

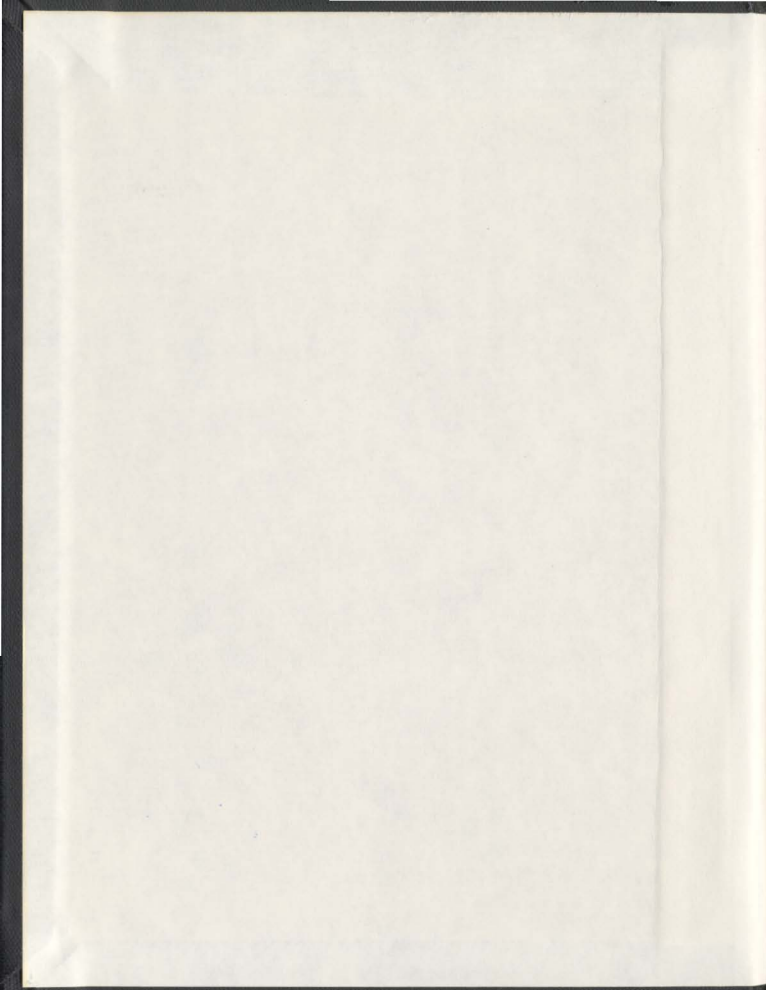
DELIBERATIONS BETWEEN THE COVERS: AN
AUDIENCE-CENTRED ETHNOGRAPHY OF
CHINESE POPULAR FICTION READERS

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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SEANA KOZAR



001311



**Deliberations Between the Covers: An Audience-Centred
Ethnography of Chinese Popular Fiction Readers**

by
Seana Kozar

A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

This thesis is an ethnography of Chinese popular fiction readership which presents an integrated exploration of contemporary readers' tastes and patterns of reading behaviour. However, in order to understand the genres and particular texts that contemporary readers designate as "popular," especially within the context of Chinese popular culture which has long been the site of an active exchange between written and oral traditions, it is necessary to examine the historical audiences and generic antecedents, the traditions of texts and contexts, that provide modern readers with reference points of continuity and change within the larger landscape of Chinese popular literature.

To this end, this study suggests that reading patterns, like other kinds of expressive behaviour in everyday life, can be thought of in terms of repertoires of aesthetic discrimination which may have inactive as well as active dimensions. The inactive facets of a reader's repertoire, it is argued, may still exert important influences on the shaping and articulation of preferences and associations.

Related to issues of methodological design, including the use of printed and electronic Chinese and English language questionnaires, face-to-face interviews and e-mail correspondence, the readership sample is comprised primarily of men and women who have achieved or are pursuing some level of post-secondary or postgraduate education. Trends in readers' affinities and/or aversions to particular genres, as well as their uses of fiction — whether they read for escape or instruction, for example — are considered, as are such concepts as fan culture, reader identification with characters or other aspects of the narrative and the phenomenon of addictive reading styles. This pattern of consumption is explored with particular reference to Chinese martial arts fiction, which as a genre is given

the most detailed treatment, followed by romance and detective fiction. In addition to readers' conceptions of the process of reading itself and their perceptions of the various traditions which inform their favourite contemporary novels, this work also looks at the importance of conversation in readers' experiences, as well as some of the interactions between gender and genre, especially with regard to the intentional transgression and renegotiation of the boundaries of traditionally "masculine" or "feminine" fiction.

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Secondly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Peter Narváez, for his unwavering confidence, as well as the other members of my committee on both sides of the Atlantic, Drs. Neil Rosenberg and Gerald Pocius at the Department of Folklore at Memorial, and especially Dr. Tommy McClellan at the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Edinburgh. I also wish to thank the Chair of the East Asian Studies Department, Professor Bonnie S. McDougall, as well as postgraduate students David Ellis, Chung Huiyuan, He Yubin and Dai Show-fen, and language instructor Fang Jing. In both faculties, I felt I was received among friends within a community of scholars with which I felt privileged to be associated. At Memorial, I received my formative training as a folklorist, and in Scotland I was granted the intellectual freedom to begin to refine those skills as an independent scholar. Both academic communities were indispensable to my development.

I would also like to thank all of the readers who shared their opinions and enthusiasm for reading with me. Although this seems an inadequate recognition of their generosity, there are many expressions of humanity which I feel are not easily expressed. Paradoxically perhaps, I am of the opinion that the moment of willingness to enter into communication is one of these.

There are many individuals who have directly and indirectly guided my path. In particular, I would like to thank Professor McDougall and Dr. McClellan for their enthusiastic reception and encouragement of my work, and Dr. Pauline Greenhill for guiding me to a number of recent works of feminist scholarship which proved invaluable to my understanding of women's talk and the ways in which words socially script gender. Other professors, as mentors by e-mail and friends if not actual instructors, provided much needed support and sensibility.

As I write these words, at least one ocean, or the entire country, separates me from some of the people I wish to mention —Pippa, Lizanne, Donna, my aunt Jean and uncle Mike, and my Welsh family, especially Barbara and Colin. This thesis is for Ranald and Katherine and the storytelling evenings in St. John's that helped me find my tales, and ever and always for Grum, who helped me find my strength.

Finally, this work is dedicated to Dr. Norah Browne,
for whose dedication to me
there will never be words enough.

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Brief Chronology of Major Dynasties and Periods

(Source: A Chinese-English Dictionary. (《漢英詞典》). 1988. Beijing: Foreign Language Institute. Dynasties specifically relevant to this thesis appear in *italics*.)

Xia (夏) Dynasty: Approximately 2100-1600 years ago

Shang (商) Dynasty: Approximately 1600-1100 years ago

Zhou (周) Dynasty:

Western Zhou (西周): Approximately 1100-771 B.C.

Eastern Zhou (東周): 770-236 B.C.

Spring and Autumn Period (春秋): 770-476 B.C.

Warring States (戰國): 475-221 B.C.

Qin Dynasty (秦): 221-207 B.C.

Han Dynasty (漢):

Western Han (西漢): 206 to approximately 24 B.C.

Eastern Han (東漢): 25 B.C.-220 (A.D.)

Three Kingdoms (三國):

Wei (魏): 220-265

Shu Han (蜀漢): 221-263

Wu (吳): 222-280

Western Jin Dynasty (西晉): 265-316

Eastern Jin Dynasty (東晉): 317-420

Northern and Southern Dynasties (南北朝):

Southern Dynasties (南朝):

Song (宋): 420-479

Qi (齊): 479-502

Liang (梁): 502-557

Chen (陳): 557-589

Northern Dynasties (北朝):

Northern Wei (北魏): 386-534

Eastern Wei (東魏): 534-550

Northern Qi (北齊): 550-577

Western Wei (西魏): 535-556

Northern Zhou (北周): 557-581

Sui Dynasty (隋): 581-618

Tang Dynasty (唐): 618-907

Five Dynasties (五代):

Later Liang (後梁): 907-923

Later Tang (後唐): 923-936

Later Jin (後晉): 936-946

Later Han (後漢): 947-950

Later Zhou (後周): 951-960

Song Dynasty (宋):

Northern Song (北宋): 960-1127

Southern Song (南宋): 1127-1279

Liao Dynasty (遼): 916-1125

Jin Dynasty (金): 1115-1234

Yuan Dynasty (元): 1271-1368

Ming Dynasty (明): 1368-1644

Qing Dynasty (清): 1644-1911

A Note on Romanization

This thesis uses the *pinyin* system of romanization. For readers unfamiliar with Chinese, some of the more problematic sounds represented in this system as follows:

C is pronounced *ts* as in “cats” but appears as an initial consonant (as in *cai*, rhyming with “my.”)

Q is pronounced *ch* (as in *qing*, which sounds like *ching*, rhyming with “wing.”)

X is pronounced *sy*, as in a palatalized “sh.” (E.g., *xi* sounds a little like a drawn out “she” with a slight stress on the initial “s” before it becomes “sh”.)

Z is like *ds* in “rods.”

Zh is similar to the “j” in “James,” but differs from the sound represented by “j” in *pinyin*. Zh has a slightly “rolled” quality. (*Zhi*, *chi*, *shi* sound like *cher*, *cher*, *sher*, all rhyming with “her.” The “i” sound is like a shwa, but the lips are slightly closed.) However, Beijing is *Bei-jing*, not *Bei-jhing*.

Other romanizations appear *only* if used by a particular author or speaker in a quotation.

Partial List of Readers

The following is a list of readers who participated in face-to-face interviews *and* who also signed release forms. All questionnaire responses were anonymous, and therefore this list represents only a small portion of the total number of readers surveyed. See Chapter Two for further information.

CHANG Huiching

CHEN Meifang

CHEN Yuyuan

CHUNG Huiyuan

FANG Jing

HE Yubin

“Jiang Lingyun” (pseud.)

LI Baocheng

LIN Meixin (*Mei-hsing*)

LIU Li

LU Zhengqi

NING Changlong

WANG Yongji

WANG Zhongning

XU Yinong

YANG Meng

YIN Xiangzhe

ZHU Peihong

Introduction

If I can't read, I may feel that something is missing in my life

...會一會。小說是我的命。

...that would be likely. Novels are my destiny.

...面目可憎，言語無味。

...my looks are hateful, and my words tasteless.

...少了精神糧食。

...too little nourishment.

...言語乞味。

... [like I'm] "begging for a taste of language."¹

A book holds a thousand stories, and the way in which a reader responds to a text is as individual as taste preferences for food. Although the metaphor of consumption as a way of exploring people's experiences of popular culture has many limitations (Radway 1996, 244), I found it interesting that the most frequently employed and descriptive phrase used by the Chinese readers who participated in this study to describe intense reading experiences was "yì kǒu qì duǎn" (一口氣讀完), "to read all in one breath or mouthful." I return to this phrase and the practices it signifies throughout this work because I think it succinctly captures the essence of reading as a source of both profound pleasure and sustenance.

To put this another way, in popular culture and cultural studies scholarship, consumption and (re)production are two commonly employed metaphors used to discuss audience responses to popular entertainments. In *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, Angela McRobbie argues that attention must be given to the ethnographic analysis of

¹Responses from four readers (QP-01, QRH-02, QRH-15 and QRH-16 respectively) to the final question on both the pilot (QP-xx) and revised handwritten (QRH-xx) readership surveys. See Chapter Two for further discussion of questionnaire types and analysis.

consumption as necessary reproduction, that is, as work rather than —or in addition to— leisure (1994, 32). In this thesis, I interviewed male and female Chinese readers and concentrated primarily on readers' experiences with and aesthetic attitudes toward popular fiction, generally referred to as *tongsu xiaoshuo* (通俗小說). As I discuss later in this Introduction and particularly in Chapter Two, most of the nearly eighty readers surveyed in this work are highly educated individuals who are in some way associated with universities and who consume and often produce a wide range of texts in their everyday lives. Some of these readers could be called “passive tradition bearers” or readers with an “inactive repertoire” (Goldstein 1971) because, as they readily and rather wistfully admit, the texts they now “work with” often demand their undivided attention to the exclusion of those texts that they formerly associated with relaxation or play, which often took the form of popular novels. However, such novels, even if not actively read, still trigger memories, associations and, more often than not, topics for current discussion and debate.

As with my experiences of the incisive —and undeniably *active*— analytical abilities of so-called “passive tradition bearers” in other contexts of narrative research, I was struck by the depth of readers' insights, recollections and even emotional attachments to stories they had not read for long periods, sometimes several years. Just as those who can tell stories may often prefer to let the tale speak for itself while those who are not recognized performers may be anxious to explain how a tale either speaks to them or even speaks for the larger community, I suggest that sometimes the reflective reader who deliberates on past experiences has insights that are just as valid for ethnographic investigation as the avid reader who is actively engaged with texts. Certainly, consumption may or may not proceed in rapidly experienced moments —in breaths or mouthfuls of texts and meanings.

Nevertheless, production and reproduction, as the inclusive inscription or reconstitution of the self in relation to what was read, may take considerably longer.

Furthermore, not infrequently, I think that the realization of these processes occurs in conversation, both in the evanescent dialogues between friends and associates, as well as in responses to the deliberate queries of the researcher. This work then, represents readers' stories about the books they read, told again, as all ethnographies are to a greater or lesser extent, through the observations of one who asked and listened and constructed a reading comprised of others' readings which inevitably shaped and guided her own. In this Introduction, I outline the questions I initially had, those I came to ask, who responded, and how those answers and the additional questions they often inspired were organized into the various chapters which follow.

Preliminary Thoughts on an Ethnography of Reading

As I explain in a later chapter, I happened upon the ethnographic import of this subject almost by accident: I was recording Chinese folktales, and I knocked over a bag containing the cherished finds of a student's recent foray into the Chinese language section of the local library. He had come to tell me the stories he thought I wanted to hear, and I left feeling a great desire to know more about the tales he loved to read. There were other incidents by which this topic worked its way into my bones —most memorably perhaps a collision with a student in a busy hallway, his nose buried in a book adorned with a painting of a mounted swordsman sweeping across the covers. The books that were the object of these intense moments of concentration, I later learned, belonged to the genre known as martial arts fiction, or *wuxia xiaoshuo* (武俠小說), and the contemporary novels shared a long thematic tradition in Chinese literature, folklore, as well as the performing arts. But, before

I could comprehend these influences and interactions, I had to understand the place of “popular” entertainments in relation to elite and folk practices of written and oral traditions in China. I also had to understand the ways in which I approached books, whether as reader or researcher. Clearly, the ways in which my scholarly training had equipped me to approach and understand myself and others as readers would require further refinement and critical reflection when applied to Chinese audiences.

Essentially, this thesis addresses three broad questions: 1) how western theories and methodologies can be used to explore reading in Chinese contexts, 2) what the multifaceted experience of reading means to Chinese readers as a mode of active engagement, that is, what purpose they think reading presently serves in their lives, and 3) how they feel past reading experiences signified in their lives, even if their once regular reading patterns have become sporadic or their tastes radically altered. At the outset, this work is an ethnography of non-western reading publics which is of necessity partially grounded in traditions of western ethnographic and textual popular culture scholarship. To my knowledge, no comprehensive study of Chinese readership which attempts a cohesive discussion of readers, texts, and contexts exists in English. It is in this discursive space that my work finds both its greatest challenge and potential contribution.

Because I cannot assume that the kinds of theoretical models which can be employed as frames for western readers’ uses and aesthetics also hold for Chinese readers—a point to which I have already alluded, and to which I return to discuss in more detail later—I have had to look at the various ways Chinese readers themselves conceive of the activity of reading, and the meanings and pleasures they associate with it. Where possible, I have tried to link reading, though a frequently solitary activity in itself, to larger contexts of Chinese communication, such as the importance of chat or gossip and speech play within the

culture. This is especially important because readers' informal and candid conversations about books represent collaborative processes that are at least as important to readers' aesthetic development and the shaping of personal reading repertoires as individual deliberations and reflections over time.

In essence, this thesis is an ethnography of Chinese readership which also looks at conversation as an important source of what has been called "oral literary criticism" (Dundes 1966; Narayan 1995) as culturally conceived and expressed as *chat* (*liaotian*[r], 聊天, 聊天儿).² I readily acknowledge the important contributions made by Hymes' *ethnography of speaking* (1972, 1986, 1989), as well as other studies which bring the concerns of folklore and sociolinguistics to bear on the analysis of literacy (Szwed 1981) and writing (Basso 1989).

However, I have not as yet determined all of the complex interactions which must be considered in a comprehensive sociolinguistic analysis of Chinese verbal art, although I suggest that this would constitute an extremely worthwhile avenue of future inquiry, particularly if focused on a cohesive community of speakers. As I describe in the first two chapters, the group of readers I surveyed do not constitute an "audience" in the sense of, for example, a group of fans who regularly come together to talk about their experiences with particular popular texts, or to construct new experiences together through collective viewing or reading.

Though this issue will be discussed more thoroughly in the second chapter, I must acknowledge that this thesis negotiates another difficult methodological challenge: except in a few instances, I did not capture readers' spontaneous conversations with each other about books or the process of reading. Even in those rare moments when my ethnographic

²See Link (1985) and Chapter Six for further discussion.

presence or the formal “purpose” of the discussion—as roughly “scripted” by readers’ attempts to speak to the various issues outlined on the questionnaires, for example, because they saw this as a well-structured way to proceed through the explication of a complex experience—was eclipsed by the sheer enjoyment of chatting about much-loved books. I was observing the unfolding of a communicative context initially framed and motivated by my inquiries.

However, as Ives points out, sometimes “...the artificial context may be the only one in which you *can* gather your data,” and attempts to record unforgettable but unforeseen ethnographic moments, particularly those that may be shared by members of a group, present myriad technical, not to mention ethical, dilemmas for the researcher (1987, 56-57, 81). Also, although many readers’ comments about reading refer to a time when they read far more extensively than they are now able to, in many respects their responses exhibit particular narrative patterns that, though no longer representative of present habits, do reveal familiar past experiences of texts and reading which left lasting impressions.

To illustrate further, Greenhill noted two distinct types of narratives in her study of English immigrant stories, those that were recognized as personal experience narratives, and others she called *generalizations*. She stated that generalization narratives: “...represent the teller’s perceptions in storied terms, which suggest an extensive rather than a specific application....a recognized mode of communication, particularly about the past” (1994, 34-35). In the research I conducted, both questionnaire respondents and readers who were interviewed face-to-face made statements or told stories about singularly memorable books or experiences they had, and made more general assertions discussing reading as an activity, or considering the place of fiction in Chinese society. However, most readers emphasized the important, if somewhat discontinuous, role reading for pleasure has played

in their lives, and as such I feel that these accounts of past behaviours and attitudes are an important source of ethnographic insight into presently held beliefs and aesthetic perceptions. As one woman reader remarked, although she no longer reads once-favourite authors and genres as intensively as she used to, these experiences influenced not only the person she was at that time, but also had, in her opinion, a profound effect on her later personal development.

Readers, Words and the Construction of Stories About Reading

As I discuss in Chapter Two, seventy-nine readers contributed directly to the ethnographic data which informs this thesis. Some I interviewed face-to-face, others I never met directly except through electronic or written correspondence. The men and women range in age from fifteen to seventy, and most are either students of higher education, or are employed as teachers and researchers. This study is an ethnography which encompasses the combined influences of class, expatriate culture³ and the effects of electronic media on folklore research.

First and foremost, the words of readers which appear throughout this work are my basic ethnographic documents. They are the oral histories of reading in contemporary Overseas Chinese culture which I have been able to gather. In many instances, readers did not provide me with a great deal of background information about themselves, even though I always began taped interviews with the invitation to do so. Names, birthplaces, academic majors, embarrassed laughter and silence characterize the beginnings of many of my tapes.

³See Li (1988) and Chan (1983) for discussions of Chinese expatriate culture in a Canadian context. Oral historical accounts include Huang and Jeffery (1992) and The Women's Book Committee (1992).

As interviews proceed, I learn other things: how for this reader the only privacy in her family was between the pages of a novel, how for that one romances make up in some small, quiet way for the love he could not experience as a "re-educated youth." These things are in my thesis, but inevitably, some of the silences remain.

My choice to incorporate questionnaires into my methodology requires some additional explanation, especially since I collected data from a greater percentage of respondents by this method than by the face-to-face interview most commonly employed by folklorists. The use of questionnaires or even more general "calls for participants" as a precursor to interviews, or as a means of determining a sample of respondents who would be willing to be interviewed at a later date, has been used successfully in studies of readership (Radway 1987; Bird 1992). I also agree that interviews, particularly recorded ones, represent "...the best technique we have ever had for reaching out into the great silences and making them articulate" (Ives 1987, 42), however, there is also a cross-cultural dimension inherent in my decision. For many readers, the questionnaire format provided a structure that they could work within which was perhaps less daunting than talking in person to a foreign female researcher about texts that were highly personally valued, although most readers were pleased with the fact that I presented myself as a student of Chinese popular culture who was willing to be taught about such things. Furthermore, I suspect that I was able to reach more readers through the adoption of a combined methodological approach which allowed interested readers to choose how they wanted to respond than if I had relied on a single technique.

Often while collecting oral narratives from Chinese people as part of my M.A. fieldwork, I would be told, prior to the interview: "Oh, let me go and prepare," a statement which usually meant they wanted to write some notes. Frustrated by this apparent

formality, I would respond that they should just come and *talk* to me. Many did, however, some declined and others felt obviously uncomfortable —until I “accidentally” provided one small group with pen and paper during an interview when one individual requested a clean page in my notebook. The group wrote excitedly in Chinese over every blank space on the page —and in all directions— turning the book round and round and passing the pen as the conversation shifted. The result was an amazingly illegible web of meaning, punctuated by the triumphant scribbles of argument when the “right word” proved elusive, and the tape recorded a cacophony of joy and laughter. I examined the “notes,” though I confess that, for me, the event itself could be read more clearly than the resultant text. I came to understand that I could not hope to study Chinese culture in a way that honoured those people who chose to share it with me if I did not first acknowledge the great love these people have for their written language, and the fact that, for some at least, this love and the power it holds in the act of reading is inseparable from reproduction through writing as well as conversation.

Questionnaires were anonymous,⁴ however, I included a section where respondents were asked to provide additional information about themselves if they wished. With printed and/or posted questionnaires, some readers wrote personal notes, but many wrote nothing. Some readers’ notes only apologized for not getting back to me sooner, as they were busy, thanked me for my interest in a subject they loved, or wished me good luck. One wrote a timely and well-meaning admonition.⁵ In the case of many electronic surveys,

⁴See Appendices C-1 through C-4 for Chinese questionnaires and translations.

⁵See Chapter Two.

I had to e-mail people who had returned meticulously completed questionnaires, reaching into the ether with that timeless question: "Thanks, but ...who *are* you?"

All of the readers who participated had one thing in common; they all loved certain kinds of books, and many had memories and ideas about reading that they not only cherished as significant for themselves, but also were excited to talk about. I learned to see these people through the windows that they opened for me, through the books and talk and experiences through which they were constructing and reconstructing readings of their lives so far. Sometimes, the windows were difficult to see through at first. "*Jidu shan bo jue hen hao, hen zhongyao* !" (" 《 基度山伯爵 》 很好 · 很重要 ! ") "*Jesus-mountain-earl* is very good, very important!" one reader said repeatedly in a taped interview. I could not figure out what he meant until I realized that *The Count of Monte Cristo* was probably the first piece of translated fiction he was able to read after the Cultural Revolution. At the time I conducted the interview, he would have read that book almost twenty years ago.

Also, a key feature of this thesis, the importance of examining readers' repertoires and habits over time and paying attention to what readers say about past reading experiences, required that I broaden my understanding of context. For many readers, the truly significant books were first read some years ago, but the reflections deepened and clarified only much later. I return to this idea in the Conclusion, but the loudest and clearest thoughts are those inscribed upon a quiet heart.

Certainly, the readers in this thesis generally come from the stratum of contemporary Chinese society which has a voice. I do not offer this thesis as a reflection of widespread Chinese working-class culture, the popular traditions of modern rural peasants, or the last word in subversive, unofficial literacy of any particular Chinese community. Basically, this study represents the bringing together of the opinions of seventy-nine intellectuals, all of

whom are Chinese and all of whom have been away from their respective homelands for some time. However, as the contemporary discipline has moved well beyond narrow definitions of "the folk," the sample composition does not detract from the potential contribution of this ethnography. Although these are seventy-nine people who cannot be said to be representative of all of Chinese society —or indeed, of all or any of the very diverse Chinese societies throughout the world— they are, as far as I have been able to conclusively discern, all people who never spoke to a westerner about fiction either written and/or discussed in their own language before.

Secondly, I want to say something about the texts about which readers speak. Throughout the thesis, I refer to certain genres and sometimes individual works as "popular" or "vernacular" fiction/literature, or as belonging to "popular" traditions. A certain degree of clarification is required as to what I mean by those terms. Concerning "popular," I refer essentially to Williams's conception of "the culture actually made by people for themselves" (1983, 237). Indeed, this ethnography differs from other studies of popular audiences (Radway 1987, 20-37; Link 1985, 1981, 79-118) because I do not deal with publishing or estimated sales. Essentially, the people who participated in my study relied on informal distribution channels which are very difficult to document. In the majority of instances, readers stated that they obtained novels from the following sources, in descending order of frequency and importance: friends, family, classmates or colleagues, libraries, book rental shops (these appear to be more common in Taiwan), online sites and bookstores.

Furthermore, I suspect that these channels are not restricted to this group, but reproduce, to some extent, more general patterns within Chinese readership. While I would not say that the sharing of books and magazines carries the same connotations as the

sharing of food in Chinese culture, I suggest that it can be another way for people to reinforce relationships and share points of mutual interest. The issue of borrowing, and the social connections and opportunities for talk about novels that this practice implies, is addressed later in the thesis. Paradoxically perhaps, many of the expatriate Mainland Chinese readers discussed in these chapters probably have a greater diversity of potential circulation channels for popular fiction, as well as greater access to the various means of distribution than their counterparts in China, although readers in China would likely have more access to other types of materials published in Chinese.

Thirdly, my use of the word “vernacular” follows Hanan’s (1981, 5, 15-16, 20-21) assertion that the vernacular as language and model for authors of fiction subsumes a number of styles and mediates between Classical Chinese and oral storytelling models, combining and reworking elements of elite and folk culture in a new synthesis of written form and content. In some respects, “vernacular literature” reflects some of the nuances attached to “popular” in terms of composite styles which can have widespread audience appeal. “Vernacular literature” as a label may be applied to traditional novels such as *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*, 《水滸傳》), as well as contemporary novels which are written with similar attention to such features as episodic, “chapter-driven” structure and the use of everyday speech styles in character dialogue. Chinese vernacular fiction is discussed later, however, the essential point to remember, according to Hanan is that “the Classical is concise and the vernacular expansive, specifying relationships that are merely understood in the Classical” (16).

Aside from the definitions used in Chinese literary studies, I think that the distinction put forward by Narváez of vernacular song as “a sector of aesthetic development and social practice” which incorporates the concept of a “culture of place” is also useful for this

ethnography (1995, 215). Although many of the novels readers discuss are so widely known they cannot be said to belong to any regional culture, people often find familiar landscapes which contribute not only to their personal enjoyment of a book, but also to the stories they later tell about it.

Finally, I should outline the process by which I constructed readers' texts. First, these are literal texts, either from questionnaires or transcribed from taped interviews. Chapter Two gives a more detailed description of the stages of analysis, but I should perhaps mention here that most readers' responses were in Chinese. I therefore present excerpts in both languages. Because most Overseas Chinese expatriates are familiar with at least one of the two character script systems currently in use in various countries,⁶ I consistently represent written responses in the same script as the original. In keeping with convention, I render book titles and proper names in traditional script.

Speech excerpts are most often presented in simplified text, a choice which primarily reflects certain technicalities of the in-text Chinese word processing system I use. On a related note, Chinese quotes and translations essentially cover the same spoken excerpts, except in cases where this poses considerable technical difficulty in presentation, such as display and printing problems which are associated with multiple language-font changes. With some long Chinese quotes, I summarize the content of elided speech in square brackets and elaborate in the English excerpt. Also, the transcript notation *tingdun* (< 停顿 >) signifies a pause in speech, and *bu qingchu* (< 不清楚 >) means simply "unclear."

In the interests of both clarity for scholars outside Chinese studies and concern for the integrity of readers' comments, I use underlined text in square brackets to indicate material

⁶These are known as traditional and simplified. Their features and distribution are explained more fully in Chapter Two and Appendix A.

added to clarify a referent, or to mark places where I asked questions which initiated a change or elaboration of the preceding topic. Underlined letters not in brackets are my own insertions in order to clarify certain orthographic errors which occur in English responses on handwritten or electronic questionnaires. I use this method over the options of either the more intrusive [*sic*] or leaving such oversights intact when they might be unnecessarily visually disconcerting for the reader. Finally, unless respondents specified a Westernized name as their preference, Chinese readers' names are given with the last name first, in capitals.⁷

Chapter Overview

This thesis is concerned with a holistic synchronic and diachronic analysis of texts and people and the social and historical traditions in which they are located and through which they meaningfully interact. That is, I am concerned not only with contemporary genres —martial arts, romance and detective fiction, for example— but also with the earlier generic antecedents from such sources as classical literature and folklore which may obtain in these popular texts at a particular point in history, or in the mind of a particular reader. Also, I am interested in the ways people relate the activity of reading and the associations it produces at any given moment to their larger belief systems and repertoires of expressive behaviour.

It should be understood, however, that *expressive behaviour* as I intend it here does not only refer to demonstrable performances, such as when friends use texts they consume

⁷Tapes numbers used in the thesis refer to my own classification system. My collection of tapes and questionnaires will be deposited in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive pending the successful completion of this thesis. Certain access restrictions will apply.

as structural frames and subjects for conversation and play (Bacon-Smith 1992, 152-57). It also signifies, like the sometimes discontinuous relationship between consumption and production, an *impressive* or *inscriptive* dimension as well. One male reader, talking about his early “addiction” to the experience of reading fiction as a young boy during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and the regret that he felt when he realized there was much in life he had not experienced, a loss he attributed in part to a belief that he had not read as widely as he should have, or would have liked, put it this way:

HYB: I think to appear [discover] the society, to begin with you have to read novels, just like you read history, read history. I feel any novel is partially true, there must be some truth, must be something useful. And most important thing is: if you don't feel the novel is particularly good or helpful, that doesn't mean it is not helpful. You may feel later, you may feel later.⁸

Essentially, I think that for many of the Chinese readers who took part in this study, reading for pleasure is more than a solitary activity from which a few moments of diversion are derived. Rather, it represents a complex, *contextual* relationship between readers, written and incipient or potential verbal texts, both spoken and unspoken, which forms an integral part of each reader's reality. How that reality changes over time—which parts are shared, with whom, and in what ways—also informs the scope and intent of this work. The specific topics addressed in each chapter are outlined in the descriptions which follow.

Chapter One presents a discussion of Chinese popular culture, with emphasis on Chinese popular literature and fiction. The long-standing, dynamic interchange between oral and written, elite and folk traditions is considered, as is the historical importance of the vernacular language as a medium for popular printed texts. Also, this chapter considers “genre” as a potentially fluid construct which signifies not only an identifiable fictional

⁸HE Yubin, interview. 24 Aug 1995. Tape T95HYBa-09.

form which has a particular plot content, structure and range of character-types, but also a medium that is capable of borrowing from other genres, as well as responding to readers' uses and modes of distribution. Furthermore, just as any historical, diachronic study of Chinese audiences must consider such factors as levels of literacy, so too any synchronic study of contemporary readership must consider individual readers' levels of expertise with specific kinds of texts. Essentially, a concern with oral and written forms, receptive literacy and reading repertoire and genres —traditions, communities, individual readers and texts— provides a kind of broad paradigm which subsumes and structures the remaining chapters.

Chapter Two provides a detailed readership profile and deals with the issues of methodological constraints and research design. Basic technical questions dealing with online field research are also addressed.⁹ Chapter Three explores readers' uses and aesthetic discriminations regarding their generic preferences and aversions. One of the specific aesthetic concerns detailed in this chapter is readers' insistence that good fiction, however fanciful, must maintain a solid connection to plausible reality. This chapter also examines such complex questions as fan identity among Chinese readers, reading for escape and instruction, the compensatory aspects of popular literature consumption, as well as the phenomenon of addictive reading patterns. Despite the shortcomings of functionalism as a theoretical approach (Oring 1976), I argue in this chapter that Bascom's functions of folklore can be used as a framework for understanding some of the central uses and outcomes of the reading process.

Chapters Four and Five consider the specific genres of martial arts, romance and detective fiction. I must stress that these analyses basically reproduce the quantitative distribution of reader preferences delineated in my survey, which showed a predominant

⁹See also Appendix A.

emphasis on martial arts fiction. I do not intend that romance and detective fiction should be seen as genres of lesser importance to their respective audiences. My emphases reflect the proportions of various groups of readers. For reasons which I discuss in subsequent chapters, my research design likely encouraged a readership sample which contained a predominance of martial arts fiction enthusiasts. However, since I am unaware of any published ethnographies of Chinese fiction readers in English, I suggest that this study begins to rectify a larger imbalance in popular culture studies, even though I acknowledge that there are many issues of relevance and interest to cross-cultural audience studies which I cannot adequately address in this single work. Some of these key areas, including the need for more in-depth ethnographic study of Chinese romance and mystery readers, are discussed in the Conclusion.

Chapters Four and Five identify earlier popular text and performance traditions which have contributed to or significantly influenced the themes and/or character-types found in the contemporary genres. In addition, I explore important similarities and differences between Chinese and western chivalric, romance and detective fiction, noting such things as the ways in which differences in worldview are expressed in such areas as plot and the cultural construction of the principal hero or heroine, as well as the importance, particularly in martial arts fiction, of the subculture and setting—a world of intrigue and infamy beyond the borders of ordinary society— not unlike the “greenwood” of the ballad or Medieval tale (Keen 1987, 1-2).

Chapter Six looks at the phenomenon of “chat” or “gossip” as a communicative form among Chinese popular fiction readers that, in a number of important respects, cuts across lines of gender and genre in the ways readers use it to enhance and extend the pleasures of the text. Furthermore, I look at how male and female readers approach and deliberately

challenge and renegotiate the boundaries of traditionally gendered notions of “masculine” or “feminine” fiction, that is, how male readers construct readings of the “inner” world of romance novels, and how women traverse the “outer,” or perhaps more precisely, the overtly masculine reversible world of the martial arts novel which, as Liu notes, manifests its own distinctive internal or inward-focused logic (1967, 130).

Finally, I want to point out a series of Appendices at the end of the main body of this work. In particular, Appendix A examines electronic resources and Internet communities associated with popular culture in general, and martial arts fiction in particular, including texts for reading, nicknaming and humour found on newsgroups and fantasy role-playing sites. This discussion draws on some of my most recent work in progress which was undertaken concurrently with this thesis.

Although some of the subtopics in Appendix A appear at first glance tangential to a discussion of Chinese popular fiction, a number of important contributions are made to the thesis as a whole. Among other things, I explore the increasing number of martial arts fiction role-playing sites which are being developed by and for fans of this genre. In addition, I examine Chinese electronic magazines published in Canada whose existence further highlights the importance of serialization to Chinese reading publics, and demonstrates how this longstanding process of textual distribution has been adapted to the electronic medium. Most importantly, my research into aspects of Chinese Internet culture provided me with contexts through which to address some of the methodological challenges and solutions foregrounded in a thesis on this subject. Specifically, through my other fieldwork I was able to develop and refine online interview techniques as well as Chinese language questionnaire distribution, two facets of my field research which were extremely significant to the collection of my field data. Additional Appendices contain lists

of useful Internet resources, as well as copies of my pilot and revised questionnaires, with translations.

Chapter One: Chinese Audiences and Popular Texts

1.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I examine some key facets of the historical relationship between Chinese audiences and popular texts and performances. As Bennett has observed, the very words “audience” and “text” are themselves replete with problematic nuances for cultural studies scholars, drawing as they do on notions of hierarchically-ordered face-to-face communication and a residual, but enduring, literary bias in scholarship (1996, 145-46). Furthermore, he argues that audiences can only really be configured for their particular moments, and that the study of “active audiences” must also be understood as a form of pedagogical and political representation designed to demonstrate not so much real readers’ activities as the ways in which people, relative to literary or sociological constructions of audiences “are to be, so to speak, *activated*” (148-50, italics added). Along related lines, Radway maintains that while they can be powerful media in themselves, especially for classroom application, genre-based studies of audience may also present a misleading picture of a “stable subject” whose activities are reduced to a straightforward engagement with media in a cycle of production and consumption which risks overly simplistic categorization: “Troped too crudely as a kind of corporeal or physical activity, whether as passive ingestion or creative labor upon raw materials, media use is thereby simplified as a linear process of reception and response” (1996, 244).

While I agree that “the audience” as a discursive construction is necessarily historically delimited and signifies a certain politics of ethnographic and/or theoretical representation, and that the processes of production and consumption are neither linear nor adequately

portrayed by physiological metaphors, I think that to postulate “fragmentary,” “nomadic” or “shifting and unstable” subjects is, in some ways, to confuse the people we study with the perspectives we adopt and reject in our evolving perception of them, and the kinds of narratives we may create as a result. That is not to say that people are static, or that they conveniently pose for the ethnographic record. Rather, individuals’ actions, beliefs and statements, however seemingly contradictory or transitory, create a kind of repertoire of everyday performances whose unity is supplied and reworked by each person in response to changing needs and contexts.¹⁰ For folklorists, understanding these patterns and appreciating the historical and social conditions under which they change is a critical focus of our ethnographic work, and one that adds an important dimension to current research in cultural studies and popular culture—a point to which I will return later in this thesis.

For the purposes of this discussion, I present an overview of some of the central forces involved in the shaping of Chinese popular entertainments, and particularly popular literature and its diverse communities of readership. Specifically, I suggest that an understanding of contemporary Chinese popular texts and their readers requires a historically grounded consideration of three interrelated issues. The first of these is *the interplay of oral and written traditions* in Chinese popular culture. The second involves a corresponding appreciation of *levels of receptive literacy and social access to texts*, not only for reading, but also often for the creation of written works through various forms of commentary which may likewise represent an elaboration of verbal texts generated through formal and informal discussion. Finally, because as Narváez observes: “texts...always possess the potential of being extricated from their social matrices” (1992, 16), I suggest

¹⁰See Green (1987), Press (1996) and Ang (1996) for further discussion of these ideas.

that *genres* should be thought of as not only kinds or classes of popular texts with certain defining features, but also adaptable textual masks or forms which are subject to transformation by audiences' uses and methods of distribution.

The dynamic interrelationship between orality, literacy (as a feature of both texts and audiences) and genres also extends to the synchronic dimension of this inquiry. More precisely, the question of exchange between oral and written cultures can be subsumed into an understanding of "vernacular," as both language (where appropriate) and dialect use in novels,¹¹ and in the conception of certain aspects of popular literature as a system of narrative strategies and formulas which are employed to create structures which not only mediate between elite and folk traditions, but which also present original, workable solutions to particular needs or questions within a community at a specific historical moment.¹²

Secondly, "literacy" among contemporary fiction readers can be understood as individual levels of experience or expertise in reading a particular genre, or across a sampling of several genres, depending on reader preferences. Finally, "genre" can be thought of not only as the predominant set of formulas which historically define a fictional form, for example, Chinese chivalric fiction as an adventure genre, but also as the points at which definitions blur, and boundaries cross, that is, "genre" as a network of interrelated

¹¹ It should be noted that not all popular fiction is written in what has come to be known as "the vernacular," or *baihua* (白話) in the strictest sense. In fact, some popular fiction, such as romances published in the early decades of this century in urban centres such as Shanghai favoured a more allusive literary style in direct reaction to the proposed reforms advocated by May Fourth writers. See Link (1981) and Chow (1991) for further discussion. Also, some readers enjoy "departures" from their own usual vernacular, in the form of representations of Taiwanese or other dialects in characters' dialogue, for example.

¹² See also Deetz (1977, 92-93).

forms of communication which can share, though not necessarily duplicate in arrangement or emphasis, thematic and/or stylistic content. Indeed, Harris suggests that this flexibility of operational definition has come to reflect the prevailing view of concept of "genre" as seen in contemporary folklore studies (1995, 509-10).

It is certainly true that a detailed consideration of these factors could not be profitably undertaken in any serious attempt to recreate the exact folkloric or literary provenance of a given class of fiction or to render a precise historical account of the composition, tastes and attitudes of the forebears of contemporary audiences. That proviso notwithstanding, however, I am of the opinion that research of this nature is useful as a means of placing texts and their readers within a larger tradition of story creation and transmission, serial publication and, most importantly, audience reception and participatory culture in China.

1.2 Popular Tradition: The Interplay of Orality and Literacy

Because they are frequently both involved in transmission, many folklorists have emphasized the need to consider printed as well as oral versions in the analysis of traditional texts, whether ballads (Dugaw 1984) or belief narratives (Danielson 1979). The study of Chinese popular traditions foregrounds this interaction to an even greater degree because of the longstanding influence of the oral and written domains on vernacular literature. Historically, the site of exchange between folk and elite worldviews in China, as with cultures elsewhere, is popular culture. Popular media manifest the ability to negotiate the two spheres and to transcend, often with considerable though not completely mutual success, the constraints of literacy, class, gender and geography which shape them. Speaking of vernacular fiction which developed from *bianwen* (變文), cycles of heroic

stories which had become established as a written popular genre by the ninth and tenth centuries A.D., Johnson states:

...it was not typically intended for a narrow audience of sophisticates. Moreover, it combined elite and folk traditions, just as the *pien-wen* had, and therefore it played a powerful role in bridging the gap between the rulers and the ruled by bringing ideas and attitudes of each group into a new form which could appeal to both (1980, 505).

Similarly, in his "Notes on Chinese Story-Tellers," Eberhard illustrated the different ways storytellers and puppeteers in Taiwan used and re-worked printed texts in their performances, telling stories drawn from episodes from well-known classical and historical novels, elaborating or shortening them according to skill level and aesthetic preferences, perceptions of audience reactions, and other performance related factors (1970).

From a somewhat different angle, there is an enduring debate among literary scholars as to whether certain literary genres and particular classical works have their origin in some sort of ancient "promptbook" storytelling tradition. For example, the provenance of both the vernacular short story or *huaben* (話本) and the early novel or *pinghua* (平話) represent controversial subjects for contemporary specialists studying pre-twentieth century Chinese literature. Specifically, theorists have concerned themselves with the question of to what extent these genres can be said to manifest connections to Song (960-1279 A.D.) storytelling traditions and Yuan (1271-1368 A.D.) dramatic cycles. Scholars such as Lu Xun (1976, 131-142) and Ch'en Shou-Yi (1961, 466-67), support the hypothesis that the short story derives much of its structure and early thematic content from oral tradition and the use of promptbooks by storytellers,¹³ although writers later deliberately exploited certain aspects of storytelling style in their literary works.

¹³Eberhard also holds this view of the historical function and origin of *huaben* (1970, 1).

Conversely, C.T. Hsia (1968, 7-9, 11-12) suggests that after the publication of late Ming writer Feng Menglong's (馮夢龍, 1574-1646) principal collections of short stories, oral tradition —with its emphasis on didacticism and retribution and fate as the overriding mechanisms of causality and explanation in the narratives, likely stemming from an ancestry shared first with reciters of Buddhist sermons and later with performers of elaborated popular histories (Ch'en 467; Hsia 11)— had little lasting influence on written literature, except perhaps as a distant formal trace or model (Hsia 9; Hanan 1981, 5-6, 55). In fact, some scholars assert that "the storyteller's manner"¹⁴ employed by certain authors such as Feng Menglong, was a consciously cultivated literary device almost from its adoption, or perhaps I should say *inception*, into written convention (Idema 1974, 3, 35-36), and not proof of the oral and professional origins of the Chinese vernacular story at all, but rather proof *against* such a lineage.

Idema further argues that although written stories might borrow from folk cultural themes, just as they might borrow from other classical or colloquial literary forms (xix), there is content and formal evidence —as well as historical records indicating that most performers during the Song and Yuan periods would have been trained or apprenticed in the storytelling profession because blindness would have precluded them from other work, and illiteracy from other educational opportunities, and also therefore, from preparing their performances from a text— to suggest that early vernacular stories were not storyteller's scripts. Moreover, he finds that the characterization of early vernacular fiction in these terms detracted from its assessment as a "serious genre" not bound by the constraints of

¹⁴Idema summarizes the "storyteller's manner" as a complex of literary conceits used in the writing of some vernacular fiction which included such features as: chapter-driven structure and the use of opening prefaces and suspense endings, presence of "oral" terms such as idioms and proverbial phrases, use of set descriptive pieces that were generally poetic in nature, and the insertion of didactic comment by the author (1974, 70).

oral composition and formula and worthy of literary attention (xii-xvi, 77-78, 87). By the same token, while colloquial fiction's connection to oral literature may not be as strong as scholars once believed, Idema acknowledges that it is likewise not true that there is *no* relationship between the two realms of communication, and that we really know comparatively little about the storytelling profession in ancient China (xiii-xiv).

As a brief aside to the differing views regarding the source of the open-ended storyteller's closing: “毕竟。 . . 且听下回分解” (“In the final analysis ... [e.g., to know what happened to so-and-so], you'll have to hear the next chapter for the explanation”)¹⁵ and its use in written work, Chow cites its convenience as a structuring and suspense-building device in serialized romance fiction published in newspapers in China in the early decades of this century. Regardless of exactly which side of the communicative fence it grew up on, oral or written, she cites its utility as a gambit to hook readers and sell papers:

The most interesting aspect of such serialization is that it happily coincided with a traditional storytelling device which had its origins in a form of Buddhist sermon that was popular in the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907) and which many Butterfly writers¹⁶ still used. This device was an expression that had become identified with the traditional storyteller's mannerism in the 'linked-chapter' form....: 'If you wish to know what happens next, you are welcome to hear my next exposition.' Thus a modern commercial gimmick found its precursor fantastically, in an outmoded cultural practice (1993, 478-79).¹⁷

¹⁵There are variations to this formula, but basically it reflects the reader's or audience's desire to “know what happens next,” and then directs attention to the reading or “hearing” of the next section.

¹⁶Authors of a popular form of romance fiction known as the “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School.” See Chapter Five for further discussion.

¹⁷The italicized insertion in the above quote appears in the author's original text.

However, even though the oral frame of the storyteller's coda, which resembles what a street or market performer might say in order to entice audiences to stick around or return the next day (and pay) for another installment of a compelling tale, is now generally accepted as one of the conventional markers of literary practice in vernacular novels that favour a "chapter-driven" (*zhanghui*, 章回), episodic format, I think that the assertion that Feng Menglong marked the end of any significant influence of oral traditions on written ones could be challenged by citing the subsequent work of certain authors. Specifically, the seventeenth-century author Pu Songling (浦松齡), whose *Strange Tales From a Make-Do Studio* (*Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*, 《聊齋誌異》) contains not only a number of tales with motifs from folk tradition,¹⁸ but also was cited by several of the readers in my study as a forerunner of detective and mystery fiction due to the underscoring in many of the narratives of supernatural or fantastic occurrences or allusions to real-world deceptions and their explanation, as well as a concern with justice and the unjust nature of much of daily life in human society.

Additionally, despite the observation that Pu Songling's supposedly close connection to "the folk" while collecting and shaping the stuff of his stories may indeed be "nothing but a legend" (Lu 1976, 256), Zeitlin observes that although as the "Historian of the Strange" Pu Songling was situating himself within a particular literary and historiographic tradition, his writings dealt with matters of "unofficial or left-over history," subjects that would have

¹⁸See the translation by Mair and Mair (1989). In particular, the prevalence of fox fairy stories and their relationship to folk belief and narrative (see also Eberhard 1986, 117-18; Jameson 1984, 413-14) is worthy of note. In addition, as further evidence that oral-literary borrowing could go both ways, Idema notes that stories from Pu Songling's collection had been worked into the repertoires of nineteenth century storytellers, especially around Beijing and Tianjin (1974, xix).

been narrative content not only germane to the folklore of his day, but also appropriate and topical material for such genres as travel-writing (1993, 4, 46).

Taken together, these issues, while historically significant for literary scholars, are less important to folklorists than an appreciation of the dynamic nature of the exchange of elite and folk cultural elements in popular literature, since “more often than not, they [oral and written traditions] influence and draw on each other,” (Wang 1988, 839). Moreover, there is *also* textual evidence to suggest that in certain instances, as McLaren found with the relationship between early *cantefables* and the classical novel, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo zhi yanyi*, 《三國志演義》), the earliest written versions of some narratives may have incorporated considerable material from oral tradition. These were later edited “...to conform with the conventions of historiography” (1985, 162). It should be noted, however, that McLaren also suggests that in generic form, these fifteenth century printed *cantefables* probably bore a closer resemblance to *broadsides* than storytelling scripts (170). Also, although the first printed examples may have emerged in the fifteenth century, certain aspects of the story and its principal characters would have circulated in oral tradition much earlier.

In sum, Chinese popular culture’s enduring and apparently limitless capacity to bridge seemingly disparate worlds and borrow from each in the creation of new texts and entertainments also accords with scholars’ descriptions of the transmission and development of such varied narratives in western cultures and periods as contemporary legends about familiar consumer products (Smith 1991), and the intertextual reproduction and subversion of medieval hierarchies in the competitive speech play and festive spectacle of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (Lindahl 1987). Sometimes, however, the wide appeal of the popular could be seen as subversive to social hierarchies beyond the text as well, as

Levine found in his analysis of Shakespeare in America. Once the popular domain of “low”/ working-class audiences (though some period commentators described in Levine’s study seemed just barely inclined to admit this designation in their descriptions of the department of the general public), Shakespearean drama, like opera, became a vehicle of bourgeois values and sensibilities around which the working-class audience could be reconstituted, cultured and ultimately excluded from both the middle-class patron’s view —and eventually— from the experience of viewing Shakespeare altogether (1988, 30-33, 78-79).

In a similar vein, as research into popular practices from religious beliefs and expressive behaviours in pre-industrial Europe (Burke 1978; Brandes 1990, 186-87), to the dissemination of literary and print materials in Ming China (Johnson 1985, 37-39) shows, I want to stress that the processes of exchange between the “Great” and “little” traditions which informed Chinese popular culture —though vigorous— were by no means entirely and equally reciprocal throughout China’s long written and oral history. In the next section, I examine the issues of receptive literacy and access more closely, in order to develop a clearer idea of who historically had access to what texts, what form they took, and how they were used.

1.3 Reception, Literacy and Access

Prior to the emergence of early mass-publishing of newspapers and other serials in China, a phenomenon which seems to have gathered momentum in the last quarter of the 1800s and especially just before the turn of the century in response to rapidly changing political and economic realities (Lee and Nathan 1985, 361-66), there were a number of popular print traditions which significantly predated the establishment of the serial press as

it is understood today, but which were likewise aimed at particularly constituted or envisioned target audiences. It is important to remember that, although the oral and literate worlds influenced each other's traditions, levels of literacy and familiarity with specific, regionally and linguistically delimited bodies of folk knowledge differed across segments of the population. Specifically, the assumption that literacy was the sole property and (perfected) object of the scholarly class and that complete illiteracy characterized the deplorable and undistinguished fate of almost everyone else has been challenged by recent research. For example, Rawski's investigation into the spread of literacy in the Qing period (1644-1911 A.D.) provides strong evidence that the sons of many more non-elite households attained a higher level of literacy than previously assumed; by the late Qing, a standardized written language and expanded school system allowed for the provision of instruction in "basic literacy to between one-third and one-half of the males of school age" (1985, 11-13). Furthermore, the civil service examination system itself, through which men achieved power and rank as recognized members of the literati, had evolved over several centuries as a rigidly patterned selection process based on scholarly merit. Therefore, theoretically at least, it was open to male candidates from all regions and social classes in China, with some exclusions based on professional and ethnic background (Ward 1977, 184-85, 198-99).

Caution is required, however, as inquiries into such phenomena as literacy and mass culture at any point in China's pre-Revolutionary history must acknowledge that the proliferation and reception of mass-mediated texts is a recent and *predominantly*, though by no means *exclusively*, urban, middle- and upper class development. According to Lee and Nathan, despite the fact that by the onset of the twentieth century: "the problems of mass culture were already being widely discussed, the 'masses' were not being reached by

modern media" (1985, 373). These demographic limitations notwithstanding, it is useful to think of literacy and oral/written consciousness or worldview in late Imperial China as a function of many complex, intersecting factors, particularly geography and class. It is apparent that levels of literacy existed in that society which in turn extended the potential range and numbers of literate reading publics far beyond highly-schooled male literati (Idema 1974, I-iii; Johnson 1985, 37-39).

According to Johnson, literacy in ancient China was tied to class, and therefore to access to texts, just as orality was intimately connected to landscape and the creation of regional variations in dialect, custom and ritual through such factors as geographic isolation (1985, 35-39). Furthermore, understanding the differential access people had to texts is also useful for appreciating the different kinds of consciousness that were shaped by people's experiences of class and literacy within Chinese culture. For example, a court literatus, a minor official or provincial scholar and a former student familiar with various primers such as the *Trimetrical Classic* (《三字經》) which combined history and Confucian philosophy within a structure of what we might call "programmed vocabulary" —though all recipients of some level of formal education— would likely have differing conceptions of Chinese written traditions and contrasting worldviews. Moreover, a merchant who kept accounts and inventory records and a peasant who could recognize strongly symbolically-laden texts, such as the "lucky characters" which adorned temples during festivals and domestic paper gods, would also inhabit very different daily worlds (Rawski 1985, 23-24, 29-30; Ward 1977, 189-91).

Additionally, because of the long written tradition, literacy must be understood as a hierarchy along two interrelated dimensions, reading and writing. Thus, the person who could read for professional purposes but not write beyond basic requirements would likely

be reading and responding to different texts than a person who either needed to be read to, or who had such a command of the classical idiom that he or she could formulate commentaries or poems in response to what was read. As Johnson puts it:

... the appropriate figure for thinking about the literate realm is not a network, but a hierarchy. Comparatively few people were able to read and comprehend everything except the most difficult texts, and so on down through the degrees of difficulty or accessibility. The result is strongly reminiscent of diagrams of social stratification, as it should be, since class position and education (which were strongly interrelated) largely determined how well a person could read and understand the texts of the literary tradition. In fact, the most meaningful subdivisions of the literate realm were related to class as those of the oral realm were to geography (1985, 37).

People who did not have access to the standardizing influences of a common written language would also be at a disadvantage when confronted with a text delivered orally which exhibited significant linguistic and regional variation relative to the kinds of speech styles and content to which they were normally accustomed. Differences in such things as dialect, levels of self-sufficiency¹⁹ and regional worldview must all be brought to bear on a historical understanding of the wider picture of literacy in China. Therefore, the development of a vernacular language and genres of fiction and drama suitable for the majority of popular audiences and specialists knowledgeable in the rituals and narratives signified by those performance texts became important forces through which the two traditions communicated with each other, and also the means through which Chinese cultural values were spread to other groups (Johnson 1985, 38-39, 65-68; Ward 1977, 193-95; Hayes 1985, 92, 107).

¹⁹Johnson points out that, even among members of society whose knowledge rested almost completely within oral tradition, the folklore of landed and landless peasants, for example, was likely to differ (68). He refers to this class-based influence on consciousness as the "structure of dominance" which was primarily determined by an individual's legal status, education and degree of economic freedom or self-sufficiency (56).

While the factors influencing the spread of female literacy differed in many significant respects from those governing educational opportunities for men, exemplified perhaps by the traditional Confucian injunction that a virtuous woman should remain unlettered, there were popular genres which appealed to and were specifically geared for women audiences. While some of these texts, such as the well-known *Biographies of [Virtuous] Women* (*Lienü zhuan*, 《烈女傳》),²⁰ which, as part of a kind of “virtuous woman” narrative tradition “worked by means of public celebration as well as suppression” of female character and potential (Chow 1991, 59), others actively challenged received Confucian ideals of propriety and praised women for resourceful and well-considered action in moments of moral, social and personal crisis (Handlin 1975, 21, 30-31).

Along these lines, Overmyer’s examination of the heavily Buddhist-influenced “precious scrolls,” or *baojuan* (寶卷) revealed that not only were literate, pious women involved in financing the publication of these materials, particularly during the late Ming, when the genre appears to have received a certain degree of official sanction, they were also involved in the oral transmission of these tales to other women.²¹ Often, these tracts and ephemera took the form of short, sermon-like exempla, exhortations, or stories of virtuous people who ultimately overcome profound spiritual struggles. Despite the expression of basically orthodox Buddhist precepts, it is interesting to note that the heroines of many narrative *baojuan* resembled strong female saints who were unconventional in the

²⁰As Chow (1991, 58) notes, the title of this work evolved to refer to exemplary women, rather than to biographies of women more generally, and the original work mentions “noteworthy” women and chronicles not only virtuous female lives, but also infamous ones.

²¹On a like note, Hayes describes the popularity of women’s ballad recitations with listening audiences (1985, 89).

expression of their convictions. Overmyer concludes that these texts embrace: "a duality between Confucianism and Buddhism, with Buddhism providing the theoretical support for dissent" (1985, 228, 250, 253). Across cultures, centuries, genders and genres, the possibility for subversive readings has remained an important motivation and source of attraction for audiences drawn to popular texts.

On the one hand, the overtly didactic nature of many of the works designed for consumption and emulation by female readers may be looked upon as outwardly "preaching to the converted" who occupied the inner chambers of traditional Chinese domestic, social space. On the other, these publications themselves, however traditional their message, embodied a fundamental contradiction between the possible content properly suited to the education of women and the *impossibility* that an educated woman could *ever* be deemed entirely proper by traditional standards (Ko 1994, 55-56). Throughout her study, Ko asserts that an increasing number of literate women deliberately exploited and traversed these grey areas in their writings and discussions with other women writers (8-9).

Stemming in part from the rapid social and economic changes engendered by specific patterns of economic growth, such as the development of a monetary economy and regionally-based cash crops like silk as described in Ko's historical examination of women's lives in seventeenth century Jiangnan, as well as changing ideas about the education and social position of women, greater opportunities developed for women to respond to literature in more lasting ways. It became possible, for example, for women to publish commentaries and original works. However, this was still frequently undertaken through private, family-based publishing concerns. Occasionally, as shown perhaps most notably by works such as *The Three Wives' Commentary on the Peony Pavilion* (*San fu*

ping Mudan ting zaji 《三婦評牡丹亭雜記》), women made their literary marks by adopting the name of a male family member or publishing under a masculine pen name (1994, 37, 70-71).

As might be expected, many of the marginal discourses women engaged in did not enter the formally published record, although they were still of fundamental importance to their enjoyment of reading. Referring to the immensely popular *Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting*, 牡丹亭) a play by Tang Xianzu (湯顯祖) published in the latter part of the Ming Dynasty, a work that seems to have been especially favoured by female audiences—as the aforementioned *Three Wives' Commentary* further implies—Ko describes how women frequently distributed hand-copied texts to other female readers, and inserted their comments and insights into the margins of personal copies for later discussion and reflection. This set of common practices gives some indication of the nature of the complex weave of orality and literacy in women's communicative patterns (1994, 73). Although Johnson suggests that hierarchical organization may be the best way of thinking about the literate tradition, I suggest that “network” can be applied not only to the oral world, but to popular traditions and their audiences as well. Accordingly, in the next section I explore two facets of the texts and contexts of “borrowing”: genres as networks of themes and readers' networks of distribution and use.

1.4 Genres and Distribution: “Borrowing” Revisited

As described earlier in this chapter, “genre” can be thought of as both a literary class whose representative works share common attributes and express important cultural dispositions and beliefs, and as a set of aesthetic constraints and potentials which may or may not transcend the boundaries of accepted classifications (Cawelti 1976, 6). With

popular fiction, genre is, in some respects, interchangeable with “formula” in so far as both can represent “a conventional system for structuring cultural products” (Cawelti 1971, 29). To borrow and rework Wilgus’ (1973) famous phrase, genre —as both a category of textual form and content and as a tool of classification— *is the thing*, however, genres are also the interstices and boundaries which define their constituent texts. This rather paradoxical condition is not unlike the problematic situation which can arise in narrative analysis when traditional annotation methods are brought to bear on motifs that are themselves also complete tale types (Minton 1993, 9, 13-15).

Therefore, while Chinese chivalric fiction is certainly a culturally-specific adventure genre, it can be seen to include elements of romance, and indeed, many readers have expressed the conviction that the romantic tension is the “special spice” which flavours the narrative, without which the story would —literally— be a tasteless tale of martial prowess and confrontation. One male reader who said that he generally preferred romance novels, also noted a liking for martial arts fiction with a romantic thread running through the story. In fact, this feature was a major influence on his choice of kungfu novels, or indeed, whether he would elect to read a work of martial arts fiction at all, since as he put it: “I seldom go for Kung-Fu novels without romances in.”²²

Similarly, traditional detective fiction incorporates certain fundamental aspects of chivalric tales, especially in its preoccupation with justice and deployment of knight-errant figures who act in the service of the central investigator, who is often a wise judge. In the words of one male reader, although traditional “court case” fiction, such as Ming period stories featuring the principled Judge Bao belong, strictly speaking, to the detective genre:

²²QRE-13i. See Chapter Two for a description of the questionnaire notation used in this thesis.

"...but he [Judge Bao] has some people who have martial arts guarded him [who served as runners and personal guards], and he also encountered some people who was *wuxia* [who were knights-errant]." ²³

In fact, this reader and others were quick to point out that, as far as they were concerned, *The Cases of Judge Bao* (*Bao Gong an*, 《包公案》) and similar collections of tales could be considered a secondary, but still important, influence on the shaping of the contemporary martial arts novel because of that genre's frequent emphasis on discovering the underlying reasons behind the hero or heroes' primary vendetta and/or quest. Likewise, romance novels can contain knight-errant figures. One such example is the chivalrous daughter of a martial arts master and performer in Zhang Henshui's (張恨水) *Fate in Tears and Laughter* (*Ti xiao yinyuan*, 《啼笑因緣》) who demonstrates not only considerable fighting prowess, but also a deep sense of loyalty and unrequited love for the hero. ²⁴

Certainly, the concept of "borrowed material" or indeed, the act of borrowing itself, has a very literal application to this discussion of Chinese popular fiction and readership. For one thing, during the late Qing era, with the increasing availability of cheap editions of books and especially the growing prevalence of serialized fiction in newspapers and magazines, circulation of popular print ephemera increased remarkably. However, as some researchers emphasize, press figures for this period and later decades of this century do not give a true picture of audience size, because the actual readers per copy ratio significantly exceeded the number of copies bought or subscriptions sold (Lee and Nathan 1985, 371-

²³NING Changlong, interview. 30 August 1995. Tape T95NCL-14.

²⁴This novel was serialized in 1929-30, and published in a complete volume in 1930. See Borthwick (1984, 255-61).

372; Link 1981, 190-191). The real extent of informal, reader-centred distribution networks for mass-mediated texts was, and may well remain, much larger.

Moreover, it seems that this phenomenon is neither restricted to a particular historical moment or cultural milieu. In her ethnography of supermarket tabloid reading, Bird described how women readers would save sections or entire copies of tabloids and make them available to other family members and friends (1992, 143). In a much different historical and cultural context, Link traced the widespread distribution of hand-copied entertainment fiction among young urban readers and those “sent to the countryside” during the Cultural Revolution, and found that: “If truly popular, the story would become a ‘flying book’ (*feishu*, 飛書) that never found its way home.” In the case of one hand-copied novel which was published after this period: “[it] eventually ‘flew’ the length and breadth of China” (1989, 18). On a like note, Chapter Two describes one reader’s memories of eight students sharing the eight volumes of a published martial arts novel, drawing lots to determine which book each student read first, then swapping them in quick (and often random) succession in order to have the whole story as quickly as possible. Similarly, other readers recalled borrowing books from friends and acquaintances, and sometimes these temporary acquisitions, even “directly” from close friends and classmates showed evidence of much travel and earlier, avid perusal.

Reading as an activity also draws on and elaborates the concerns of its target communities, even if those concerns differ from the ones originally expressed by particular authors. Interestingly, reading historically fulfilled at least three of Bascom’s four functions of folklore for Chinese audiences: amusement, education and cultural validation (1965, 290, 292-293). At a time when May Fourth writers were advocating a wider acceptance of western writers, literary styles and ideas, authors of popular “Mandarin Duck and

Butterfly" fiction adhered to traditional allusions and themes, while also allowing readers to vicariously experiment with certain aspects of western modernity, like new ideas of womanhood, from a safe remove (Link 1981, 20-21, 146).

As Radway states, however, reading as an activity — even the reading of genres which ostensibly perpetuate traditional values and patriarchal structures and ideologies — tends to subvert rather than support cultural norms (1987, 118). This outcome was similarly noted, and lamented, by late nineteenth century reformers in China who sought to use fiction as a medium of mass education and moral instruction (Lee and Nathan 1985, 378-88). Indeed, similar arguments could be made for many other forms of popular literature which have been officially sanctioned or permitted for popular consumption, either before or after this period. It is very likely that stories of Buddhist saints, and their accompanying sinners, remained the stuff of entertaining tales long after the generic labels for those narratives, as well as their original form and function as exempla may have fallen into disuse, or the dogma they once illustrated into disfavour (Ch'en 1961, 466). Similarly, traditional Chinese detective fiction, with its plots frequently structured around the reversal of previous verdicts (*pingfan*, 平反), would have been especially intriguing and resonant for readers after the Cultural Revolution, in the wake of the trials of the Gang of Four (Kinkley 1985, 92). The medium, it seems, reconstitutes the message according to the dictates of the popular imagination.

It is also entirely possible for mass media to deliberately borrow from and reproduce texts from genres not primarily for reasons of political ideology, though ideology may certainly affect such things as access to printing facilities and circulation prospects, but for more commercially immediate ends. Recognizing the power of fiction as a means to sell copy, if not exactly usher in a new social order, newspapers and journals in turn of the

century China—from their late Qing origins as commercial papers, missionary publications and political forums— diversified their contents to include popular entertainment fiction, sampling widely from Chinese and translated western genres in an effort to attract and hold readers (Lee and Nathan 1985, 362, 364, 382; Link 1981, 12). As I discuss in Appendix A, a concern with the balanced inclusion of fiction, poetry and other kinds of articles along with news in an effort to appeal to a wider range of readers is also expressed in the format and regular content of a number of Canadian-based Chinese electronic magazines.

As stated earlier in this chapter, I do not intend that these examples should be taken as any kind of conclusive account of either the provenance or content of contemporary genres, or indeed, the constitution and complex motivations of their modern audiences. Indeed, to whatever extent possible, I intend to address those kinds of questions—and, where appropriate, to reformulate them and pose new ones—in the chapters which follow. They can, however, hopefully go some way to demonstrating that when and where there are readers, there are vernacular texts and ways of accessing, sharing, and using them which will continue to sustain and transform Chinese popular tradition. The final section of this chapter recaps the synchronic structure of this thesis and the ways in which oral and written interchange, generic literacy and expertise and genres as networks of content and reader interaction comprise a framework for this ethnography of contemporary readership.

1.5 Exchange, Expertise, Texts and Readers: The Present Study

The tripartite structure which informs the historical basis of this chapter can also serve to delineate the basic synchronic framework of this thesis as a study of a particular cross section of contemporary readers. The interaction between oral and written forms in the creation and transmission of Chinese popular traditions, as well as audiences' levels of

expertise and their corresponding access and response to different kinds of texts and genres are all important questions to consider when looking at the place of Chinese fiction in readers' lives.

In the present study, the mutual significance of oral and written traditions merge in an exploration of the importance of language and fiction to contemporary readers. As a result of the development of the vernacular language and popular entertainments which used it, popular culture helped to bring a measure of the differing realities of the oral and literate domains into closer contact and facilitated the transmission of a range of Chinese traditions. Moreover, vernacular texts that could be read by and/or performed for larger sections of the population also provided other channels for the spread of Chinese cultural values and worldview beyond the ephemeral spoken word or largely inaccessible classical treatise. Many readers who took part in my field research noted that a good novel should possess a measure of the mix of registers and language styles that Hanan cites as the hallmark of successful popular literature, namely, that it should appeal to audiences from all walks of life (*ya-su gong shang*, 雅俗共賞) and contain "dialogue that is neither pedantic nor vulgar" (1981, 15).

"Literacy," as a way of looking at individual readers' expertise in reading particular genres, as well as how those genres inform reader aesthetics, is a central theme throughout the next several chapters. In appreciation of the fact that expertise can take many forms and is influenced by a range of factors which may be situated either in the individual reader, the media which form the reader's main focus of attention, or a combination of these and other elements, the last two chapters concentrate on gendered experiences of reading, readers and participants who engage with electronic texts as opportunities to inscribe and extend their personal and collective readings, and the ways in which their perceptions of their own

aesthetic preferences and ideas about the genres to which they are most readily attracted change and clarify as a result.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined Chinese popular culture from a diachronic perspective, emphasizing popular traditions as a primary site of interaction between the oral and written worlds, and has also outlined the synchronic investigation which forms the fundamental project of this thesis in subsequent chapters along similar lines, exploring the connections between orality, literacy and genres of popular fiction. Here, literacy is conceived as both a collective social phenomenon subject to various historical and geographical conditions, and as a metaphor for the levels of generic expertise demonstrated by individual readers. Genres are forms of dynamic popular entertainments transmitted, consumed, reproduced and often connected to other narrative patterns by readers' tastes, associations and activities, such as discussion and other forms of face-to-face and electronically-mediated forms of play.

In the next chapter, I discuss the composition of the "audience" who participated in my survey, and the techniques used to interview them. As I pointed out in the opening remarks to this chapter, "audience" can be a problematic construction, even when it is defined, however evanescently, by ethnographic study rather than literary supposition. While I can call these readers "an audience" to the extent that they form a body of participants who engage with specific kinds of popular texts and who, as a result of this engagement, have made definite aesthetic decisions about the kinds of pleasure they seek and ultimately derive from their experiences —as well as what those experiences lack— I cannot necessarily say that these readers formed spontaneous collectives before I introduced my study. In fact,

because of the methodology involved in the field research, I can say with some certainty that most, though not all, are probably unknown to each other, though it is my intention that as many as possible, at least through their words if not their actual identities as individual readers, will become known to future readers and researchers through this and subsequent work.

Chapter Two: Methodology and Readership Profile

2.1 Introduction

Common to almost all contemporary audience studies is a concern with the interaction of individuals with both texts and the social contexts in which those texts are endowed with dynamic patterns of meaning by their respective publics, from British and American science fiction serials and syndicated reruns (Bacon-Smith 1992) to Chinese soap opera (Rofel 1995). Studies of readership however, partly because of their focus on the aesthetics of largely solitary readers, frequently seem like multiple ethnographies describing discrete communities of one.

That is not to say that ethnographic reader research is repetitive in its findings, even though recurring configurations of reading preferences do emerge, particularly within certain genres, a phenomenon I discuss in later chapters. Rather, I suggest that, in many ways, the folklorist interested in reading audiences and the researcher looking at Internet communication confront similar challenges. Both must find ways to comprehend the traditions and worldview of a group which shares a certain repertoire of cultural understanding, but not necessarily any geographical or temporal proximity. When studying technologically-mediated audiences, it is important to distinguish between what I refer to as participants' *co-prescience* —their grasp of possible ranges of actions, meanings and especially the locations at which cultural boundaries intersect or are open to transgression— and the *co-presence* traditionally associated with many forms of popular cultural participation.²⁵

²⁵I discuss these concepts as they apply to joking strategies and nicknaming on a Chinese newsgroup in a forthcoming article (Kozar, in press), which is also summarized in the first and third sections of Appendix A.

Certainly, some forms of Internet discourse, such as Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels, Multi-user Domain/Dungeon (MUD) sites —and, to some extent, even high-traffic newsgroups— depend upon a higher level of interactivity²⁶ in order to maintain a sense of topicality and simultaneity of exchange. Despite an apparent concurrence of activity, however, often the ethnographer is dealing with ephemeral texts and/or inscribed traces of technological artifacts, such as transcripts of role-playing sessions or spontaneous expressions of speech play.²⁷ As a folklorist who has conducted research in both fields, it seems to me that these electronic inscriptions are not unlike readers' memories of past narrative pleasures. In each instance, it may be said that the initial discovery of the text, either as an act of creation or point of contact, has more or less passed *except* that an unmistakable intertextuality remains as a potential influence on future texts.

For example, an ongoing newsgroup debate may retain only part of the original message which sparked it, embedded within many replies. Eventually, as participants develop other, related issues and opposing points of view, the discussion may assume a very different shape and take a direction only tangentially related to the original posting.

By the same token, a reader may have pleasant memories associated with particular books, which in turn evoke a more general response to previous reading experiences.

²⁶See Rafaeli (1996) for a discussion of the relationship of interactivity to the other definitive features of Net-based communication. Similarly, Morris and Ogan propose that there may be different "critical masses" of adopters needed to sustain different kinds of computer-mediated interchanges (1996, 45).

²⁷See, for example, Baym's ethnography of a soap opera newsgroup (1993), Ruedenberg, Danet, and Rosenbaum-Tamari's analysis of framed speech play on IRC (1995), and Turkle's discussion of MUDs as a forum for the creative reworking of players' identities (1995, 12). In many cases, researchers may actually participate in one or more Internet communities, but records of interactions, like detailed notes or taped interviews, are necessary for in-depth interpretation.

However, his or her recollections of precise events or characters that may have been crucial to the plot may become vague or mingled with fragments remembered from other novels. While this may decrease the relative accuracy of a reader's quantitative recall of individual works, these cumulative, reconstructed perceptions may actually serve to heighten his or her qualitative expertise within a given genre as a whole. As Roberts asserts: "every story in every popular genre is referring deliberately or unconsciously to every other story in that genre. Most of what seems inexcusably unintelligible in popular fiction is crystal clear to the people who have learned how to read it" (1990, 60).

In this chapter, I describe the research techniques used to gather my field data, which included taped interviews, ongoing, informal discussions, and the distribution of printed and electronic questionnaires, as well as some of the major methodological challenges and constraints involved in the design of this kind of inquiry. In addition, I outline a general readership profile which provides information about certain key features of my sample, such as the total number of respondents and the ratio of male to female readers who participated in my survey, as well as respondents' average ages and education levels and/or main occupational categories.

Though I do not confine the present discussion exclusively to an examination of readers' aesthetics, the construction of this audience profile also permits me to summarize and explore in other chapters widespread trends which emerged from the data. These include readers' generic preferences, their ideas about what constitutes a satisfying narrative, and their perceptions of the amount of time and concentration they devote to the activity of reading. As a corollary of this third topic which is connected to aspects of my research design discussed later in the present chapter, I also consider how this intensity of engagement with texts has varied at different points in readers' lives.

Caution is required in this or any analysis which seeks to abstract the common elements from complex systems such as a set of individual behavioural repertoires, whether the primary focus is on a single activity or not. Even a single activity, as a singularly framed event, cannot be taken as a simple act contributing only and equally to a person's larger expressive culture. To give but a few examples, crafting, singing, cooking, dancing —and reading— are all multi-faceted experiences for those who choose them as the performative media through which to enact the signifying texts of their everyday lives.

There is always a danger in taking the mean as an absolute value, in describing the *average* instead of the *actual*, even though it is sometimes a useful and necessary tool for finding common resonances in what may seem a cacophony of disparate voices. In the analysis of my field data, I found it difficult to keep track of the opinions and reading practices of the seventy-nine individuals who took part in my study without some sort of statistical abstract of the overall composition of the sample. Indeed, summarizing particular kinds of data proved extremely instructive.

For example, as I discuss later in Chapter Six, I found that men and women who describe themselves primarily as martial arts or romance fiction enthusiasts share similar predilections for reading books “all in one go” if possible, or as the Chinese expression puts it: “all in one *breath*,” — *yi kou qi duwan*, 一口氣讀完. I also confirmed, as I had suspected, that almost exactly twice as many men as women participated in my research, or fifty-three compared to twenty-six. The average age of female respondents was 28.6 years, while for male readers the average was 33.4 years. I suspect however, that these averages may be somewhat low, since in a total of twenty instances, respondents did not give a firm statement of how old they were. It is interesting to note that this was a question that many Chinese seemed to have trouble with, not because they thought it was too personal —and

in a culture which traditionally values age and wisdom I have been assured it is not considered an impertinent query — but because many readers do not seem to bother keeping track very closely. With readers in face-to-face interviews, I estimated ages based on readers' descriptions of academic histories, length of time abroad, and so on. The youngest and oldest respondents were both male, fifteen and seventy years old respectively.

Educational levels and occupational groupings were comparable, with the majority of respondents stating that they were engaged in postgraduate study. A higher percentage of women listed occupations outside academia, even though they may have had comprehensive training, such as the woman who described herself as: "an engineer, now full-time mother."²⁸ Perhaps surprisingly, especially given the seemingly exhaustive generic background knowledge of many male readers, although men's and women's responses were proportionally similar on many points of comparison, including the mention of their favourite author or authors by name, women were more than twice as likely to provide additional information about a writer's life and career.

It should be understood, however, that I arrived at my comparative synopsis *after* I had translated and transcribed all of my taped interviews, a significant number of which were either completely or primarily in Mandarin. I did the same with the handwritten and electronic questionnaires. In the latter case, I also assigned each a number and coded all of the information by category and recorded the responses of each reader onto charts. Although I realize that the creation of transcriptions and charts implies a certain redundancy of practice, it helped me to cross-reference the documentation of my sample, and the

²⁸QRH-14. The letters prefixing the number of the questionnaire denote whether it belonged to the pilot survey (P), or the revised handwritten (RH) or revised electronic (RE) sets. Numbers do not specifically relate to the order in which questionnaires were returned.

presentation methods strengthened my understanding of these readers and their diverse readings.

As might be expected, the nature of most of the taped interviews did not suit this type of analytical organization. While I had certain questions in mind, I also wanted to give respondents the opportunity to discuss their attitudes and reading habits as freely as possible. Interviews, even moderately guided ones, tend to evolve into moments of ethnographic significance that are somewhat difficult to chart. Alternatively, I developed a transcription system whereby I was able to indicate central topics and transitions, as well as instances of code-switching between languages, on the transcripts themselves. As I ultimately put all of the tape transcripts and handwritten surveys into an electronic format — the electronically distributed questionnaires were already conveniently in this form — I could then search for specific subjects or more general response emphases among several readers relatively quickly in order to obtain elaborated quotations which seemed representative of particular reader preference clusters.

Additionally, I began scripting the results of my fieldwork in hypertext. Hypertext allows files to be dynamically linked through a series of markers or commands, and represents one of the fundamental underlying structuring mechanisms of webpages. “My readers” soon articulated themselves separately and collectively through this mode of investigation as well: I found myself increasingly linking readers to other readers and then back to themselves in particular ways. I was alerted to the need to consider readers individually, as constituent members of the entire group I surveyed, but also as perhaps belonging to interlocking, yet fluid circles of enthusiasts, not entirely dissimilar to the dynamic structure of women’s Star Trek fan communities explored in Camille Bacon-Smith’s Enterprising Women (1992, 26-30).

I want to emphasize that the interpretive techniques described here were developed as an attempt to establish in my own ethnographic practice systems of analysis which avoided the codification of people into fixed categories, but which instead considered their expressive traditions from a variety of angles. At the same time, I had to acknowledge that I also needed to see where individual readers were situated in the larger landscape of my work, without allowing the people of my study—as can happen in discussions of popular traditions as mass cultural phenomena—to become undifferentiated masses, the residual by-products of an overly rigid method or ideology.²⁹

In the next sections, I will describe my position as an ethnographer, as well as the chronology and development of my research methods. Within this context, and indeed, throughout this work, I strive to give some insight as to who these readers are, and the stories they tell about the stories they read. Although I will summarize certain aspects of the information they provided, my paramount concern is that readers' deliberations are clearly heard.

2.1.1 Learning to Read Reading Audiences: Cultural and Linguistic Literacy

Before proceeding, I should probably point out that I do not have extensive formal training in Chinese studies, at least not in the conventional sense. I went to Changchun, northeastern China, to study with the Simon Fraser University Summer Field School in 1990, following the completion of a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology. After the

²⁹See Williams' resolute dismissal of the concepts of "mass culture" and "mass society" (1958; rpt. 1963, 289, qtd. in Narváez 1992, 24-25). With specific reference to recent Chinese political history, and the distinctions between what may be thought of as "official" populist and basically "unofficial" popular culture, see Lee and Nathan (1985, 360-361, 373) and Link (1984, 100-01, 110; 1989, 18-20).

summer course in Chinese language, philosophy and medicine ended, I returned to Beijing and found employment as an English teacher at the Beijing Teachers' College³⁰ for the 1990-91 academic year. I lived in the foreign student dormitory of another university for the latter part of the summer before taking up my position at the Teachers' College and continued learning spoken Mandarin in an immersion setting.

Within the year, I became quite fluent, though my grammar lacked the sophistication of a more experienced speaker. By the time I returned to Canada to commence graduate studies in the autumn of 1991, I could handle most daily situations without difficulty. Also, I could conduct interviews, providing that the person to whom I was speaking refrained from talking too quickly, especially if I was unable to tape the session.

Although my responsibilities as an instructor kept me very busy, while I was in Beijing I continued to study the written Chinese language, however, my progress as an independent student of this complicated writing system was understandably slow. After my return to Canada, I undertook my MA in Folklore at Memorial University, and finished in 1993, whereupon I began a doctorate in the same department. During this time, I taught English as a Second Language (ESL) at the university and found many Mandarin speakers who were interested in my various research projects and supportive of my efforts to improve my Chinese language skills. Once I had met my doctoral course work and examination requirements, I moved to Edinburgh, where I was accepted at the Department of East Asian Studies as an independent research student.

At the University of Edinburgh, I audited language classes and continued my fieldwork, writing and presenting on my findings. By the time I designed the pilot version

³⁰To my knowledge, a few years ago, this institution amalgamated with several other smaller colleges and was renamed the Capital Normal University.

of my readership questionnaire in the spring of 1995, the distribution and revision of which is given detailed treatment in a later section, I was able to formulate all of the questions orally. However, I naturally found the assistance of a native speaker invaluable for such things as phrasing the questions in a more formal register, varying the style of questioning to maintain respondent interest, and keeping the potential for ambiguity to a minimum as much as possible.

While at Edinburgh, I improved my reading and translation skills significantly, however, I must concede that I was never able to cultivate my ability to physically write Chinese to any great extent, and the acquisition of a clear calligraphic style is of course a fundamental component in the attainment of well-rounded literacy. I should mention that in this regard, I labour under a double disadvantage: I am a “southpaw” by necessity as a disability has meant that I have never had even functional use of my right hand. Certainly, there are some celebrated left-handed Chinese calligraphers and painters, but most people recognize that it is easier to master Chinese characters if the student is right-handed. Although I had some success in Chinese composition, a persistent injury to my left hand makes any writing—even in English, or indeed, many fine motor activities for that matter—quite painful. In an effort to compensate for this, I have developed a proficiency with several Chinese software packages, which require a minimum of keyboard input, as well as English language dictation software. As a result, I can use my reading recognition vocabulary to select the characters I want to “write” by choosing from an on-screen display. These and other technological issues are further addressed in Appendix A, which also provides a summary of the scope of my recent research on the Chinese Internet.

2.2 Creating Ways to Talk With Readers

2.2.1 Interviewing “Old Four”: A First Glimpse at Chinese Fiction Fandom

As alluded to in the Introduction to this work and described in greater detail in my MA thesis, my first clue as to the complex and compelling world of Chinese popular fiction audiences emerged as the result of a fortuitous accident. I had arranged to interview Wang Zhongning, a Chinese graduate student in Chemistry from Memorial University of Newfoundland who had assured me that he could tell me “a story from every Dynasty.”³¹ As I was then engaged in collecting stories about Chinese heroines for my thesis, the promise of such a wealth of tales was too good to pass up. Contrary to his usual punctuality, my tradition bearer arrived late, breathlessly making his apologies and burdened—or so it appeared—with more than the weight of either a guilty conscience or an excessively hectic schedule.

He had been to the library, and retrieved a few books on Chinese folktales that he wanted me to see. He had also signed out an impressive collection of fairytales for himself, as he later rather sheepishly referred to them. One of the bulging bags had tipped over, revealing a volume of martial arts fiction. It was one of about twenty, and the total divided into three or four multi-volume sets, as far as I could make out before my storyteller closed the bag, telling me I could not *possibly* be interested in its contents.

As it turned out, I was very interested, and although his repertoire of heroine tales faltered somewhat after that unintentional disclosure of his true narrative expertise, I conducted follow-up interviews in the autumn of 1993 and the winter of 1994. These taped discussions covered such things as the contemporary history of the genre, as well as his

³¹See Kozar (1993, 128).

own preferences for particular novels and authors. He told me that although his studies prevented him from devoting as much time as he would like to reading what he termed *kungfu* (*gongfu*, 功夫) novels, they were a major source of enjoyment in his life, especially as a university student in China.

He described how, while living with seven other students in a cramped dormitory, a new eight volume set of novels by the immensely popular author Jin Yong (金庸) became available at the library. Because all of the students were eager to read the new story, they drew lots to assign each reader's "first" volume. After completing that book, they were then free to trade in quick succession for those they had not read.

Although Chapter Four is devoted to a detailed discussion of this genre, one of the features of traditional martial arts fiction is its use of chapter-driven prefaces and episodic plot structure. Despite having to start with the fourth volume, Wang was able to piece the story together completely. In fact, in an example of what Oring calls the intimate dyadic traditions common to close friends (1984, 20-21), he talked about how he and a former classmate still sometimes address each other by these original volume numbers. Even though these avid novel fans are now thousands of miles apart, they keep in touch by electronic mail, and they still remember their shared experience of martial arts fiction:

WZN: Usually the *gongfu* novel is very long, [more so] than general novel. They may give the Volume One, Volume Two, Volume Three, Volume Four, even volume Eight: And in China when I was a graduate student, in Shanghai Nuclear Research Institute, we had eight male graduate students together. We find Jin Yong's *gongfu* novel, it's Volume One to Volume Eight. We want to read it immediately, all of us! So we just say we can get the paper, do you know? And write —1,2,3,4, [up] to 8— people. Then we assign too, say: "You read One first, you read Two first." My turn is, if I can remember, I should read volume Four first. Then we exchange it! <laughs> So you see the sequence is confused, but still we think it's very interesting!... For Jin Yong's novel, *Yi tian tulong*, [*Yi tian*

tulong ji, 《倚天屠龍記》, *The Heaven Sword and the Dragon Sabre*].³² I still remember it! And one of the members, he is in United States right now. And I give him an e-mail, just one month ago. I ask him: "Do you remember the story we just exchanged? Start from Volume Three and exchanged, from Volume Four, Volume Two, then go to Volume One!" You know! <laughing> And he answered he still remembers that!³³

2.2.2 *Xin Ling*: The Secret Women's Discussion Group

Following my preliminary interviews with Zhongning, I decided to seek out the opinions of some female readers. Wanting to further practice my Chinese language and field research skills, I began a discussion group for Chinese women to examine images of women in popular media. I felt that this would be an interesting way to explore Chinese women's experiences of their own and western popular culture, and might widen my developing concern with popular fiction to include women's perceptions of other mass-mediated narratives found in film, comics and perhaps even advertising.

We began with weekly meetings, and topics were partially determined by the Chinese members. Although I attempted to simply facilitate discussions as much as possible, I was regarded to some extent as a "teacher," possibly because I was the only native English speaker from a western culture. I was very conscious at times that I was "leading" the group, a position I tried to avoid. I found that simply trying to limit my contributions was not a useful approach. The women would not permit my voice to be silenced, just so I could better hear theirs. After all, they were giving of their spare time, and expected a

³²According to Minford (1993, 6), this novel was first published in 1963, and revised in 1977. The introduction to Minford's article contains a complete list of all of Jin Yong's major novels, including titles, publication dates and brief synopses of setting (6-8).

³³WANG Zhongning, interviews. 16 October 1993, 26 January 1994. Tapes T93WZN-01/2, T94WZN-03.

certain return. I was a group member, and, as a Canadian woman interested in their culture, a cultural resource person through whom they might gain new understandings about their lives abroad.

At the end of the sessions, the women often asked me to prepare a brief presentation for the following week on a particular subject, and supplement what I would speak about with articles or other material. During the group meetings themselves, they would cooperatively take the floor, offering opinions and comparing their own experiences. Generally, the meetings started off in English, but excited code-switching into Mandarin, which was the Chinese dialect common to all participants, whether they were from Mainland China, Taiwan or Malaysia, frequently occurred once the discussion was under way. Mandarin Chinese is my second language, and as a *laowai* (老外) —literally, an “old foreigner,” a common colloquial term for non-Chinese— I found the lively discussions an excellent opportunity to practice listening comprehension and learn new vocabulary.

We came up with a special name for the group, *Xin Ling*. The first character, *xin* (信) means “belief,” the second is an invented “secret word,” a composite of the radical for “woman” (*nü*, 女) framing the character *yu* (羽), meaning feather, and pronounced the same as a word for “agile and clever” (*ling*, 灵). It looked something like this:

𡥉

The women came up with the second character as an expression of their freedom “to talk about beliefs about language” in our group, a freedom which they felt was much greater than either traditional society or the language itself afforded their sex. Many of the women noted, for example, that words like *slave* (*nūli*, 奴隸) and *jealousy* (*duji*, 妒忌) contain the word for *woman*, and so speak negatively about their gender from the outset.

Of particular interest were issues involving women's balancing of home and career, as well as cross-cultural gender and social differences. Two articles that I provided which generated a great deal of animated discussion were Carol Mithers' "My Life as a Man," (1982) and "Shakespeare in the Bush," by anthropologist Laura Bohannon (1971).

The latter article details a young researcher's unsuccessful attempt to show that *Hamlet* is world literature insofar as the family conflicts are universally appreciated. While a traditional Chinese view agrees to a large extent with western reactions—that Hamlet is a weak son and his mother should not have remarried so soon after her husband's death, and *certainly* not wed one of her in-laws— Bohannon's amusing and insightful account describes the difficulty she had in convincing the elders of the African tribe she was studying of the validity of this interpretation.

To her dismay, the young anthropologist's audience expressed a generally complacent reaction toward this powerful tale of family intrigue. Bohannon was unprepared for their response, and for the very different underlying worldview it signified. There was no basis for a story here, no conflict. Sometimes people are killed, sons must mature before they can accept responsibility and the woman's marriage to the uncle was a wise move: dowry land and possessions stay in the family and the dead man's spirit can rest in peace knowing that his wife is well looked after (1971, 15, 17-21).

Bohannon's article was written like a story. The group members quickly pointed this out, and began to discuss other kinds of popular fiction which involved travel and exotic places and people. A biochemistry student in her mid-twenties from Beijing spoke excitedly of her appreciation of San Mao's (三毛) novels, a woman writer whose works highlight her travel experiences. Another young woman, a Taiwanese computing science major, described how Jin Yong's kungfu novels were explorations through the far-off time and

space of ancient China, and how he too tried to portray even genuinely fantastic characters in a consistently logical and realistic way.

Within a few weeks of its inception, *Xin Ling* had established a fairly stable membership of about seven women, with some occasional visitors. Despite the fact that the group was created, to some extent, in response to an induced context on my part, as I put up posters suggesting the formation of a discussion group, the women formed a “folk group” by most accepted definitions. They had developed and acknowledged an esoteric identity and were recognized exoterically —mainly by curious male students— as “the secret women’s discussion group.” They participated in regularly occurring cultural scenes and engaged in various kinds of small group interaction.

In the weeks following our encounter with “Shakespeare in the Bush,” our discussions turned more and more to popular fiction and fiction-based films. While I found it more convenient and conducive to spirited discussion if I refrained from taping group meetings,³⁴ four members of *Xin Ling* agreed to be interviewed individually about their reading habits. Three of the women are from Mainland China, and the other is from Taiwan. Two are married and in their early thirties, the other two are in their mid-twenties and single. Three are studying computer science, and the San Mao fan is in biochemistry, as I mentioned earlier.

The youngest group member I interviewed, Chen Yuyuan (Jade), is a seasoned fan of martial arts fiction. She attended high school in Taiwan before she came to Canada to continue her studies at university. And, like Wang, she too described how her passion for reading kungfu novels conflicted with her responsibilities as a diligent student. Unable to

³⁴Because I am physically unable to write quickly, and waiting for me to “catch up” would have greatly impeded the flow of talk, I generally took down keywords and wrote or recorded fuller reflections later.

confine her reading to a dormitory shared with like-minded devotees, Jade developed elaborate strategies for engaging in her subversive entertainments which, though generally successful, sometimes backfired:

CCY: Yes, and I kind of gave up studying. I just borrow a book and read it because it's impossible for me to read at home. My family are not used to the idea of privacy. We don't close our doors, we are not allowed to. Can seldom read at home. So I have to bring them novels to school and then look at them, read them during in class! <laugh> So, every time I chose a seat, I'm always in the middle one, last row. And then I can just put the book on my desk because the back of the front person will obstruct the teacher's view.... Many people put things in the desk drawer, and look at the teacher and look at it. And look at the teacher and back at their books. But I learned very early, it's unwise to do so! <laugh> Never do that, put it on the desk.... [Describes how the teacher will sometimes find out but not do anything immediately.] Sometimes the teacher will check your book bag, so you have to hide your book everywhere. We have a gathering every morning, you go out without your book bag. So sometimes they will just go into the class and check it. And when you come into the class, is your novel there? And the teacher's there and you can just kiss your novel goodbye!³⁵

Both of the married women who permitted taped interviews were computer science specialists from Mainland China, however, their tastes differed markedly. One stated that she really enjoyed sitting at home with a bowl of roasted watermelon seeds³⁶ reading a good romance novel in the evenings:

LZQ: When I came to Canada, when I'm at home <voice quiet, people entering room> I always lie on the sofa, then take some *guazi* [roasted watermelon seeds] <laughter, SK says: "Only women eat *guazi*, they're too small!" Zhengqi concurs, laughing> If I have such kind of evening, it's very enjoyable! A novel and a pack of *guazi*.... [SK asks if she prefers to read straight through.] Usually I read novels from beginning to end, continuously.... [SK asks if she has a certain preferred time to read.] You know my husband is a medical doctor, so he is very busy.

³⁵CHEN Yuyuan, interview. 19 December 1994. Tape T94YYCb-07.

³⁶A common snack in Mainland China. I was told that watermelon seeds are especially favoured among women as a kind of "comfort food." Men do not appear to share this taste, and generally dismiss the rather complicated process of shelling and extracting the edible portion of the small seeds as an effort which greatly exceeds its rewards.

Sometimes he has to work in the evening. He will be not at home, this is my special time to read! <laughs softly>³⁷

Zhengqi acknowledged that few married women and fewer married men seemed to read, or at least *admitted* to reading, romances. The genre's main audience, in her opinion, consisted of unmarried women and "reflective, introverted (*neixiang*, 内向) young men." When I asked why she still liked to read them, she replied:

LZQ: Maybe I'm very happy! <laughs> And you know actually, when I came to Canada, it is my first time to left home. I always lived together with my parents, and they give many, many cares [*they looked after me well.*] So when I graduated from the university, and met my husband, he is still very caring to me. So I think I am very happy, so I still read such kind of novels! <laughs>

By contrast, her contemporary, a reader of mainly non-fiction, gave me the distinct impression that she was unlikely to bother with either *guazi* or romance fiction now, but—if pressed to make a choice—the seeds would definitely win a higher place in her affections. Like Zhengqi, Yang Meng described herself as happy, however, she was no longer particularly happy reading fiction. Although she once enjoyed novels, her response to the propaganda which formed the greater part of her daily experience with official media when she was growing up in Beijing made her react strongly to any kind of leisure-time reading that was purportedly untrue, even if it was explicitly framed that way. For Meng, the act of reading necessitates a commitment to active reflection on what was read. As she matured, and especially after she married, she found that she was no longer satisfied with works that discussed love in unrealistic terms, or that masked the nature of relationships behind indirect language and poetic allusion, although she still occasionally enjoys romantic films:

³⁷LU Zhengqi, interview. 16 May 1994. Tape T94LZYM-04.

YM: [Commenting on her dislike of “poetic” romance novels]: Yes, I would say that right now it’s [her preferences tend toward works that express things] more directly, I mean saying things. Maybe because I’m married, I don’t know. I think with what you experience, I think sometimes you have to more —directly— to saying something or to doing something. Not always implied, because you can have many, many interpretations. [SK notes suggestion that married people don’t tend to keep reading romances.] Yes, I would say that, I would say that. Because I don’t believe it. I think if you are married, you know, there are lots of things that —marriage is not that beautiful. Some part is, but some part is not. Just the normal things in the relationship, real things is not that beautiful. Maybe because I don’t believe it, so I don’t like to read it. But sometimes, I really like to see a movie, sometimes, have some beautiful things, but not really think about it.³⁸

Speaking of her enjoyment of San Mao’s works, Peihong, an unmarried biochemistry graduate student, seemed to take a position intermediate to those expressed by either Zhengqi or Meng. For her, San Mao’s novels captured a beauty that was not situated in larger romantic ideals, but in the small joys and mishaps of ordinary existence:

ZPH: And the thing I like about San Mao’s stories is, too, she writes a lot about ordinary people, a lot of ordinary things, but she makes me think these things are so interesting. Like she used to write about the shoes she wears! <laugh> All the kinds of shoes she wears. She doesn’t like high heels because it’s difficult to walk. She likes to wear the shoes [says “sandals” in Chinese], the shoes you wear in summertime because it’s so simple and you can go to anywhere. Not cocktail parties of course, but you can go anywhere you like. And one pair of her shoes that she liked very much were broken down at last because she wear it too much. And she just take off the —belt [strap] <voice quizzical> of the shoe, and tied her hair with the belt <laugh> and then the shoes fall off at the street, so she had to wear the broken shoes back to home. And it’s raining, and it’s wet on the street. And when she walked, the shoes made sounds: “Gush, gush.” And the faster she walked, and the sounds become more: “Gush, gush, gush, gush.” <laughs, voice quickens to imitate faster steps> She just run! Because she liked the sound, so she just run back home with that broken down shoes. So <pause> I think the true meaning of life is not in romantic love or something like that. It’s in the broken shoe.³⁹

³⁸YANG Meng, interview. 16 May 1994. Tape T94LZYM-04.

³⁹ZHU Peihong, interview. 16 May 1994. Tape T94ZPH-05.

After transcription and analysis, I found that while these five early interviews generated five distinctly individual reader profiles, as might be expected, they shared numerous similarities which, significantly, would be echoed by many of the other readers I would later interview on tape and by electronic mail. Most notably, over the course of my research, respondents indicated that they thought that “good” examples of popular fiction, regardless of genre, should contain certain fundamental traits, though these were often not specified in any fixed order of importance, as all were seen to contribute to reading pleasure.

Basically, one of the things a good novel should provide is a realistic portrayal of characters and relationships. To this end, it should feature aesthetically pleasing language and an engaging style, and the author, while potentially graphic in descriptive ability, should avoid lurid or gratuitous depictions of sex and violence.⁴⁰ The plot may be potentially fantastic, especially in the case of martial arts and fantasy fiction, but it should strive for a high degree of *plausibility*. This means that the narrative should not depend on sensational elements, such as a reliance on marvellous displays of *qigong* (氣功) —the focusing of power through martial arts training and mastery of one’s life force, or *qi*— or overly maudlin exchanges between star-crossed lovers. The frequent use of these conceits was described as disgusting or conducive to “chicken skin,”⁴¹ and dismissed as clear

⁴⁰The female media fans in Bacon-Smith’s study (1992, 195-96) and the female romance readers featured in Radway’s work (1987, 65) expressed similar preferences for more subtle signs of sexual attachment between characters, and a more gradual progression in the overall development of the romantic relationship.

⁴¹In Chinese, the sensation of “goose bumps,” or “chicken skin,” is associated more with feelings of extreme distaste than either fear or positive excitement. Jade, the Taiwanese student and kungfu novel reader described above, mentioned melodramatic dialogue between characters as something that would likely give her “chicken skin.”

indications of a lack of talent. The narrative structure should be cohesive, “like rings fitting together,” (*yi huan kou yi huan*, 一環扣一環). In the case of serialized stories like many kungfu novels, cohesive devices may include traditional folk novel structural elements such as the chapter-driven preface I mentioned earlier, or classical-style poetry in romances.

2.2.3 Subsequent Research and Summary of Findings

In January 1995, I arrived at the University of Edinburgh’s Department of East Asian Studies to continue my doctoral research and pursue additional Chinese language instruction. Using my preliminary field data as a basis, I designed a pilot questionnaire with the help of Dai Show-fen, a Taiwanese graduate student in the department who was studying Chinese children’s literature.

The Chinese language pilot questionnaire was distributed to twelve respondents, equally divided along gender lines. Once a final, edited copy had been prepared, Show-fen was eager to “try the questionnaire out” on some of her friends, and she helped me to identify potential respondents from among her acquaintances. As a result, ten of the readers who participated in this early survey were from Taiwan, and two were from Mainland China, a ratio that would reverse itself in later runs.

Six readers in the pilot study identified their educational status or present occupation as that of postgraduate student. Of these, two men and two women were pursuing doctoral degrees. One woman was a Chinese language instructor in the Department of East Asian Studies, and was also completing a Master of Science in Linguistics. The youngest respondent was a fifteen year old male kungfu fiction fan who normally attended a residential school in Cheltenham. However, he often came to Edinburgh to visit his father,

a public prosecutor from Taiwan who was reading Law.⁴² Two of the female respondents listed their present occupations as homemakers.

Once these initial replies had been collected, Show-fen and I examined the patterns of response. In order to assist both my accurate translation of the questionnaires, and to improve my reading skills, I read each survey aloud, in the company of Show-fen or another native Mandarin speaker, and noted words I did not immediately recognize. This approach proved to be an extremely worthwhile exercise, especially with those questionnaires which exhibited rather *exuberant* but *unconventional* penmanship. I also followed this procedure with the revised handwritten questionnaires.

Perhaps because I lacked any traditional sense of "good form," I became rather good at reading the sometimes hurriedly written responses. Show-fen expressed her growing admiration for my ability to correctly interpret poorly written characters according to context. She once suggested that I could come to Taiwan and work as a "handwriting analyst for the government." A bureaucrat perhaps, but I soon realized I would never make a connoisseur of calligraphy. Although I could often identify words that were obvious mistakes, these did not constitute any real affront to my cultural sensibilities. As she scanned the questionnaires, I read in Show-fen's furrowed brow and disapproving frowns the quick, profound discernment of countless infractions against a venerable written tradition.

After going through the pilot set, several aspects of the survey were revised with an eye to improving questions construed as either unclear or redundant. To give us another editorial perspective, Show-fen's husband Ye Chinglong read through the questionnaire and identified points that he thought merited additional modification. The structure was also

⁴²QP-12. His father also later completed a questionnaire, QRH-01.

changed to include more multiple-choice questions, in an effort to reduce the overall investment of time required on the part of respondents to complete the entire survey. Certain key questions, such as readers' opinions about what features constituted "a good book," were left open-ended because I felt that it was important to capture the vocabulary with which audience members articulated their preferences. As I discuss later, male and female readers "talk novels" rather differently, even when they share similar generic tastes.

Revised questionnaires were distributed in Chinese or English, depending on respondents' language choice, in either printed or electronic format. It should be noted that there was some overlap between electronic and more traditional forms of questionnaire distribution. I posted a "call for readers" to a Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) computer bulletin board. Several people saw the posting and confirmed their desire to participate by sending me a message by electronic mail. Sometimes, however, either because they were unsure as to whether their respective mail utilities could handle Chinese encoded text or because of problems with sending lengthy replies of any kind, I was asked to send printed surveys by post. Some local students simply used e-mail as a means of initial contact. Alternatively, other respondents requested electronically transmitted PostScript (PS) files in Chinese that they duly printed off, completed and returned by internal University mail or regular post.

With most requests for printed copies, I either delivered the surveys to prospective respondents in person, or if they lived outside of the Edinburgh area, I posted questionnaires to them with stamped reply envelopes. Some recipients of PS files returned the questionnaires at their own expense, completing them so expediently I was unable to supply them with postage.

The majority of these PostScript and other electronically-generated surveys which originated from files I e-mailed to interested online parties simply “turned up” in my university mailbox. At most, I would be e-mailed about their imminent arrival once already posted. By my reckoning, at least eight such surveys were returned. Most of these were assigned to the “handwritten” set because respondents completed them in writing, and because they originated in a form, such as PS files, intended for printing rather than completion by electronic input. In a few situations, readers sent back through the post electronically distributed questionnaires that were at least partially handwritten, often because they had experienced difficulty with returning the entire survey in electronic form— as evinced by the slightly frustrated interim replies from readers which occasionally punctuated my field notes. I will briefly address the way I dealt with technological differences and incompatibilities in a moment, as these considerations were important to the overall success of the electronic dissemination of my questionnaire.

Including the small subset of “mixed mode” returns —those questionnaires which showed evidence of manual and computer-mediated inscription— the two distribution methods for the revised electronic and handwritten questionnaires yielded forty-seven completed surveys. Taken together, questionnaire respondents accounted for almost sixty percent of my total readership sample, or roughly twenty-eight percent and thirty-two percent respectively.

Initially, my main reason for separating handwritten from electronic surveys was to facilitate analysis. As I have already explained, it was unnecessary either to translate fully the electronic questionnaires, as they could be easily displayed and printed either in English or in a standardized Chinese font, or to convert them to computer format for future search and sorting. I was able to put the electronic questionnaire data into charts with little

intermediate processing on my part. Conversely, as explained above, the handwritten questionnaires —as they were exclusively in Chinese— required me to subject them to several readings. Initially, I reviewed them with direct access to the expert knowledge of a native speaker, in order to ensure the correct identification of visually anomalous characters. Then, I translated the entire text into a form that was both computerized and in English. If a questionnaire was especially difficult to read, I also created an electronic Chinese text and compared that against the original, then translated from a hard copy of the Chinese text file.

In some cases, participants requested that we establish an informal dialogue about reading via the medium of electronic mail. In these instances, all replies were logged. To distinguish these electronic responses from online readers who opted for the questionnaire, while they are included in the QRE set, a lowercase /i/ follows the survey number which marks them as “informal” responses. Because of the far-flung circulation of the computerized questionnaires —individuals could access the bulletin boards where I posted the notice about my research from potentially any electronic site in the world— replies came from a variety of locations. While most originated at universities within the United Kingdom, responses also came from Europe and North America.

According to my records, most responses were returned shortly after I replied to readers' preliminary inquiries, generally within days —especially if respondents were able to complete and return an electronic questionnaire from the outset— or within a fortnight if relying on the post. If I did not hear back from people who expressed a clear desire to participate within a few weeks, I sent follow-up e-mail messages to confirm that they were still interested. Most readers returned their questionnaires soon after I sent a brief reminder, often apologizing for their delayed responses on account of conferences or other

commitments. On very few occasions, I found it necessary to send a second reminder. If this failed to produce a reply, I did not send another as I reasoned that the individual's initial interest in the project had waned, or that his or her attention had been otherwise directed.

With regard to the electronically distributed questionnaires specifically, there were certain potential complications to successful transmission and final receipt of filled surveys which I had to bear in mind and, as much as possible, control at my end. Chiefly, these had to do with the different encoding formats that are available for Chinese text. Because I explore this topic in more detail in Appendix A, I will only briefly touch on certain particulars here.⁴³ Western readers unfamiliar with either the written Chinese language or its online presentation should be aware of a few points which can create problematic interactions if ignored.

Firstly, while there are over 50,000 characters extant, only a few thousand are used for the purposes of day-to-day communication. Secondly, while there are many dialects of spoken Chinese, the written system remains constant throughout, except that it should be appreciated that there are two different versions of the script in use among different groups of the Chinese population, a reflection of literacy reforms instituted in Mainland China after Liberation in 1949. The system used in the modern People's Republic is referred to as *simplified* (*jiantizi*, 简体字), whereas the character form most commonly used elsewhere, with some exceptions due to political and social changes —such as Singapore, and increasingly, Hong Kong— is known as *complex, traditional*, or *full-form* (*fantizi*, 繁體字).

⁴³See also Kozar (in press; 1995b).

As can be seen from the preceding by using the middle character *ti*, meaning: “body, part, or form” as an example, the most common simplification involved a reduction of the number of strokes of individual characters. While these scripts are equivalent, there is not a strict one-to-one correspondence between them in the sense that all characters exist in both simplified and full-form versions. The word *zi*, for example, meaning: “(written Chinese) character” remains unchanged.

Thirdly, the existence of different script versions has direct implications for computerized Chinese text processing. In essence, the simplified and traditional systems require different encoding protocols in order to transform an ordinary ASCII file into Chinese characters. The former requires either hZ/zW (*hanzi-zhongwen*, 汉字中文, “Chinese language”) or *guobiao* (国标, basically, “national standard”) encoding, while the latter makes use of a system called “Big 5,” which is sometimes translated as *dawuban* (大五版). These encoding and decoding protocols make it possible for people to send and receive, upload and download what are essentially ordinary text files which they can then read, print and input as Chinese on the screen.

While each system’s protocols differ, the essential function is to delimit lines or portions of ASCII code which may be displayed as Chinese characters. For example, consider “hello” (*ni hao*) in Chinese. In characters, this greeting is “你好.” Converted to ASCII for posting to the newsgroup alt.chinese.text, which uses the hZ/zW environment, this appears as “~{Dc:C~}” — unless viewed with appropriate software. Converted to GB format for use in a webpage, the same phrase looks like “f√h” without the aid of a GB-capable browser.

For the purposes of my research, I had to make sure that I sent the correctly encoded format to any respondent who requested a Chinese electronic questionnaire. Most readers

knew what kind of file types they could most easily handle, and there were few problems. Occasionally, however, incompatibilities between our respective mailers became apparent, which resulted in confused replies because the recipients were unable to extract or properly display files. Some Chinese readers did not have the necessary software to interpret encoded text into Chinese characters, and may not have realized fully what was involved in this process. Other readers needed me to encrypt the file before I sent it, due to particular system configurations which they themselves could not alter.⁴⁴ In cases where it was not possible to transmit an encoded Chinese text file, I either sent PostScript files if the respondent had access to a compatible printer, sent an English text copy, or resorted to the Royal Mail, depending on our mutual agreement as to the most feasible solution. Most interested readers persisted in their desire to participate, and therefore I made every attempt to facilitate their efforts by accommodating "technological differences" to the best of my ability.

Although survey respondents allowed me to quote their responses in my finished work, anonymity is maintained unless individuals specifically gave written permission to refer to them by name. According to my field notes, the rate of return for my readership questionnaire, based on the number of actual returns compared against total e-mailed requests, was seventy-nine percent. I realize this rate is high for a research inquiry of this type, but I think it is indicative of the level of readers' commitment, not necessarily to my

⁴⁴This step is generally unnecessary, but helps to prevent certain kinds of data loss or corruption, such as can occur when sending files with DOS carriage returns to a user with a Unix platform. In these cases, line breaks are often lost or redefined, resulting in the loss or incorrect positioning of the encoding protocols. These protocols, as particular character sequences with a specified placement within the text environment, are required for proper Chinese text display.

project for its own sake, but to an activity they perceive as valued and worthy of cross-cultural investigation.

In addition to the readership questionnaires, I conducted approximately twenty-eight hours of taped interviews. It is interesting to note that, while only one man agreed to be interviewed by two methods, note-taking followed by a questionnaire, five female participants completed questionnaires and gave detailed interviews. Three women readers agreed to multiple interviews. I was careful not to count these prolific respondents more than once, however. A total of nineteen readers, or twenty-four percent of my sample, agreed exclusively to taped interviews, and one man consented to unrecorded interviews on two separate occasions. Most readers with whom I conducted face-to-face interviews permitted me to quote both their responses and their names in my work, however, one woman requested that I call her by a pseudonym which she supplied.

Also, it should be mentioned that there are two responses which I elected to exclude from my study. One male respondent sent a very laconic reply, telling me only which authors he read. As subsequent inquiries did not produce any further elaboration, his brief contribution was not included in the final total. Also, after I sent a copy of my questionnaire to one woman, I received a reply which stated that she declined to participate, and gave her reasons why. This response was also not counted, but her objections are noted in the next section as they pertain directly to design-based methodological challenges.

2.3 Issues of Representation, Part I: Design

To open this section, I want to briefly examine the issue of audience composition and how it influenced both my methods and the outcome of my research. From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that the readers who chose to participate in my research were highly

educated. Indeed, many of them demonstrated a comprehensive literacy which encompassed not only their favourite kinds of popular fiction, but also Chinese and western classics and different electronic media as well. To some extent, the computer proficiency can be explained by the fact that many respondents, both male and female, were working and studying in the pure and applied sciences, and computers would have formed an integral part, if not the primary focus, of their own research. Such a disciplinary concentration would also at least help to account for the marked gender bias in my sample toward male respondents, which is a recognized feature of much of computer-mediated communication in general, though not necessarily of specific communities (Baym 1993, 147-48).

Bowden's assertion that "we are all the folk" (1988, 53) succinctly counters past methodologies that tended to privilege certain forms of tradition over others, like oral over written or *vice versa*— or at least, certain traditions through which the traditions of the "Other" are in turn filtered and refocused, like some positivist notion of the objective scholar looking intently at "the Folk" from a safe remove. However, in many respects, such statements oversimplify our contemporary grasp of issues of representation. As Shuman observes, the act of defining "authentic" unmarked categories, such as folk culture, for example, reinforces the political systems which underlie the very construction of representation, when we should perhaps phrase our research questions in such a way as to confront the power relations themselves which foreground particular groups, genres and performances at the expense of others (1993, 347, 349-50, 354).

As a student of Chinese popular culture, I am mindful of the inevitable disjunctions between my interpretation of the place of popular cultural texts and performances in the lives of readers and theirs. In the various chapters of this thesis, I attempt to acknowledge

some of the contentious ethnographic spaces inherent in my representation, not to gloss over or fill them in, but to avoid what Susan Ritchie aptly terms “ventriloquist folklore:”

In terms of representation, fieldwork often assumes that the presentation of the folklorist's object of study remains entirely consistent with the individual performer's self-presentation. The result is ventriloquist folklore: that which assumes it is really possible to give the folk their own voice within the pages of our own articles, books and films.... it is possible to say that ventriloquist folklore is that which ignores the ways in which context mediates presentation (1993, 367).

In short, the readers who participated in my research are well-educated, articulate people with their own voices. They did not need me to speak for them. However, since my study identified an area of popular entertainment and an audience whose tastes and practices are apparently not widely known outside their own cultural milieu, I think that, as an ethnographer, I have a responsibility to both my discipline and the readers I surveyed “to find a way to speak ethically on behalf of others” (Shuman 1993, 354).

By their very nature, the products which result from the enterprise of ethnographic interpretation contain certain fundamental shortcomings, or at least unanswered questions and unexplored angles. Such criticisms also apply to scholarly investigations in general, however. Hall notes that the *uncertainty principle* in physics: “holds that the observer and his instrument are inextricably bound up with the phenomena under observation and that the act of observation alters the conditions under observation” (1973, 114). By analogy, he suggests that: “when working with cultural data, *one can only be precise on one analytic level at a time and then only for a moment*” (114). [Original emphasis.]

The design of this study is no less beset by methodological constraints, which likewise affected what I was able to observe and how I saw it. By focusing on the reading preferences of primarily Chinese intellectuals, it can be argued that I effectively perpetuated a traditional bias which pervades not only Chinese popular culture scholarship, but also the

historical record of the domain itself (Lee and Nathan, 1985, 373). Specifically, I documented the aesthetics of an elite, largely middle- and upper-class, urban segment of the population, to the ultimate exclusion of groups whose voices are traditionally muted, but for whom this aspect of popular culture might hold even greater significance.

Furthermore, within that small cross section of the population, I gave the study of one expressive genre a clear priority over others. As I discuss in the concluding chapter of this thesis, the future directions of cross-cultural audience studies should encompass the in-depth investigation of viewers' uses of fiction-oriented films, television serials, animation and printed comics.

In addition, appropriate extensions of the field research undertaken here which would facilitate the investigation of another group of readers include the study of reading habits and preferences among middle school students in Taiwan, or hotel workers in Mainland China, though again these projects would most probably have an urban emphasis. I suggest these two possibilities because, in most other *in situ* research situations, the researcher would likely be further constrained by regulations on the activities deemed acceptable for foreign nationals to engage in, where they could live, and the basic need for a source of self-support.

In either of these scenarios, the researcher could be employed as a language teacher, for example, and could request voluntary participation from students and other associated local staff who were interested in reading. I suspect that, despite the differences in policy among different Chinese-speaking countries, or even the changes which have occurred in Mainland China since I taught there, simply showing up at a school or on a factory floor with a notepad, tape recorder, and a sheaf of release forms would not be the wisest move. Such action would surely invite at least some level of official scrutiny and disapproval

which would have repercussions beyond the immediate infraction of the rules pertaining to the local institution. Even if these same valiant attempts simultaneously engendered sufficient unofficial amusement as to suggest a potentially fruitful avenue of inquiry later, subsequent pursuit of such leads would probably prove difficult for the fieldworker and, more importantly, possibly detrimental to prospective respondents.

I was acutely aware of the rather circumscribed nature of the reading population I chose to study from the commencement of my research. For various reasons, I was unable to return to China or go to Taiwan to conduct my fieldwork. I could not finance it myself, and I did not have a situation lined up which would furnish either the professional or academic justification necessary to obtain the appropriate visa. My decision to study at Edinburgh was influenced by personal factors, but was primarily determined by the fact that my research proposal was warmly received at a respected East Asian Studies department with a recognized popular culture concentration.⁴⁵

Also, the experiences I had in Newfoundland interviewing Chinese members of a university community were another positive influence on the final shaping of my research design. Over the course of my MA thesis fieldwork, I had found that in many ways, it was less intrusive to interview people whose working schedules were to some extent self-determined on a daily basis.

For example, when I interviewed Chinese immigrants in central and western Newfoundland —most of whom ran or worked in family-owned shops and restaurants—

⁴⁵While I could have returned to Vancouver and found ample readers to talk with, I suspect that the logistics of networking within the sizable communities of Chinese speakers would have been daunting, to say the least. Also, previous inquiries made to the Asian Studies Department at the University of British Columbia suggested research emphases incompatible with my own, and therefore I would not have been granted access to the same level of academic resources in Vancouver which were made available to me at Edinburgh.

during the summer of 1992 as part of my MA thesis preparation, I found that I frequently disrupted the flow of their business day regardless of the time of the interview, which I left to their specification. Sometimes, these people had to take time out during opening hours to speak with me, entrusting their duties, or even the entire range of business activities, to a potentially less experienced family member. On other occasions, in a kind of bustling backstage region of time and space, interviews were conducted amid empty tables, over the noise of preparation for the full night's work ahead.

Every ethnographer is faced with decisions that delimit the scope of his or her investigation, but these are also choices which help to clarify the feasibility of projects, and refine their underlying rationales and goals. I therefore decided to devise a project along lines which would allow me to build on past research experiences, and develop new skills as well. In order to help increase the potential breadth of my audience sample, I chose to widen the scope of my field techniques to include distributing electronic questionnaires, and conducting interviews by electronic mail. While online interviews do not usually entail the same level of technological complexity inherent in computerized questionnaire circulation,⁴⁶ interview questions must be phrased with care, especially since opportunities for clarification with gestures, vocal inflections, and verbal "back ups" are not present to the same extent.

Given these factors, it is perhaps not surprising that I anticipated that some readers would express concern that my project would not yield a true picture of readership across Chinese society. I have neither expressed that as my intention, nor seen its achievement as an even remotely attainable goal. Taken together, the principal genres favoured by readers

⁴⁶It is possible to conduct e-mail interviews in Chinese using the same ASCII encoding processes already described. However, I did not do this during my doctoral research, and was not so requested by respondents.

in this study, such as martial arts and romance fiction, enjoy a phenomenal following among Chinese enthusiasts worldwide. I was therefore not entirely surprised when I received a handwritten questionnaire from a reader in Glasgow with a strong affection for classical histories and romances such as *A Dream of Red Mansions* (*Honglou meng*, 《红楼梦》) which closed with the following well-intended admonition:

Kozar 先生:

我是一个退休的中国教授。平素喜爱中国历史和古代文学，得悉您将选择中国文学方面的博士论文感到非常高兴。但还不了解您的论文将包括哪些内容从调查表看，您似乎想调查统计中国人对文学作品欣赏的倾向性和阅读习惯。如果是这样的话建议您将调查对象划定一个范围。这是因为中国人很多，更重要的是受教育和文化程度差别很大。太广泛的统计数字很离散，得不出较有代表性和有益的结论。

Mr. (Ms.) Kozar,

I am a retired Chinese professor. As I have always loved Chinese history and classical literature, to learn that you have chosen this as the topic of your Ph.D. thesis makes me very happy indeed. But, I don't quite understand from the questionnaire what will be included in your thesis. It seems that you wish to survey and compile statistics on Chinese readers' preferences and reading habits. If this is the case then I suggest you delimit your scope. This is because China has a large population with significant differences in educational and cultural levels. Too wide a range may yield an overly scattered result, which will neither yield a representative sample nor benefit your conclusion.⁴⁷

Of course, ethnographers cannot control others' perceptions of the demands of the research situation, and so it also did not overly astonish me that this reader may have thought that I could have intended to generalize my findings to China as a whole. What did impress me was the reader's careful presentation of his ideas, and the meeting of tradition and technology in the inscription of his efforts. The questionnaire had been printed from an electronic file, and brought home by a young man to another member of his household, his

⁴⁷QRH-07.

father-in-law. The reader's reply almost literally *fills* the entire questionnaire, written in small, impeccably formed characters. The reader is, as he says, a retired professor who formerly taught in a university in Nanjing, in what we might call a Construction/Civil Engineering department. And, at the time of his reply, he was seventy years old.

At this time, I want to examine some related criticisms of my sampling techniques. Firstly, because I wanted to develop a profile which consisted of a wide range of reading styles, I included readers, like the preceding respondent, who did not chiefly describe themselves as consumers of popular fiction. Secondly, these methods are more suited to the description of individual reading patterns articulated in an interview setting, and do not lend themselves easily to the recording of readers' evanescent talk about stories. Thirdly, some may contend that I am studying readers' memories, which in effect defines their experiences with genres and texts as historical moments rather than as sites of active, ongoing participation.

In response to the first point, I have observed over the course of my field research that the behaviour of reading enthusiasts is similar to that of many other kinds of fans. As Bacon-Smith observes, although people may identify a particular fandom as their undisputed favourite through which they express their essential character as fans, they may participate in several fan communities (1992, 7). For example, many readers who describe themselves as devotees of particular popular genres also have a deep affection for certain Chinese classics, such as romance readers who acknowledge the place of the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 A.D.) *Honglou meng* (《紅樓夢》, *Dream of the Red Chamber* or *A Dream of Red Mansions*) as the forerunner of the genre in their opinion, an attribution of generic lineage I explore further in Chapter Five.

Similarly, many readers whose main interests are directed toward the classics, particularly military romances like *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo zhi yanyi*, 《三國志演義》) and *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*, 《水滸傳》), also read the martial arts fiction of Jin Yong and/or Gu Long (古龍). Such readers found these classical and popular genres compatible, and perhaps even complementary, because of the popular authors' incorporation of historical events, places and personalities into their narratives, and their sensitive and thorough exploration of the themes of friendship and loyalty, concerns which are central to the classical novels as well.⁴⁸ In addition, the contemporary martial arts genre maintains a continuity of form, language and style which contributes to the popularity of the genre with fans of traditional fiction.

The readers' responses typically illustrated this fluid dialectic. One female reader, a doctoral student in Architecture, compared some of the characters in Jin Yong's *Tian long ba bu* (《天龍八部》, *The Demi-gods and the Semi-devils*) to characters in *The Three Kingdoms*, with specific reference to the friendship between Zhuge Liang and Liu Bei. This respondent noted that, while Zhuge Liang does not actually appear in kungfu novels, martial arts fiction is replete with characters who resemble him in personality and resourcefulness. Alluding to an episode in *The Three Kingdoms* in which Zhuge Liang sends reinforcements to Liu Bei, she stated: "Then, in [Jin Yong's] novel, he wrote with reference to these real events. He referred to these things, I don't mean that the events [in the novel] were real, but that he referred to real happenings in history, and to characters'

⁴⁸See Ban Seng Hoe's discussion of narrative traditions among the Chinese in Quebec City for further insight into the very important place of *The Three Kingdoms* as a story exemplifying friendship and solidarity among people who were related by common cultural values rather than family ties (1985, 104-06).

names."⁴⁹ More generally, as a male computer researcher put it: "The basic understanding of his [Jin Yong's] novels is: the background (the big events, times and places) is real in history, while the particular details may be his own creations."⁵⁰

Also, I did not find that readers' occupations significantly affected either their enjoyment of fiction, or the depth of their interpretations. Most readers seemed to see reading as an activity through which they could pursue informal instruction and achieve a degree of freedom in interpretation which may not be possible within the more fixed analytical requirements of their professional domains. The reasons behind readers' attractions to texts are complex. According to one male respondent, a significant proportion of his enjoyment is derived from immersion in a narrative context free of the same limitations as his everyday life. He accedes, however, that return from the story-world often involves a kind of culture-shock which, though not an entirely positive experience, is still an instructive one:

I am a D.Phil. law student at Oxford, and I am a great fan of martial arts novels of Jin Yong and Gu Long. The reason is simple enough, because somehow one can escape from reality by reading that kind of stuff. I wouldn't deny that the novels have succeeded in creating an atmosphere which either helps you explain your own philosophy and world views or enables you to live a life which is always too far for you [to achieve in real life]. The novels are not about the ingenuity or omnipotence of their characters' kungfu, but about the latter's consistency, blandness, [probably, "equanimity"] emotional capacities, kindness, and vulnerability. The end result after one's reading of these novels may not, however, be encouraging: he becomes more aloof. On the other hand, he will certainly acquire some satisfaction if he tries to be different from others, for the hero in the stories is always lonely, content with, or compelled to content with communicating with the inner self or the wilderness (mostly he is not religious and most often he has to endure).⁵¹

⁴⁹Jiang Lingyun' (pseudonym), interview. 28 August 1995. Tape T95GYa-13.

⁵⁰QRE-04.

⁵¹Respondent's prologue to QRE-05.

Another reader, a student of literature rather than law, also sees value in reading popular fiction which extends beyond any formal educational benefits gleaned from a novel's content. For him, people's different reading preferences are akin to different occupations. Therefore, no profession —whether in the sense of the conscious choice of a novel as an expression of personal taste or the choice of a vocation— is inferior to any other:

HYB: [Speaking of martial arts fiction.] But when I read this kind of novel, what moves me is only the *heroism*. Of course there's a strong sense of morality and justice, but I don't think it's very educational. I don't think you can have such a purpose, to receive education by these things! <laughs> [SK: "Why?"] Because I think there must be something better than that. Because each kind of novel has a specific purpose. That's why it's this kind of novel, they can't replace each other. That doesn't mean this kind of novel is inferior. Just because different people have different jobs, right? Just because you are a philosopher doesn't mean that you are superior to a violinist! <laughs>⁵²

These issues, the potentially complementary nature of readers' aesthetics and uses of reading in the larger contexts of individual worldviews and expressive repertoires, as well as the compelling, paradoxical nature of reading as an activity requiring active disengagement from the text *as well as* heightened involvement, will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, especially in relation to the question of additive reading patterns. In addition, topics such as reading for escape, reading for instruction and readers' identification with characters and other narrative features are also more fully examined in Chapter Three.

Before I consider a different set of methodological constraints which —though admittedly interrelated with research design— are somewhat more closely associated with both my position as researcher, as well as the readers and their language, I want briefly to

⁵²HE Yubin, interview. 31 August 1995.

examine two other points. As mentioned earlier, it can be argued that my methods studied individual readers' experiences, rather than talk about stories in natural contexts, and, furthermore, that my study samples readers' memories of past experiences and conditions that no longer obtain.

That my ethnography does not succeed in capturing the most "authentic" moments of readers' narratives in context is true to the extent that I was able to record few sessions of people spontaneously discussing either their most recent or singularly memorable reading experiences. Also, as I said, many who were diehard fiction fans in their youth openly regretted that they could not devote the same kind of time and concentration to reading that they used to. Reading is itself a solitary activity, and talking about books, though a fundamental aspect of audience reception, is a spontaneous event whose specifically framed time or venue varies with other small group factors related to gendered performance traditions. In Chapter Six, I look more closely at the relationship between chat and reading.

I cannot say, however, that my observation, no matter how unobtrusive, is more accurate than a reader's self-presentation. In some fashion, I would have to break the reader's silent interaction with the text in order "to give a voice" to the answers to my questions. After all, whether I try to capture another's reading experiences contemporaneously through some form of recording, or enlist prospective respondents in such a task, I will have irrevocably altered both the experience and its possible interpretations.

In response to the observation that I am exploring readers' reminiscences rather than current practices, I suggest that it is important to put ethnographic investigations in their proper individual historical contexts. That is, it is worthwhile to examine what people *used* to do, providing that they value that information and are willing to share it. Despite my

attempts to convince her of the contrary, one woman declined to participate in my survey, suggesting that, as a meteorological software engineer of thirty-seven, she was not the kind of consistently absorbed reader I was looking for: "I have read your questionnaire a couple days ago. I was wondering that I wasn't a right reader you like to answer your questions. My first impression after reading your questions was that questions were more for teenagers than for adults."

Placing her reaction into a kind of theoretical perspective, I suggest that ethnographies of reading share many fundamental points of correspondence with other studies of folklore and performance repertoires. According to Green, a repertoire reflects a performer's aesthetic system, which as a "set of artistic aims and predispositions" is subject to change. The content and scope of a repertoire are therefore determined by an individual's conscious selection, rejection and reworking of items within a hierarchy of preference. As a consequence, these seemingly "unified traditions" are rarely completely stable at any point in time (1987, 105-6). Green also cites the importance of song fragments to the comprehensive study of repertoire, since these may represent the shaping of an earlier stage of performance skill rather than the process of mere forgetting (114). Similarly, readers' fragmentary recollections of books they read at earlier moments in their lives may exert a lasting though residual influence on the way they view their present reading tastes and habits.

Likewise, Goldstein (1971) asserts that a repertoire can contain both active and passive elements which are selected for use —or permitted to fall into disuse— depending on the context. Consequently, there are a variety of reasons which may account for the patterns of movement and change in the status of individual songs. I suggest that similar kinds of forces may operate in reading repertoires, however, although readers' preferences certainly

change over time, their earlier aesthetic profiles are still important to a comprehensive understanding of the place of reading in their lives. And, readers may still hold particular genres, texts and authors in high esteem, even though their contemporary reading habits may now reflect other directions and influences.

2.4 Issues of Representation, Part II: Translation and Transposition

In this section, I want to explore how my ethnographic representation of these readers is mediated by my research and personal experiences with Chinese and western genres, as well as readers' ways of talking about and relating to books. Speaking of the ways in which folklorists describe their relationships with folk communities, Spitzer advocated the creation of metaphors which "animate the relationship most central to our practice: the informed conjoining of folk aesthetics, expressive patterns, and traditional genres with appropriate modes of representation" (1992, 81). He suggested that, in many ways, despite the enduring political and communal resonances ascribed to natural metaphors: "*cultural conversation* is a stronger universal metaphor for our public practice than *conservation*. In representing ourselves to communities through talk, we learn their meanings and they ours" (Spitzer 99).

The metaphor which most readily suggests itself in the description of my relationship to these readers and their texts is perhaps that of someone being read to, or learning to read something that has been not only translated but *transposed* into another cultural key. By transposition, I mean not only a substitution of, for example, a text in one language for the same one in another, but a qualitative shift in the cultural associations which accompany that text. The text itself may exist in straight translation, in its original language, or indeed,

have evolved into a completely reworked entity. Elsewhere, I have written about this concept in relation to the meanings attached to the song “Auld Lang Syne,” and its use as a graduation anthem in Taiwan for over thirty years (Kozar 1995a).

For me, this idea of transposition was most poignantly expressed by Xu Yinong, a thirty-four year old doctoral student in Architecture, whose thesis on urban planning in China involves in-depth study of ancient Chinese classical architectural writings and literature. He has read *A Dream of Red Mansions* several times, though as much for the romance of the scenery and beautifully cultivated gardens as for the characters themselves. He is the son of intellectuals and, in answer to my question regarding formative influences on his reading behaviour, vividly recalled his early exposure to Chinese folktales and translated fiction, two genres which, at various points in recent Chinese history, would come to exemplify extremes on a continuum of thought falling far short of official approval. His father, a professor of classical interpretation, brought great drama to folktales such as *Niulang zhinü* [牛郎织女, *The Cowherd and Weaving Maid*]. His mother read him one particular story which, on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, would surely have echoed forcefully for a family who had cultivated a deep love of books and literature, an affection that was imparted with care to their children:

XYN: But the influence came, I think, when I was very little, three, four. Because in my family, we had a habit — my parents had a habit — to read something for us when we were in bed. Not every day, but <pause> say, when I was five, that’s 1966. So that’s the period, you know in China, all the text books have become that sort of thing [reflecting the precepts of the Cultural Revolution] and the social environment has changed. They, probably out of nostalgic reason, I don’t know but they constantly read old textbooks, and of course for my father for academic reasons he read all those ancient — because he is a professor of <gives Chinese term as something like *xinguxue*, 信古学, but may mean *jieshixue*, 解释学, or basically, hermeneutic criticism> interpretation and assessment of ancient documents and texts. Etymology — [SK: “Hermeneutics?”] Oh — I don’t know that, right! <laughs>

So once they found something that was suitable for us to listen, to absorb they would read them to us. So I think the most — I mean there are two, at least, that I remember well. One is, do you know <pause> I don't know the English name. In Chinese, we say *Du-de* (都德) [*Alphonse Daudet*] a French writer, writing a novel, a short novel, "The Last Class," or "The Last Lesson."⁵³ When Prusse invaded [SK: "*Yes, Prussia invading Alsace.*"] and occupied the area. And they forced all schools to teach Prussian, rather than French. So that's "The Last Lesson," and that little guy [*in the story*] never tried to learn. Always playing, always — and suddenly find himself in the situation the last chance to learn so little. That, it's brilliant. The translation is brilliant as well. My mother just read that novel, and my mother *read*. And *wept*. So it's so strong, I mean the influence is so strong, I remember it well.⁵⁴

It is conceivable that Yinong would neither have grasped fully the reasons behind his mother's reaction, nor known anything about the historical context in which the story was originally set. He was careful to convey the sense that he was aware as a child that the society around him was undergoing rapid and profound changes, though he was naturally unable to express his perceptions. Clearly, the story made a strong impression on Yinong, and, as he says, these early reading experiences positively affected his later behaviour and selections, even though his reflections now hold a special intensity for him beyond memories of bedtime stories.

I have not read this story in Chinese, but I do remember reading it on my own in primary school, as well as the associations I attached to it. While I knew almost nothing of either the Franco-Prussian War or the Cultural Revolution, I did identify with the story for another reason. As a child, I began my earliest education in special pre-school classes, from which I was quickly removed when it was discovered that, not only could I read at

⁵³The piece is "La dernière classe," from Daudet's *Contes du lundi* (1873). The Chinese name of this well-known translated short story is *Zuihou yi ke* (《最後一課》).

⁵⁴XU Yinong, interview. 6 October 1995.

age three, but also, with the fitting of my leg brace, I had become a standalone source of revolutionary agitation among my wheelchair-bound cohorts.

I was duly sent to “normal” school. I skipped a grade in primary, much to the suspicion of my classmates, who thought that I had simply wandered over to the wrong side of my split-grade class. The tacit threat that I was in the wrong place and would be returned to special classes once my error was discovered loomed over me through most of elementary school. When I read “The Last Lesson,” I was convinced that it was necessary for me to learn as much and as fast as possible, for fear that I would, like the little boy, one day forfeit the opportunity.

As I suggested in my study of “Auld Lang Syne” in Taiwan, transposition involves adopting and interpreting a text according to one’s own cultural traditions, worldview and understandings of personal and collective history. A transposed text may evoke strong emotional responses, and, furthermore, may arouse complex reactions and identifications in a variety of very different contexts. In Taiwan, the tune of “Auld Lang Syne” was paired with new lyrics, the most widely known of which is perhaps “The Leaving Song” (“*Lige*,” 《驛歌》). Because of its frequent use as a soundtrack for the tragic wartime romance *Waterloo Bridge* (1940), Taiwanese also identify “The Leaving Song” —though the anthem itself ostensibly deals with the need to leave school behind and come to the aid of one’s country— with the film (Kozar 1995a, 74-77, 80-81).

The film’s Chinese name, “*Hun Duan Lan Qiao*” 《魂斷藍橋》 is another example of a text that has been not so much translated as transposed. The film’s title is basically rendered as *A Soul Severed on Blue Bridge*. While this foreshadows the heroine’s eventual decline and suicide, it also recalls a particularly symbolically laden viaduct in Chinese folklore, the Blue Bridge, which was guarded by the moon-goddess *Chang’e* (嫦娥). She

is honoured during Mid-Autumn Festival, traditionally a time to recall absent loved ones. Furthermore, according to Wolfram Eberhard, the Blue Bridge refers to a bridge on the Wei River: “where wives and friends said good bye to those who were being sent to take up posts in remote provinces” (1986, 49).

The process of cultural transposition of texts and expressive styles is not restricted to either Taiwanese adaptations of well-known Scottish songs or my particular relationship as an ethnographer to a certain audience or the popular texts they consume. Mitsui has explored what may be seen as an analogous phenomenon —the popularity of American bluegrass among Japanese listeners and performers— and the various ways musicians: “show in the music they perform that they have digested southern musical tradition in their own way” (1993, 289). One of the main difficulties I face as a student of Chinese popular culture is the fact that, in addition to the challenges of translated understanding, I must recognize the potential for significant differences in transposed meaning. This concept may be thought of as the distinction between textual and cultural comprehension of a text.

In the first place, while I speak, read and translate Chinese to a level of competence that is adequate for the interpretation of my collected field data, it is a second language and I am not a classically trained literary scholar. Many novels, whatever their critical merit, make use of poetry, Buddhist or Taoist imagery or other classical references and allusions. Sometimes, little-used characters are employed for their specific nuances and stylistic effect on a passage, an apparent source of delight for many readers, while others merely skip what they perceive to be obscure references or old-fashioned diction. Although I am aware of certain symbolic commonplaces and devices, I must read with the wary eye of the student, rather than the delighted gaze of the enraptured reader.

To illustrate briefly, several readers have expressed how they often came across a single, archaic character whose meaning they could not discern — a mystery that never seemed to create undue distress— but whose visual appearance intrigued them. Similar discoveries usually sent me scouring etymological dictionaries to no avail, and *intriguing* does not come immediately to mind as an apt description of the exercise.

Secondly, besides my role as ethnographer, I am also a reader, whose aesthetic preferences differ markedly from those expressed by many readers in this study. In her study of supermarket tabloid readers, Bird stated that: “while I have developed a strong appreciation of the importance of tabloids in many people’s lives, I did not begin my study as a fan, and I do not end it as one” (1992, 5). On a similar note, Bacon-Smith describes her often powerful aversion to some of the subjects treated in science fiction fan writing, coupled with her emerging recognition that she needed to confront the stories if she hoped to understand their place and function in the larger fan culture (1992, 268).

I do not think that I must necessarily become a fan of Chinese popular fiction, but it is necessary for me to appreciate why this small cross section of fans find their favourite genres so attractive. Because of the complexity of the language and the sheer length of some of these works, I have found it essential to approach these works through readers’ words, at once reading their readings, and using their observations to guide or perhaps *cue* my own interactions with texts. While I cannot say that I make the same connections in my explorations of their favourite stories, like these readers, I make connections which resonate with my own areas of narrative expertise. Through this process, and through the historical, diachronic study of Chinese popular culture and its audiences, I attempt to develop some sense of the significance of particular generic traditions for contemporary readers.

Before concluding, I should mention that I have had to look at the contrasting transpositions in the words which make up my questions and readers' interpretations of those queries. Concepts such as "fan" and "identification" carry different and somewhat problematic connotations for many Chinese readers. That does not mean that there are no novel fans, or that they do not identify with narrative events or characters and locate themselves in the signifying space of the story-world. Rather, it means that the ethnographer must be prepared to reconsider his or her definitions of those ideas, as their meaning may be culturally and linguistically keyed in unique ways. Furthermore, readers who describe unequivocally the ways in which they *do not* interact with texts may be providing the researcher with examples of what Cothran calls "non-participation in tradition" which are as methodologically significant as respondents' positive assertions about their reading habits (1979, 446). These and other issues surrounding readers' uses and patterns of consumption form the focus of the next chapter.

2.5 Conclusion

My rationale for undertaking this project found expression through the words of one reader after we completed a taped interview. In one of the weekly meetings of the Chinese women's discussion group *Xin Ling*, participants from Mainland China described how during the Cultural Revolution there were *eight* sanctioned artistic performances, including dramatic and musical works, which were available to the masses.

While I knew that this figure did not reflect the many unofficial performances, scores and texts that would have undoubtedly circulated, I did a little quick mental arithmetic. Eight performances, distributed among a conservatively estimated population at that time of perhaps eight hundred million. The ratio was staggering. "How could you possibly *stand*

it?" I blurted out, rhetorically posing one of the many "impossible questions" of which Chinese storytellers and readers alike said I seemed so fond. I did not expect an answer. Perhaps one did not exist. Or perhaps, as the women's looks told me then, the answer was beyond words. Later, after our interview, Meng said: "In the group, we talk about things we never considered before. I don't know how we could 'stand it.' We've never thought about it. And until now, *nobody ever asked.*"

In this chapter, I have endeavoured to outline some of the ways I went about asking questions of readers, who answered, and how I interpreted their responses. I also attempted to examine how my research design and ethnographic stance influenced the final shape of this study. In the chapters that follow, I look at specific questions dealing with readers' uses, the characteristics of particular genres, gender differences in reading behaviour and electronic texts and their audiences.

Chapter Three: Readers, Uses and Folkloric Connections

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the construction of readers' identities in accordance with personal articulations of reading experiences. By this I refer to their descriptions of preferred genres and modes of consumption, as well as the connections they make between the act of reading and other aspects of their daily lives. Broadly speaking, I will look at readers' uses of fiction and aesthetics from a folkloristic standpoint. I also examine an issue which is fundamental to an appreciation of an important dialectic that underlies readers' critical negotiations as experts, the interplay of tradition and innovation in popular texts. An ethnographic perspective is fundamentally important to the study of readership because the "question of audience" quickly attenuates into a rhetorical fiction when a focus on actual participants is neither sought from the outset, nor properly maintained.

It is certainly true, however, that the theoretical interpretations of proponents of reader-response criticism have done a great deal to give a more active dimension to both the reader and the reading process by acknowledging that readers are not merely correctly applying strategies or codes to different layers of textual stimuli. These contributions notwithstanding, many of the classical theories rely on an implied, or model reader whose experiences of the text closely —and conveniently— appear to mirror those of the professional critic (de Beaugrande 1992, 195). Similarly, although he is not coming from the angle of a literary critic, Roberts' study, despite his many valuable insights into popular fiction reading, suffers from a kind of "ventriloquist theorizing" in which he posits a

complex hierarchy of acceptance and aversion thresholds and situates the paradigm within the phenomenology of the reader (1990, 52, 63).

I concur with Roberts' analysis along certain lines. For example, my own research has shown that Chinese readers do indeed develop distinct configurations of generic preferences and, as I mentioned in the last chapter, firm ideas about what constitutes a good or poor example of a genre. Also, his concept of "addiction clusters" as a way of thinking about some kinds of readers' preference cycles is incisive. Roberts states that certain kinds of behaviours may be called addictions, even if the patterns of consumption involved are shifting, multiple, and discontinuous (75). I will return to this issue in another section, but many of the readers who participated in my study affirmed that they could become periodically addicted to particular genres —or even to a specific series of novels— abandon them for an extended duration, and then return, "picking up a familiar habit" once again.

However, I suggest that, at least with respect to the people who contributed to my research, reading patterns are socially influenced,⁵⁵ and as such bear a greater resemblance to dynamic networks than hierarchies or thresholds. Furthermore, I propose that the construction of these aesthetic networks is based on the continual refinement and re-evaluation of readers' expertise and developing ability to negotiate specific types of fiction, as well as their flexibility and desire to experiment and play. Expertise also develops in part as a result of social interaction: the more readers talk about what they read, the greater access they then have to others' insights as points of reference and comparison. A willingness to read across a variety of genres —even ones whose features, character-types and overall themes seem incommensurable— may reflect less a "low aversion threshold" (Roberts 1990, 63) than a highly attuned sense of narrative adventure.

⁵⁵See also Fiske (1989, 147).

It is possible that the aim of Roberts' formulation is to depict general trends in the reading habits of western audiences, and is not necessarily meant for cross-cultural application. Despite this consideration, I agree with McRobbie's assertion that studies of popular culture would greatly benefit from a shift in scholarly practice toward:

...more ethnography, more participant observation. It would also mean turning away from the temptation to read more and more from the cultural products and objects of consumption, readings which invariably are of most enjoyment to our own interpretive communities. Such a turning-away does not mean being against interpretation, rather it means examining all of those processes which accompany the production of meaning in culture, not just the end-product: from where it is socially constructed to where it is socially deconstructed and contested, in the institutions, practices and relationships of everyday life around us (1994, 41).

Essentially, I think that Roberts' work, by its emphasis on distinctions between high and low forms of literature and literary tastes as exemplified from the beginning in its title, *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction*, unfortunately reproduces some of the shortcomings of cultural analysis that McRobbie is talking about. My feeling is that his arguments would have been enhanced by a greater inclusion of actual readers' voices and a further emphasis on the traditions which make up the history of those genres and their audiences, a point Narváez underscores as a general criticism of cultural studies from the perspective of folklore (1992, 27-28).

Also, I frequently employ the term "aesthetics" when discussing readers' preferences and discriminations. *Aesthetics*, like *art* itself, is a central idea in folkloristics, yet, as Pocius observes: "little of a systematic reflexive nature has been written about such key concepts and what they cover" (1995, 413). As a discipline, folkloristics recognizes that all communities are capable of aesthetic expression (Hymes 1975). From a Marxist reading of cultural studies, Fiske stresses the separation between aesthetic and popular readings of culture, highlighting their antithetical political discourses (1989, 130, 138, 147-48).

In my analysis, I use this term in its earlier connotation of the apprehension of the qualities of an object by sensory perception, without the class-based connotations which became attached to notions of “quality” and “culture” (Williams 1983, 31). I mean the grasp of the beautiful by some beholder who may not be a critic, but who is certainly an expert. Pocius notes that:

A work of art, then, through form and through the association of that form to particular aspects of daily life, succeeds by eliciting some type of emotional response in the observer.... Because of its cultural association, the work of art produces an intense emotional reaction to those exposed to the work (420).

To many of these novel fans, good books in their preferred genres are not simply popular diversions whose content is unworthy of serious attention. They are works of art that stir the reader to respond to the narrative, not by moving through it in an orderly fashion like some idealized, disciplined reader, but by lingering in the text to recognize, to reflect, and even to *dream*.

Specifically, I use the word “aesthetics” because I feel that it captures some sense of what readers are talking about. Referring to the immensely popular romance novels of writer Qiong Yao (瓊瑤), a male professor of biochemistry summarized his aesthetic connections to romance fiction in these words:

Her [Qiong Yao's] description about feeling is very touching and beautiful. I read one of her books by chance just after the ending of the notorious cultural revolution during which anything about feeling was considered to be capitalist and unhealthy. I immediately liked it and have read most of her works till now. Although the writing style remains basically the same for all her novels, I seldom get bored. I don't think there is any writer in mainland China who is as good as she at writing romances. There is a huge contrast between the way people choose their partners in this practical world and that in her book, which makes them more beautiful. I would rather stay in her book than come into this world.⁵⁶

⁵⁶QRH-13i.

In the next sections, I examine the experience of reading in greater detail, focusing in particular on the topic of reader distance or disbelief, and its relationship to concepts such as “fan” and “identification” in the larger discourse of Chinese readership.

3.1.1 Reader Satisfaction as a Discourse of Plausibility

As Smith notes, most expressive behaviour subsumes both cognitive and affective dimensions, and phenomena that are judged “desirable” by a cultural group — regardless of either the truth value or perceived pleasantness of the actual events— usually become part of tradition (1972, 70-72). Furthermore, Abrahams’s taxonomy of folklore genres recognizes that all genres, no matter how simple or informal, possess distinguishing characteristics of form, content, and context and that performers’ involvement varies from genre to genre and depends in part on past experience (1976). Throughout my fieldwork, readers stressed three facets of reading which combined in varying degrees in their subjective determination of whether a particular genre or novel satisfied their standards of a worthwhile read. Two of these, expertise and familiarity with a genre and sustained interest in a particular text, are self-explanatory. The third element I call the *activation of readers’ disbelief*. This is understood as the challenge that a given book’s reality presents to an individual’s worldview and concerns especially the moments when the reader traverses a landscape that, although admittedly fictitious, is also by turns almost more believable than his or her own daily experience. None of the readers in this study read what we might call fantasy for its own sake. However, many readers expressed a profound enjoyment of novels which presented *the incredible* —whether in love, combat or detection and adjudication— in the carefully studied guise of *the feasible*.

The "suspension of disbelief" is a phrase which connotes multiple meanings in folklore and literature. It is considered one of the central tenets of "poetic faith" according to Coleridge (Koelb 1984, 15), as well as an emergent condition of audience reception which distinguishes some genres from others, such as Märchen from the tall tale (Thomas 1977). Conversely, in some narrative traditions, it represents a state whose active solicitation may counter fundamental audience aesthetics and tacit performance rules in certain contexts (Glassie 1982, 111-12, 145-46, 155). The need to suspend academic disbelief or judgment has been a central topic to belief studies (Hufford 1982a, 1982b; Bennett 1987, 15), and an operating principle which, according to Holbek, was historically too readily assumed as a basic characteristic of "unsophisticated" oral literary publics by early researchers (1987, 202).

Some forms of fiction deliberately summon, rather than suspend, readers' disbelief, while others are interpreted humorously as incredible by the reader, a result which the author may not have intended (Koelb 1984, 23, 32). Koelb's analysis is focused on narratives which are unquestionably implausible, works he calls *alethetic fictions* which never assume any particular truth value and which: "use the readers' disbelief to force the reader to look for the hidden kernel of truth promised by tradition" (34). As such, these deliberately unbelievable texts differ from those which meet the conditions of Todorov's (1975) conception of the *fantastic*. By contrast, the fantastic's generic definition and ephemeral existence is predicated on ambiguity and the reader's hesitation between an attribution of causality which effects a reconciliation with natural laws, or an acceptance that the cause of the narrative events is situated in an alternative reality. Todorov states:

The fantastic, we have seen, lasts only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to reader and character, who must decide whether what they perceive derives from "reality" as it exists in the common opinion. At the story's end, the

reader makes a decision even if the character does not; he opts for one solution or the other, and thereby emerges from the fantastic. If he decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described, we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary, he decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvellous (41).

It is necessary to bear in mind, however, that ambiguity of experience resides at least as much, if not more, with the researcher as with the reader. According to Holbek, ambiguity “results from our inability to transpose a complex artistic unity into an unequivocal intellectual description” (1987, 216). Readers themselves may have a good idea of what they are willing to accept or question in a novel, though their precise criteria may represent a kind of unspoken aesthetic that they find difficult to put into words. As I show in a moment, many readers seem to focus on specific historical events or even technical descriptions as frames for their experiences of involvement and disbelief. Their experiences, however, are actually more like shifting constellations of interconnected impressions rather than discrete moments of either outright acceptance or rejection of the story. Proximity, or engagement with the text, is balanced against readers’ active establishment of distance. Scenes and particular references, as I discuss below, provide metaphors which allow readers to move through the cultural space delineated both within a text, and within the individual reflections and associations that the act of reading engenders.⁵⁷

I suggest that readers’ disbelief functions in Chinese popular fiction not solely as a response to occurrences whose causal origins seem indeterminate. Rather, disbelief can be conceived of as a process which combines aspects of questioning or hesitation and

⁵⁷See Fernandez (1974) for further discussion on the relationship of ritual behaviour and metaphors.

dissonance with a kind of emergent recognition of references to people, places, and historical events. These allusions resonate with the reader's cultural understanding to transpose the text into a unified narrative experience that the reader can relate to on a deeper, personal level (Touponce 1984, 14-15; Bachelard 1965).

Somewhere in the interpretive space between textual dissonance and symbolic resonance, active readers confront the story-world as presented by the author and negotiate its landscapes by means of their own cognitive maps and aesthetic expectations. For example, Jin Yong's *Tian long ba bu* (《天龍八部》, *The Demi-gods and the Semi-devils*) is an example of a book which readers approach with an attitude of disbelief. Furthermore, they construe the adoption of a sceptical stance as a desirable, and *usually* highly pleasurable facet of the reading process.

I am careful to use the word "usually" as a modifier here because disbelief as a construct, as with most complex responses, has more than one side. For some readers, a refined sense of scepticism can have some negative effects, even though it may still be important to their overall approach to texts. For example, although it rarely happens with Jin Yong's work, some readers may feel great disappointment at a novel which does not answer or disprove their disbelief with any kind of unfolding of a plausible storyline. This situation exists when readers encounter what they conceive of as a genuinely poor novel, and the experience may leave some temporarily disillusioned with an otherwise well-loved genre. As a specific case, Jade —whose innovative strategies for finding times and places to indulge in popular fiction were described in the last chapter— has definite ideas of what she expects from the genres she enjoys, particularly martial arts novels. She asserted that an author who did not strive to maintain a coherent plot, or who filled the novel with

interminable displays of martial prowess, somehow let go of his side of the bargain, and let her down at the same time:

CCY: Some *gongfu* novels are really RIDICULOUS. My sister and I just can't imagine how a book which is so badly written can be published. Just like sometimes if you see a romance, sometimes you will think: "This is not good, I don't like it, it's typical." But it's always like, it can't be so bad, because it's based on real life. But in kungfu novel, it has a different world, the world is totally different, so you can do whatever you like. I mean the writer. Do whatever you like. So sometimes they can do it VERY BAD. Manage things very badly.... For Jin Yong's novel there is a storyline, and then you find there is lots of things <pause> well, it's more logical. And it's more like real life. They [the characters] struggle and they suffer and they solve the problem or they didn't solve the problem.... The most important thing is still the storyline. With bad *gongfu* novels, when I don't like it, I feel the writer is not responsible to what he writes.⁵⁸

Also, as described by one reader in the last chapter, the disbelief applied to the novel during reading may reflect for a time back onto the reader's everyday life once the book is finished, resulting in a kind of "aloofness" or "culture-shock." On a related note, Link discusses the theme of of "reading as a return trip" in the context of city-dwelling Chinese romance readers in the early decades of this century whose responses to fiction involved temporary departure from their own urban realities and vicarious observation of how fictional characters confronted the vicissitudes of urban life (1981, 21, 232-34).

Tian long ba bu was described by readers in Chapter Two as sharing considerable common ground with classical works such as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo zhi yanyi*, 《三國志演義》). "Jiang Lingyun," an architecture student from Yunnan Province, said that much of her fascination with the novel stemmed from the author's use of her home region as a backdrop. For her, the story took her to plausible vistas that, though unfamiliar in the context of ancient times, were "nearly known" historical spaces which she felt she could navigate with a certain confidence:

⁵⁸CHEN Yuyuan, interview. 19 December 1994. Tape T94YYCa-06, T94YYCb-07.

JLY: He— used some real name, real place. Like in *Tian long ba bu*, that *Nanzhao guo*, Nanzhao Kingdom, which is in Yunnan. It's a real kingdom, and there are some name of the king, like, Duan Sichen.... There have these people, it's a real people, it's a real name. So when I read it, I like it very much, <laughs> because it's in Yunnan! <laughs>⁵⁹

Perhaps, as with a well-told folktale, the strange and special environment of the well-written martial arts novel is more commonplace than first impressions might indicate. It is possible that Nicolaisen's astute observation is equally suited to readers' enjoyment of a good book as to listeners' appreciation of a good tale: "This landscape of otherness is largely a projection of the landscape of home" (1991, 7).

Furthermore, it may be possible that there are certain features of "texture" inherent in particular narrative genres which simultaneously invoke disbelief *and* destabilize the ability of involved readers to maintain a detached vantage point. In her detailed analysis, Porter suggests that the discourse structure of vernacular works such as *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*, 《水滸傳》), especially the repeated use of assumed subjects and elided referents, which is also characteristic of much classical Chinese poetry: "has the effect of drawing the reader deeper into the world of the narrative by creating the illusion that the events are being perceived but not mediated by the narrator" (1993, 130-31).

Similarly, as I have already discussed, the practice of mixing fact and fiction in classical as well contemporary vernacular fiction may confound some readers' perceptions of historical veracity (Lu 1976, 158). By contrast, the fluid boundaries of storytelling and historiography may also appeal to other enthusiasts' larger comprehension of truths which underscore the author's construction. Naming *Tian long ba bu* as his favourite novel, one male questionnaire respondent wrote:

⁵⁹Interview. 28 August 1995. Tape T95GYa-13.

故事的結構雖然是虛構情節與真實史料參加在一起。但人物塑造很成功。正邪兩方並非那麼黑白分明，好人有懦弱的一面，壞人也有可愛一面，就像社會中人性的縮影。

Although the framework of the plot is a blend of fiction and solid historical reality, the characters are portrayed very successfully. Good and evil are not distinctly black and white. Good people have a cowardly side, while villains may be charming. It's just like an epitome of society.⁶⁰

Occasionally, sound technical descriptions may interfere with readers' maintenance of interpretive distance. I do not think that these moments where readers are drawn in to the rhetorical performance of the narrative are aversive, however. Although it draws a comparison with a very different time and genre of popular entertainment, Harris (1990) argues that part of the immense attraction for audiences to such phenomena as P.T. Barnum-style shows and exhibitions that were obvious hoaxes was not the embarrassing implication that, as one of the seemingly transfixed rabble, any member of the audience was tacitly affirming that now-clichéd observation regarding the gullibility of the general public. While there may well be "a sucker born every minute," it is possible that many so-called naïve observers, however lowly and lately born, derived some additional satisfaction by re-investing time —and money— to gain re-admittance to the illusion with the express purpose of finding out how it was done.

Likewise, readers who realize that they have been convinced of the likelihood of some aspect of the story have neither surrendered their disbelief nor forfeited a measure of their expertise. Instead, they are like spectators who have witnessed fascinating curiosities and wonders, and finally spied the trap door in the stage when the display was over. They may well leave the narrative with renewed respect for an author who challenges their perspicacity in a way that clearly affirms their intelligence as readers. According to Fang

⁶⁰QP-07.

Jing, a foreign language instructor at Edinburgh University, Jin Yong's depictions of martial arts skill in *Tian long ba bu* had this kind of effect on her:

[莎娜问她武功是否重要。] 方晶: 武功也是。 <停顿> 通常中国的武侠小说比如看过《天龙八部》它里面说的一些功夫是很, <停顿> 很不平常的功夫, 很特别的功夫。然后, 你看的时候, 你很想, 因为它有时候用具体的描写, 功夫这是怎么会事。你很想, 很想你能会这个功夫。可是有的时候读完了, 你又会发现它那个功夫是, 是想像中的, 很完美的, 但是地上是不可能的。

[SK asks if martial arts are very important to kungfu novels.] FJ: Martial arts— are necessary. <pause> Often, Chinese martial arts fiction, if you take the example of *Tian long ba bu*, then the martial arts in that book are <pause> very uncommon kungfu, very special martial arts. And when you read it, you really wish, because it sometimes uses concrete descriptions, it's [describing] how to do martial arts. You really wish, really wish you could do this kungfu, but then sometimes when you finish reading, you discover that that kungfu was in the imagination, very perfect, but—in reality— impossible.⁶¹

In the next section, I consider readers' understandings of fandom and identification with the narrative and characters. Later in this discussion, I examine a topic which is also related to the notion of active disbelief—the phenomena of reading for escape and addictive reading styles.

3.1.2 Identifying Fandom and Fan Identification

In an ethnographic analysis of popular cultural phenomena, it is important to give careful consideration to the interpretations of true fans (Roberts 1990, 86). Being a fan however, may signify enthusiasm rather than strict exclusion. Roberts argues that most readers are *users*, that is, they may have a favourite genre, but like many of the readers profiled here, they may also read widely in other genres as well. *Exclusivists*, according to Roberts, are relatively rare, and their focused reading choices may be a reflection of a

⁶¹FANG Jing, interview. 31 August 1995. Tape T95FJa-15.

particular stage of life (63). This accords with Jade's description of the widespread yet restricted popularity of kungfu fiction and martial arts comics among adolescent boys.

Some readers, however, tend toward the development of a rather specialized repertoire which is oriented around certain key themes or features. For example, Zhengqi, a member of the discussion group who described in the last chapter how she liked to read on evenings when her husband was working late, said she was a true fan of Qiong Yao's romance novels. She enjoys this author's use of beautiful poetry and traditional folkloric allusions. Likewise, the same male respondent who was quoted earlier in this chapter pinpoints the reasons behind his fandom to two characteristics of her work. The first, as we have seen, is Qiong Yao's portrayal of relationships. The second, in his opinion, is the continuity her books share with an earlier romance genre, known throughout the Ming (1368-1644 A.D.) and Qing periods as *caizi-jia ren* (才子佳人) or *scholar-beauty* novels, a connection I explore further in Chapter Five. He stated that while he also reads martial arts fiction that contains some sort of love interest as a sub-plot, he also affirmed that: "I seldom go for Kung-Fu without romances in. The idealised Chinese Coupling Model is: Hero-Beauty. It will certainly [be] a pity for me that no beauty accompanies a hero for justice."⁶²

Because of their centrality to an investigation of readers' uses and habits, I return to the complex subjects of "escape reading" and reading addictions shortly. At this time, however, I would like to examine two related concepts in the context of cross-cultural audience studies which carry problematic connotations when applied to Chinese readership without some prior qualification: "fan" and "identification." Indeed, the concept of "fan" also carries a number of negative associations in English. For example, Harrington and Bielby note an increasingly selective emphasis in media reportage on bizarre or violent fan

⁶²QRH-13i.

behaviour in recent years which reinforces popular stereotypes of fans as individuals who cannot easily separate real-life actors from their celebrity personas (1995, 2-3, 32).

However, despite its origins in the word *fanatic*, contemporary meanings ascribed to the words *fan* and *fandom* do not *only* reflect negative undertones of excess and obsession with specific popular cultural events, products, and personalities.⁶³ A fan can also signify a person who participates creatively and enthusiastically, either individually or in a community of others sharing similar preferences, in popular culture —but who asserts personal control over his or her choices, behaviours and the levels of intensity which characterize them. This holds even though those practices may be in some sense subversive, and neither shared nor fully understood by members of the individual's social networks which extend outside the fan community itself (Radway 1987, 107-08, 118).

It is possible then, that just as *amateur* has taken on negative nuances in the English language —from an individual who undertakes a course of action or inquiry for love to one who does so as a beginner without the validation of having achieved recognized professional status— *fan* has shed some of its more dubious shadings. This does not appear to be true to the same extent in Chinese, however. Although it may be a case of translated borrowing, a fan is “someone who loves something madly” (*kuangre aihao zhe*, 狂热爱好者) or simply as *mi* (迷) “obsessed, confused, enchanted/fascinated.” This denotes a state of distraction which is additionally modified by the particular medium that is the object of the obsession, whether films, science fiction novels, or whatever. From readers, I discerned an overall sense that the word carries an underlying implication that

⁶³See the special issue of *Culture & Tradition* (1987) which presents ethnographies of individual fans across a range of popular media.

anyone who is obsessed or enchanted by something lacks at least a certain degree of self-control.

Given these lexical colourings, it is perhaps little wonder that many readers, even ones who avidly described a profound and long-standing passion for books, looked askance at me when I asked if they would describe themselves as fans. The response of a male postdoctoral student in physical Chemistry at Heriot-Watt University was fairly typical. He said that he could not be a fan because, for one thing, he did not devote his attention exclusively to a single genre. For another, fans are people who engage in very public behaviours in order to express their predilections:

NCL: It depends on —to my view a fan is those guys, when he watch— for instance, pop star, pop fan, and when they view, went to a concert and wave those things [banners, signs, and so on.] And football fans, they wear the special clothes, and these guys sometimes get crazy. <laughs> And if the definition is this, then I'm definitely not a fan. [SK asks if a fan can just be an enthusiast.] No— I think even it's a fan, then he would always read these books, and always told people that book or something about this thing —books. Or not miss any opportunities to get introduced to authors, ask them to signature. Signatures, and this sort of things. And I'm not close to that.⁶⁴

I suggest that for a significant proportion of the people I sampled, fans are equated with another category of reader, those whose patterns of consumption are marked by what might be called “fiction addictions,” a topic addressed in a later section.

Folklorists have long recognized that it is important to discern and appreciate the categories people use to name and classify their own folkloric performances (Ben-Amos 1969; Casey, Rosenberg and Wareham 1972, 397). Cultural studies scholars, however, caution that to restrict an analytical taxonomy to named elements explicitly found in the cultural discourse under investigation is an “impossible intention” which: “makes it

⁶⁴NING Changlong, interview. 30 August 1995. Tape T95NCL-14.

impossible for the theorist to have any critical position independent from the people s/he is studying" (Barker and Beezer 1992, 15). Both theoretical viewpoints have merit for ethnographers of popular culture. To illustrate, I would like to briefly discuss another concept which, like *fan*, is not often given specific mention by readers but which nonetheless informs their conceptions and experiences of reading.

Specifically, the construct of *class* exerts an important influence on the shaping of this research. Although I have deliberately rejected definitions of aesthetic preferences which are too narrowly class-determined —since, as a folklorist, I believe that aesthetic expression and discrimination is part of the behavioral repertoires of all individuals in every community, just as I hold that every reader is a potentially expert reader— I cannot deny that class is a contributing factor in readers' responses. As I discussed in Chapter Two, the participants in my study are primarily intellectuals, although their class positions are not necessarily established by purely, or even primarily, economic determinants.

While it can be argued that most Chinese intellectuals abroad generally belong to the middle classes of society, except perhaps during their years as students, I did not find that this was entirely the case in Beijing when I was there in 1990-91. Though profound economic shifts have taken place in Mainland China in the last few years especially, when I taught in China I was told that teachers' salaries were low compared with other sectors where workers could receive production incentives in addition to their basic wages. Paradoxically, however, several students told me that while the teaching profession was not their first choice as a career as the wages were so low, there was some compensation in the knowledge that teachers occupied a higher social status than ordinary workers.⁶⁵

⁶⁵See also Wong's (1996, 377-90) perspective on the emerging and rapidly changing Chinese middle-class.

Furthermore, it should be noted that although I do not deny that class is an important influence in the ultimate pattern of my ethnographic data, these particular Chinese readers did not often speak of class as a major social signifier. As the caveat from the elderly reader in the last chapter shows, participants did alert me to potential sources of differences in interpretation, although these were most frequently attributed to such contributing factors as rural versus urban backgrounds, education, life experience and even age and gender rather than class specifically.⁶⁶

These features of respondents' discourse notwithstanding, I suggest that often it is the case that even if an influence is not specifically delineated, its effects are still present. It is possible that for many of these readers, past experiences with negative connotations attached to class labels and their accompanying official redefinitions of social status by exclusion have stripped the word of much of its critical significance. Because my study focuses on the reading practices of essentially a single class—even though some of its members may have different backgrounds—I cannot ethnographically substantiate the claim, for example, that Jin Yong's martial arts fiction transcends class distinctions, although other scholars have certainly made this assertion (Minford, 1993, 1), including some of those I interviewed:

WZN: The people like Jin Yong's novel. You can find, it's very surprise, the general people I mean—the worker, the peasant—they like Jin Yong's novel. But in the university, even among the professors, among the high-rank officials, they like Jin Yong's novel too. And even in the Department of Philosophy.

⁶⁶The rural-urban dichotomy, despite its significance to scholarly examination of the specific conditions of Chinese popular and mass culture (Lee and Nathan 1985, 394; Link 1978, 178, 232-34), is particularly interesting in this context because it is not strictly true that all of the readers I studied—or indeed, all of the tradition bearers who have informed different facets of my folklore research over the past few years—are originally from urban centres. It is possible for people from rural areas in China to achieve a higher education, however, people who have done so have informed me that they faced difficulties which they sensed urban students were not confronted with to the same extent.

Yeah! And among the monk in the Buddhist temple, they like to read Jin Yong's *gongfu* novel. So it's quite strange thing! I think there's not that kind of novel liked by so many people and so different people.⁶⁷

One issue I can address through ethnographic comparison and a certain degree of theoretical reflection, however, is that of a reader's identification with characters or other aspects of a narrative's construction. On the face of it, I would say that most of the readers in my study, unlike several of Radway's women romance enthusiasts, did not directly indicate that they identified with a major character. I suggest that, while many reasons, including gendered differences in interpretation and disclosure, may underlie this kind of declaration, several stand out which have nothing to do with equally likely and certainly more obvious explanations, such as participants' reluctance to admit such fancies to an interested stranger from a very different cultural background.

In common usage, I have been told that *identification* in Chinese usually carries a greater sense of the ability to *distinguish from* or *between* people, objects, or events as opposed to the capacity to *relate* them *to* each other. As well, for many of the Chinese readers represented in my findings, the ability or willingness to identify or recognize oneself in a character or in relation to a series of narrative events is inextricably bound up with the *desire* to do so. It is certainly true that most male respondents who answered this question either stated unequivocally, like Zhongning and Yubin, that they did not see themselves in the context of the story because their lives differed so markedly from those of the protagonist and other principal characters that there were no points of common correspondence, or —like Yinong— suggested that if they did make such connections they were unaware of them at the time.

⁶⁷WANG Zhongning, interview. 16 October 1993. Tape T93WZN-01/2.

However, even within these affirmations, many male readers acknowledged moments when their sympathy with a given character's plight was aroused. One male postdoctoral student in his early forties from Changsha emphatically concurred with a female student who suggested that our feelings toward literature, like music, were sometimes beyond the realm of adequate explanation: "When you read a book, it's not that you decide how you will feel, it depends on your type of need."⁶⁸

I am reluctant to attribute basic gender differences in this regard to a theoretical formulation such as Chodorow's (1978) concept of the different emphases in male versus female socialization for a variety of reasons, although Radway's analysis of romance readership cites Chodorow's work and indeed, incorporates it as a unifying theme throughout her discussion (1987, 13).⁶⁹ In the first place, while the notion of the female self as relationally defined and socially reconstituted certainly has merit for a western cultural analysis, scholars such as Chow have argued that Chinese masculinity is also constituted through collective networks that shape identity, even though the locus of these forces may have shifted in more recent times from the family to the state. Furthermore, the construction of Chinese masculine identity may be just as vigorously subject to acts of passive or "feminine" resistance in contemporary texts (1993a, 112-14). As she further argues in her critique of Jameson's postmodern gloss of a particular branch of romantic fiction, the "Mandarin Duck and Butterfly" school (*yuanyang hudie pai*, 鸳鸯蝴蝶派), western concepts cannot be globally applied to other world literatures whose histories have yielded different, non-linear "metanarratives" and reactions to them, and whose language

⁶⁸Male respondent, interview. 12 October 1995. Tape T95VAR-26.

⁶⁹Modleski (1984) also makes use of Chodorow's work and reaches similar conclusions to those offered by Radway. See Clancy (1992, 126-28).

conceives of "the unrepresentable" as something which reflects less the subversion of modernist signifiers than an established classical aesthetic (1993b, 472, 479, 481-84).

Furthermore, it is neither the case that all works or characters inspire the same degree of compassion on the part of the reader, nor that people identify most readily with the main, same-sex protagonist as presented by a novel's *dramatis personae*. As Purdie finds, Radway's comprehensive but rather exclusive emphasis on the relevance of Chodorow's socially reworked psychoanalytic premises to the act of romance reading gave her readers a potentially narrowed scope for possible self-affiliation from the outset (1992, 159-60). As a contrasting example, although Jing really enjoyed *Tian long ba bu*, the female character-types in that novel did not provoke the same depth of emotional resonance as some of the women in *A Dream of Red Mansions* :

方晶：但是在<停顿>在我看的《天龙八部》里面，因为女孩子特别的多，女孩子特别的多，不想，不想比如说我不觉得它一貌一个女孩子为举，她基本上是多平均的。所以对我来说我就不容易说把自己想象什么其中的貌一个。然后特别关心她的感觉，她的感情，她的命运。比如想读《红楼梦》里面，也是女孩子很多，但她其中些几个，我觉得如果你很喜欢其中的貌一个你很容易就把自己伴奏她或者替她<不清楚>。

FJ: But when I read *Tian long ba bu*— because there were many women in it, a particularly large number of women. I don't think, as far as I would say, there isn't one outstanding or exemplary female character. They are all basically pretty much the same. So, as far as I'm concerned, it's really not easy to say that you can identify one from among the others, and be concerned about their feelings, personalities and destinies. If we are talking about reading *Dream of the Red Chamber*, even though there are also many women in that story, yet you can pick out a few, I think that if you really like the look of one, you can quite easily take on her role, [the character] or [put yourself in her place] <last word unclear>.70

On a similar note, despite her general rejection of fiction now, Meng was quick to acknowledge that, in her youth, she was as likely to throw her lot in with a character whose

70FANG Jing, interview. 31 August 1995. Tape T95FJa-15.

fortunes were depressed if this choice reflected her emotional state, or like Jade, to side with a villain if she was in a bad mood. Likewise, “Lingyun” was more likely to identify aspects of herself in someone who was neither the most handsome, nor the most adept, but who had a sense of humour. Indeed, as Brown suggests with many soap opera fans, *identification* may not describe the complex and dynamic structuring of viewers’ reactions to particular characters as aptly as the concept of *implication*: “where one identifies with soap opera characters until something happens that causes the audience member to back off and take a more analytical position” (1994, 16). Perhaps the implications some Chinese readers make vary depending upon such factors as character-type, genre, or even individual authors and particular works.

With certain genres, such as martial arts fiction, the chapter-driven structure may help to facilitate reader identification by linking many smaller episodes that the reader may choose to get into in some depth, in order to see each subplot through to its completion:

慧元：一样的人物然后他可以<不清楚，她说快一点>大故事里面有小故事。然后小故事有解下出的故事。好象你就需要一定看完还觉得安心，因为很容易我觉得看武侠小说人非常容易看对里面的人物产生认同<说英语解释，还说她不知道认同英文怎么说。> <英文>：They identify themselves as one of the characters.

CHY: With the same character, <unclear, speaking a little fast> you have a little story within another little story, then that little story links to the one after. You need to finish reading before you can feel at peace. Because it’s very easy, I think from seeing kungfu fiction people [fans] it’s very easy to produce a feeling of identification with the characters in the story. {Switches to English: “Do you know what I mean? They see themselves as part of the story. You know, somebody will say: ‘Oh, Huang Rong⁷¹ is as clever as I am. So I can be Huang Rong,’ you

⁷¹The heroine in Jin Yong’s *The Eagle-Shooting Heroes* (*She diao yingxiong zhuan*, 《射雕英雄传》).

know. They— <asks what *rentong* is in English, *identify* >....They identify themselves as one of the characters.}72

Conversely, some readers may take identification to mean recognition of central issues in the narrative, rather than locating the self in relation —or in opposition— to the strengths and idiosyncrasies of a particular character. Identification may provide an enlarged, reflexive viewpoint from which the reader can consider difficult challenges and dilemmas vicariously in order to test possible reactions. As one female undergraduate from Malaysia wrote concerning romance novels:

我没有特别喜欢的小说。基本上会比较喜欢亦舒（在英文写：“有名的香港作家。”）写的小说。觉得她写人都很好。个个人物都很有个性与特色。而且都是我们日常生活可以接触到的人与事。比较生活化，也比较现实，也常常会我思考一些观点的问题。我觉得那样很好。帮助我了解自己，帮助我体会生活。（在英文写：“帮助我的想法或发展我的思想。”）。

I don't really have a favourite book, basically I like Yi Shu's [in English: "a famous writer from Hong Kong"] books. I feel that she depicts people really well. Each character has a personality and special features. In addition, the stories are concerned with everyday life, people and things. As far as daily life goes, it's quite realistic, and I often find myself considering problems from the viewpoint presented. I think this is very good, it helps me to understand myself to learn about life. [in English: "It helps me to think or it develops my thinking."]73

Finally, because I think it bears upon the topic of reader identification, most readers agree that a good Chinese novel has neither an entirely sad nor happy ending, but an open one which resists full narrative closure. The almost serial potential of Chinese popular fiction suggests an analogy with western soap operas. Their similarly “always expecting but never quite ending” structure allows the viewer to become simultaneously subject and

72CHUNG Huiyuan, interview. 25 Aug 95. Tape T95CHYA-12.

73QRH-17.

spectator— someone who is involved with and objectively distanced from the actions and passions of characters (Modleski 1990, 193).

However, as the readers' views in this section demonstrate, identification is a complex, socialized response, and the preponderance of replies from women on this issue affect my reading of it. Still, I can tentatively conclude that identification may be one facet of reading that permits both male and female readers the possibility of cross-gender association as well as the ability to approach the text from different viewpoints, a possibility that many theoretically and ethnographically-based studies do not seem to readily admit (Clancy 1992, 129). I will return to this issue in Chapter Six, but I suggest that a "fragmented" or "dispersed" gaze may not only characterize female consumers or "feminized" modes of consumption. While I did not encounter any men who said that they actively identified with the heroine, I did find men who rejected linear reading styles that focused on the primary male lead, as well as women who chose to "stand and deliver" with male heroes or villains. To return to the speculation offered by the male reader earlier in this section, identification may be not so much predicated on established patterns of individual commitment or decision-making —or on the exigencies of the textual choices available within the reader's psychological and cultural space— as on spontaneous desire. Next, this discussion examines how readers view the dialectic of tradition and innovation which informs Chinese popular genres.

3.2 Shades of Tradition in Contemporary Relief

3.2.1 The Interplay of Invention and Convention Revisited

As with the various functions of the act of reading and their relationship to many fundamental social uses of folklore which I investigate in the final section of this chapter, the central correlation which forms the subject of the present discussion —the dynamic interplay of tradition and innovation in texts and its influence on expressive behaviour— is also an established tenet of contemporary theory and practice in folklore (Toelken 1979, 10, 35). Tradition, as it is conceived by folklorists, is “a process, an integrated style of creation,” where “history, culture, and the human actor meet” (Glassie 1995, 408-09).

This ongoing engagement occurs despite —or perhaps because of— the seemingly dissonant solitudes of meaning connoted by the dynamic itself, such as creativity and convention, whose semantic improbabilities are, if anything, enlarged in an ethnography of reading, where such loaded words as “fiction” and even “novel” are admitted as necessary commonplaces (Williams 1983, 80, 82-84, 134-35). The concepts of tradition and innovation both carry positive and negative nuances, depending on the perspectives of participants (Williams, Keywords 319-20; Ben-Amos 1984, 99), and non-participants (Cothran 1979).

According to Cawelti, narrative pleasure is produced in response to the intensification of familiar experiences, which, in the context of the reading process as a whole, involves striking the right balance between “invention within convention” (1976, 10). He explains this interrelationship in the following terms:

... all cultural products contain a mixture of two things, conventions and inventions.... Convention and invention have quite different cultural functions. Conventions represent familiar shared images and meanings and they assert an

ongoing continuity of values; inventions confront us with a new perception or meaning which we have not realized before. Both these functions are important to culture. Conventions help maintain a culture's stability while inventions help it respond to changing circumstances (1971, 28).

While I agree in principle with Cawelti's basic premise, I think it is important to acknowledge that this quintessential equilibrium is culturally and historically negotiated by each individual reader and, as such, produces qualitatively distinct experiences of satisfaction. Using several examples of practitioners enacting different worldviews and personal aesthetics, Glassie points out that people working within systems of tradition do not only have the option to reconstitute exact replicas of a received heritage: "In one dynamic, the whole is repeated. In another, entities are dismembered and essences are preserved. In a third, what is preserved is a general tone, a sound, a look, a certain spirit" (1995, 408).

In order to appreciate the reactions of the Chinese readers who responded to my query regarding the presence and nature of classical and folkloric content in their preferred fictional genres, it is necessary to consider both the historical implications of folklore, and specifically of oral traditions, as well as the possible range of respondents' perceived degrees of freedom in interpretation. While Chinese popular culture has traditionally been the site of regular conversation between elite and folk culture (Johnson 1980, 505), the choice of sides in the ideological argument —and indeed, at particularly foregrounded historical moments, the precise separation of the sides themselves— has often seemed neither fixed nor particularly clear-cut (Link 1984, 108-09). Furthermore, Chinese folklore and literary traditions have shared a long-standing, mutual connection (Wang 1988, 839) which encompasses the processes of synthesis, borrowing and simulation which may be

said to characterize the relationship between folklore and literature more generally (Taylor 1965, 37).

Relating to the second point, readers' answers reflect differences in their perceptions of what certain questions demanded, for example, whether the focus suggested a concentration on larger modes or discrete metaphors (Toelken 1979, 338-40). Although a total of fifty-three percent of taped interview and survey respondents noted the presence of folkloric and classical elements in popular fiction, the overwhelming proportion of these responses—which approached ninety-percent of questionnaire replies and reflected considerable breadth of genre preferences—pointed to the use of traditional folk speech, such as proverbs, and excerpts of classical poetry. As might be expected, most readers had difficulty citing specific examples, though they indicated that such devices were commonly used, especially in the martial arts fiction of Liang Yusheng (梁羽生), as well as Qiong Yao's romance novels.

By comparison, in answer to related questions posed on the revised⁷⁴ questionnaire, sixty-one percent mentioned the use of traditional episodic structuring such as chapter-driven prefaces and suspense endings, and roughly nineteen percent described other elements, such as the use of Buddhist and Taoist imagery and references. Sixty-eight percent of readers observed that characters in popular fiction bore a certain resemblance to classical or folk heroes, like "Lingyun's" identification of the essential qualities of Zhuge Liang in a variety of kungfu fiction character-types, as described earlier. Also, I should point out that eight readers, one-quarter of those who completed either the handwritten or electronic versions of the revised questionnaire *and* also referred to the occurrence of folk

⁷⁴On the pilot questionnaire, I asked the following question: "Do you think there are any

and classical allusions and structural patterns in popular literature, asserted specifically that they felt these features detracted from their general enjoyment, and they tended to reject novels which extensively employed them.

The observation regarding characters is an interesting one. Generally speaking, while readers rejected the idea that individual popular characters were outright “remakes” of earlier ones, many suggested essential similarities in personas or character-types which gave them the sense that the contemporary fictional actors were comprehensible and familiar in a broad sense. According to Idema, while western heroes reflect a worldview which places great emphasis upon the individual:

The heroes of Chinese fiction, it is generally agreed, are much less individualised, much more “types”; the author tries to characterise them by one or two essential traits, displaying also little attention for individual psychology, but rather showing their nature through their actions and conversations (1974, 51).

As I stated above, some readers preferred not to be able to make completely positive identifications: they wanted the conventional types inhabiting a new novel to be dressed in sufficiently innovative uniforms (Roberts 1990, 101-02) that they appeared potentially recognizable, but remained personalities with whom the reader was largely unacquainted. In closing this section, based on readers’ descriptions —which are highlighted in more detail in the next two chapters, depending on the respective genre to which they pertain— I suggest that most readers represented in this study appreciate the reconfiguration, rather than the strict repetition, of tradition. While writers of Chinese fiction need not adhere to the accepted canon of historiography, a responsible author, like a reputable oral historian, identifies the indispensable aspects of tradition, and merges culture and history in “a creation of the responsible self” which is received by the audience as an original tale (Glassie 1995, 399, 407).

3.3 Chinese Popular Literature and Some Functions of Folklore

At this point, I want to explore some of the correspondences between certain functions of folklore and Chinese popular literature. My main purpose in constructing a comparison of the ways in which genres are used, both in reading and in other aspects of expressive culture in everyday life, is to propose an alternative way of dealing with some of the weaknesses of the “uses and gratifications” approach, including the different uses which may be attributed by different scholarly takes on the same media instance (Berger 1991, 91-92; December 1996, 28-29).⁷⁵

Also, I want to demonstrate that this chapter, despite its title and some of the issues raised, does not represent a straightforward application of this approach, especially since this methodological stance, like reader-response criticism, does not actually require the presence of an audience, but can often operate by means of theoretical introspection. As I stated earlier, while rigorous theoretical formulation is often insightful and may even produce results which are borne out and complemented by ethnographic investigation, it can risk projecting attitudes onto an audience which does not share them. I see this as an exercise in misrepresentation which can surely be avoided in large measure if, in the course of our theorizing, we take time to talk to real audience members —and then *listen*.

For example, while I acknowledge its place as an important study which anticipated and contributed to her 1984 monograph, this occurs, to some extent, in Modleski's “The Disappearing Act: A Study of Harlequin Romances” (1980). Her tone, while understandably critical of a medium which purports the need for women to reconcile the

⁷⁵“Media instance” is December's term for a temporally-defined media object linked to media experiences by audience perception, such as a particular program in a specific time slot that is regularly watched by a group of viewers.

ideals of true love with the realities of male brutality, is also tacitly dismissive of the readers who may use these novels in order to help them negotiate such questions.

I do not believe that these overtones can be entirely attributed to Modleski's rejection of ethnographic methods, however. Purdie has also noted this underscoring of scholarly distance in Radway's work, in everything from her comments regarding respondents' clothes, to her emphasis on her detached relationship to the texts themselves, to the acknowledgements which preface her book, in which she thanks her husband in such terms as to suggest that she achieved the romantic ideal which she states repeatedly eludes her readers, except between the pages of the books they so cherish (1992, 152-54, 161).

In contrast, I get a clear sense of Bacon-Smith's struggle to overcome her unwillingness to confront certain thematic complexes in the various genres of fan fiction she read, and of her respect for the communities of women she studied (1992, 268, 270, 279). In addition, although it is essentially also a text-based study, and one which profiles "ballad women" whose options and tactical repertoires are in many ways as circumscribed as those of romance novel heroines —and who, moreover, rarely if ever have the formulaic certainty of the happy ending to fall back on— Stewart's examination of female characters in Child ballads does not slight either the tradition or, by extension, the generations of real singers for whom the songs held such profound significance (1993, 56-57).

Furthermore, I agree with Narváez that individually-centred audience ethnographies, that is to say, *audience studies undertaken from the perspective of folklore*, have much to offer cultural studies. A folkloristic methodology and rationale would help widen the analytic scope beyond a "consumption-transformation model" of possible audience responses, as well as consider diachronic aspects of popular traditions, thereby elucidating the historical basis of a group's popular culture (1992, 27-29). Such investigations are

neither “apologias for mass culture” (Modleski 1986, xii), nor exercises that feature only the positive aspects of people’s reworking of popular cultural products into personal meanings to the ultimate mitigation or denial of the underlying boundaries on viewers’ interpretive options as determined by the genuinely powerful forces of cultural production (Jancovich 1992, 141-42).

Popular culture fans in general, I think, are acutely aware of moments when the products they have to choose from fail to fulfil their expectations (Heggli 1993, 12; Radway 1987, 49-50). As Bacon-Smith demonstrates, many fans’ subsequent extensions and revisions of selected texts fill in gaps or traverse discursive roads not taken by the original production (1992, 66-67). Although Jenkins’ (1992) application of de Certeau’s (1984) ideas created a penetrating lens through which to analyse television fandom, I do not believe that creativity in popular cultural reproduction is necessarily always constituted from the array of subversive tactics of powerlessness. To maintain such an attitude seems to me to subscribe to an outlook which posits “the folk” as not only silent, but also more or less hopeless as well, active bearers of popular tradition-as-surrender (Williams 1983, 319). It strikes me that more often than not, people like to play games that they can win and then talk about later. And victory, in the absence of any kind of empirical evidence such as a final score or the loss of a chance to play again, need only be subjectively defined in order to produce a feeling of satisfaction.

In the final sections of this chapter, I discuss certain key uses of reading by locating them within the set of folkloric functions outlined by Bascom: amusement, education, validation, and maintenance of cultural norms (1965, 290-96). I acknowledge Oring’s critique of Bascom’s application of functionalism to folklore, and note his objections that a functional approach can neither explain the origins of folkloric phenomena in culture nor

account fully for processes of stability or change beyond the explanation of observable patterns (1976, 70-74,78). These objections notwithstanding, Bascom's functions are a useful tool for organizing and discussing the uses of reading outlined by readers in my survey because his formulation concurs closely with readers' expressed opinions. First, I look at the role of reading as entertainment in relation to "reading as escape" as well as a degree of narrative abandon which conceivably takes that function to its limits of excess, addictive reading. Second, I examine the important function reading plays in informal instruction. Third, I describe another major facet of the act of reading in juxtaposition with the roles of cultural sanction and censure, the compensatory nature of popular literature.

3.3.1 Amusement: Escape Readers and "Fiction Addictions"

Initially, many people critical of popular fiction equate reading for pleasure with reading for escape. In everyday usage, popular fiction is often dismissed as "escapist reading." The interaction between the pleasure derived from a controlled and delimited form of escape such as that provided by reading popular novels deserves further analysis. Roberts points out that for many readers, "escape" may signify *going to* an activity that is somehow intrinsically satisfying, rather than *fleeing from* one that is more aversive (1990, 96-98).

As I stated earlier, for Cawelti, the reader's delight comes from the ability of popular genres to present a familiar experience, one which intensifies our feelings through a safely detached fictional frame, in a seemingly new way. This power, he suggests, lies in the basic formula underlying any particular genre. Popular genres, such as kungfu adventure novels, far from being simply constructed, are comprised of formulas which he defines as: "...a combination or synthesis of a number of specific cultural conventions with a more universal story form or archetype" (1976, 6). Thus, a kungfu novel reader's pleasurable

experience may derive from the expert recognition of a skilled author's introduction and manipulation of innovative elements within the basic parameters necessary to the definition of the genre, the harmonious and seamless fusion of "invention within convention" (Cawelti, Adventure 10).

The reasons behind the popularity of formulas are complex. Formulas combine both ritual and game elements, such that we not only experience vicariously spectacles which may include elements of danger or risk from a safe vantage point, but also participate in activities in which escape—in this instance, imagined through the story and enacted momentarily through reading—becomes a vital component of amusement (Cawelti 1971, 30-32). Regarding the more playful qualities of formulas, Cawelti writes: "Thus the game dimension of formula is a culture's way of simultaneously entertaining itself and of creating an acceptable pattern of temporary escape from the serious restrictions and limitations of human life" (Mystique 32).

Escape may be seen as one form of pleasurable response which the reader may choose to intentionally *construct*, rather than one which is merely elicited by the formulaic text. Radway found that when the romance novel fans she studied spoke of "escape," they were referring to two facets of reading: 1) a "free space" where they could elect to read instead of performing the other-centered activities normally associated with their roles as wives and mothers, and 2) vicarious identification with a cherished heroine. By selecting stories which fit their aesthetic requirements, for example, the need for a happy ending, the women felt that they were acknowledging, and to some degree fulfilling, a need to nurture and value themselves. As Radway says: "Although the experience is vicarious, the pleasure it induces is none the less real" (1987, 100).

In the interviews I conducted, readers spoke of temporarily “escaping” into privacy through reading, as Jade described in the previous chapter. Moreover, the function of *escape* itself was viewed in very different ways: positively if linked to opportunities for self-instruction, and negatively if seen as a possible site of self-absorption, that is, as a potentially addictive response. In general, women tended to discuss the pleasures inherent in escape reading—which included informal instruction—whereas men stressed the educational benefits as the primary purpose of the activity, a pattern also manifested in other studies (Bird 1992, 143-51). In a similar vein, Bacon-Smith suggests that while dominant cultural attitudes are predisposed to the trivialization of women’s activities and spheres of discourse as “play,” and “gossip,” the ability to engage in creative, non-serious representations of texts which are significant to the participatory community is an important indication of competence with the symbolic lexicon of fandom (1992, 152-57). Furthermore, playful expertise is seen as subversive of masculine cultural values (Bacon-Smith, 289-91). As I discuss in Chapter Six, however, “play” or “gossip” are not restricted to feminine audiences or modes of response.

To highlight this often marked contrast, compare the following reactions to the topic of “reading for escape.” Chen Meifang, a twenty-five year old female reader from Taiwan who had studied in the United States before coming to Britain to undertake a doctorate in applied linguistics, noted that while she read widely and generally felt enriched by most of the genres she chose from, she preferred the quality of playful flight offered by travel narratives:

CMF: Escape reading for me will be my favourite genre, the traveling one. Because that’s the only way I can persuade myself these things do exist [exotic places, cultures and customs she has never seen or experienced] in the world. It’s waiting for my exploration sometime. If I have a lot of time, if a lot of money, I will launch forward. I think that’s the best place to find escape. When I read Qiong Yao’s romances I hardly can find escape. Because, you know just by

looking around, I don't see a man who is both humorous, rich, graceful and always speaks a kind of soft language to you, always writing love poems to you, and say: "We could die for our love tomorrow, if we want." So I find no escape inside [romance novels]. And science fiction, basically I am quite sceptical about the power of technology. So although I could have a high dream that maybe someday I could fly in the sky, fly to any place I want, solve any problem by a certain equipment — just have to use my brain, don't have to use my physical power — but I find that escape may be limited to my grand-grand-granddaughters! <Laugh> Okay, and what else? Also say like, a lot of people like wuxia xiaoshuo [martial arts fiction, 武侠小说], because they find a lot of escape and seek justice. They say: "The good will always gain the power and the bad will always be terminated." Well I think, if you read more in Chinese history, this is hardly the truth! <laugh>⁷⁶

By contrast, a male reader of thirty-one who was in the course of completing a doctoral degree in material science — although he described himself throughout the interview as a highly motivated reader of a variety of genres, including especially Jin Yong's martial arts fiction — did not even acknowledge "escape" as part of his vocabulary, in either English or Chinese. Once he grasped the meaning of the concept he stated adamantly in English: "No, I don't like this." He went on to distinguish himself from readers who might be so inclined, for reasons of limited time or interest, to allow themselves to be seduced by "shallow" or "easy" reading:

男读者：这是说，有一种那性的人喜欢看这个比较<英语说：“容易”>的小说，你知道把？我不喜欢看这样的小说，我喜欢看的比较<停顿>就是，<停顿>看完了就是让你<用英文解释>，...但有的<英语：书>你读完了以后你会想很多，就是<不清楚>我喜欢读这样的小说。

Male reader: This is to say that there is a type of person who likes relatively <in English: "easy"> books, do you know what I mean? I don't like this type of book. I like those that are <pause> once you finish, you still <uses English to explain> Means — some novel you just finish last page, then you <pause> forgot all, everything this book, after read! <laughs> <Switches back to Chinese> But some

⁷⁶CHEN Meifang, interview. 5 September 1995. Tape T95CMFa-18.

book, <says “book” in English> after you read it, you may think of many things, or you <unclear>. I like these sorts of books.⁷⁷

Clearly, for this reader, escape represents a less desirable, or at least less respectable, outcome of reading. Although in the preceding commentary he contrasted escape reading with the worthy enterprise of reading as instruction, a function I explore more fully in a moment, it is interesting to note that, on two other occasions, including an earlier point in our interview, he related escape to addictive reading. Echoing sentiments similar to those expressed by one of Radway’s key reader-experts (1987, 87) —but from a standpoint which placed him unequivocally outside his intended comparison group— he stated that, for some people: “books are like drugs”:

男读者: 这是<停顿>读那个<停顿>金庸小说, 武打小说, 那性的小说的话, 它的象<用英语说: “吃成瘾性毒品”>读完了, 它可能有五本是把? 读完一本, 然后要读第二本。不吃饭, 不睡觉得, 你要读, 读完第二本, 还要读第三本。可以说人都进到故事情节里面, 你自己进到故事情节, 必需要了解这个。这象人吃<用英语说: “成瘾性毒品”>。

Male reader: This is <pause> to read <pause> Jin Yong’s novels, martial arts novels, it’s like <says in English: “take drugs”> read it to the end, maybe there are five volumes, right? Read one book, then you want to read the second, don’t eat, don’t sleep, you just want to read. Read the second volume, and you also want to read the third, you could say that everyone enters the plot of the story, you yourself enter the story’s plot, it’s important to understand this. This is like people taking <literally, “eating”> *drugs*. <says “drugs” again in English>.

From the rest of his interview and other similar declarations, I suspect that his assertions would benefit from some further clarification, however. Specifically, while he readily admitted to a general fondness for reading books “all in one go,” he did not become absolutely enthralled as a rule due to the propensity of much of popular fiction to exhibit a strong beginning but a weak finish. In general, chances were good that he would still finish

⁷⁷Male respondent, interview. 12 October 1995. Tape T95XHZ-25.

such a novel, but he quickly became disenchanted with books that exhibited a pattern of narrative decline, which he described as “start with a tiger’s head, but end with a snake’s tail.” (*hutou shewei*, 虎头蛇尾). It was the likelihood of the occurrence of this type of plot progression, or perhaps I should say, *regression*, that in fact prevented him from becoming addicted.

“I really love kungfu novels, but I’m not an addict,” was a common response from many of the readers I surveyed. Most regular consumers of kungfu novels are aware of the possibility of addiction to the genre, even though they may be unwilling to admit that they once were, or perhaps still are, “fiction dependent” in this respect. As might be expected, reading is a highly individual and rather numinous experience for most people, and therefore specifying the precise nature of this condition of heightened, almost obsessive, involvement with the story-world is extremely difficult. In the model outlined earlier in this chapter, I suggested that a reader who is experienced with the genre, has a high aesthetic involvement with a representative text within that genre, but who maintains a minimal distance or level of disbelief may be predisposed toward at least temporary addiction, recalling Roberts’ concept of cyclical “addiction clusters” (1990, 75). It is also possible that for certain individuals, short-lived or intermittent “kungfu fiction binges” may contribute to a reader’s later development into an enduring fan of the genre, again showing that reading repertoires can change over time.

Many readers suggest that the lived-world of the martial arts novel, the *jianghu* (江湖) is constructed in such a way that maintaining one’s ground in relation to the narrative is difficult. During one of our interviews, Zhongning remarked: “*Ren zai jianghu, shen bu you ji*,” (人在江湖, 身不由己) that is, “Once among the ‘rivers and lakes,’ a person can’t control himself.” It is interesting to note that Zhongning’s account of his reading

experiences with a good novel in some ways mirror the training and philosophy of a *qigong* (气功) practitioner, someone who learns to control and channel vital energy through such practices as fasting and breathing exercises. As with many other readers, both male and female, Zhongning stated that while reading, he goes without food or sleep, and literally devours the story all at once. Similarly, Jade declared that although she could often listen to music while reading romances and other genres, the fast pacing of kungfu novels required her full attention, and she did not usually have music on while reading in that genre because she could not attend to it simultaneously.

In fact, evidence points to the possibility that most readers have experienced something akin to addiction clusters, even though these periods of intensified enthusiasm for certain kinds of texts are often notably sporadic depending on how much time an individual has available for reading. Among questionnaire respondents, for example, seventy-two percent of male kungfu and romance readers said that they preferred to read a good book in one sitting if they had the opportunity. Of these, forty-eight percent did not take breaks to eat or sleep. Comparably, all nine of the female readers who indicated a primary inclination toward martial arts fiction stated a preference for reading a book straight through if possible. Five of these readers also said that they preferred not to interrupt their reading by eating or sleeping. Finally, a total of fifty-nine percent of male readers of these two genres stated they felt that “life was missing something” if they could not read at all, as compared with fifty-three percent of female readers with similar generic preferences.

Apparently, however, just as many Chinese can give accounts of young people in their acquaintance who studied *qigong* too obsessively, ultimately requiring the intervention of a master practitioner to restore inner balance to over-zealous students, there is a tacit acknowledgment that readers too can “go too far” in their consumption of popular fiction.

Meifang said that while she enjoyed some martial arts fiction, particularly Jin Yong's stories, the genre had become associated with a tragic mishap in her family:

[SK asks if she likes to read martial arts fiction.] CMF <says yes, but>: It's such an issue <laughs> I get a problem with my parents and it's never allowed to— APPEAR IN MY FAMILY! <laughs> Because it's a sad story with cousin in my mum's side, it's the son of my mum's eldest sister. He's the only— he was the only son in the family, and he read too much of it, and he really did believe by some practice you could, you know— *neigong* [内功, literally, "inner qigong,"] something— and he tried to fly from the second floor. And get a serious fracture. After that he become a kind of cripple. And so, ever since that episode, almost all the relatives, you know, throw all the *wuxia xiaoshuo* away.

On the surface at least, compulsive kungfu novel reading does not appear to be linked to other common comfort addictions, such as those associated with certain snack foods or special places and times for reading. In my research to date, readers of these novels often state they read anywhere, anytime, and, with the exception of Zhengqi's description of eating roasted watermelon seeds while reading romances mentioned in the last chapter, generally do not eat while reading. It is possible, however, that transitory addictions are connected to another positive source of comfort for readers— the levels of *connotative language* used in the stories themselves.

Although I discuss the world of the kungfu novel, as well as gendered responses to it, in greater detail in Chapters Four and Six, *jianghu* as a narrative construct has as much to do with language and layers of meaning as it does with setting and subculture. According to Loh, one of the most enjoyable aspects of Chinese popular cultural productions is the intermixing of folk and elite elements so that audiences can participate and construct meanings on many levels (1984, 173). For Overseas university students at least, addiction may be partially a function of the subversive pleasure of escaping into levels of one's own language, recognizing a proverb, lingering for a moment on the architectonics of a little-used, but somehow fitting character demanding remembrance and recognition, or

discovering that the chapter headings comprise a poem which emulates a classical meter with considerable skill.⁷⁸

It is possible that for some readers the experience of a mild form of “fiction addiction” is a precondition for developing the sensibilities of a fan. This development of fan identity naturally includes the individual’s maturation into an expert, critical reader. Like Bacon-Smith’s recounting of an episode of spontaneous speech play within a group of female media fans cited above (1992, 152-57), Jenkins also finds that experienced fans derive great satisfaction from the ability to hold the genre at arms length, to use it for performance and play (1992, 65). Linked to this emergent mastery are readers’ recognition and exploitation of the information value of their preferred genres, a theme discussed in the next section.

3.3.2 Education and Instruction

As I have already demonstrated, related to the function of reading for amusement and escape reading *for instruction*. Radway observes that one of the explanations readers in her study used to justify the time and money spent in the consumption of romance novels was that the books had instructional value. Through reading, the romance novel fans gained information about distant places and cultures, depending on the setting of the stories. Radway found the women initially defended their reading through arguments which are central to a consumer society: since the women spent so much time and energy taking care of others, they too deserved to pamper themselves occasionally. By then justifying their behaviour by appealing to traditional values like the work ethic —that such reading is a means of informal education which makes them better informed people— the women were

⁷⁸As they do in Jin Yong’s *Tian long ba bu*. See Minford (1994, 7).

also identifying with a value system which they perceived as socially more acceptable in keeping with their roles as women. However, because they continued to engage in an activity which takes away from the central focus on home and family, Radway suggested that: "In so justifying the act of reading the romance...women affirm their adherence to traditional values, and, at the same time, engage in a form of behaviour that is itself subversive of those values" (1987, 118).

Similar arguments were given by the Chinese readers I interviewed. Of particular importance to readers was the fact that reading the novels helped them stay in touch with their own written language and culture, and expand their general understanding of the sites of interaction between their respective cultures, life experiences —and not infrequently, their chosen fields of study— through reflection. However, as Jade's detailed description of clandestine reading during class in the last chapter showed, elements of subversive delight can certainly underscore readers' motivations. Despite the domestic ban on the genre in her family, Meifang did take up reading Jin Yong's novels in college in Taiwan and watching filmed adaptations on television, though apparently not in direct protest of her parents' interdiction. She, like many others already described, found Jin Yong's historiography both absorbing and highly informative:

CMF: And first, I always insist I must finish reading the first volume because Jin Yong is such a good writer. He's very truthful to history, and he tries to —not rewrite— but describe history in a very interesting way. And I learn more about history facts from his writing, especially in the first volume of every series.

Another student, a history postgraduate also from Taiwan who enjoys the work of several Chinese, Japanese and western authors, including especially Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco, finds in the act of reading a space for the testing of alternative historical scenarios. She feels that this is a creative exercise in hypothesizing which ultimately

complements her research, even though it subverts the boundaries of history as received truth or canonical fact into history as a frontier of unexplored possibilities:

CHC: Sometimes I think it's very important, also for my study. Reading those novels, they're very helpful for me. [SK: "What do you mean, how were they helpful?"] I think, in some ways I think fiction or novel is, you put people in an imagined situation, and see what, how they, how they move and how they— well, it's just a hypothesis of a situation. And first, sometimes history is a little bit like that, isn't it? It's also a particular situation, and in this situation people, how they act and react, something like that.... It just gives you new ideas, and to do history studies it's very important that you always get new ideas. <laugh> You see in these things that you get out new ideas, different ideas, so you can organize historical things into a—into a thesis! <laugh> You can organize them and say what you want to say, and that's what I think about history study. So I think, sometimes I do learn a lot from this, these novels—and sometimes it may be better than those old professors at university! <laugh> [SK asks if reading fiction can be a way of "playing out history."] It doesn't have to be real things, just imagined. You know, you just imagine a man in a situation, sometimes very— very <says "abstract" in Chinese, *chouxiang*, 抽象> abstract situation, you know. And you, you— think about the <pause> possibilities. Yeah, that's the word, possibilities, something that's very interesting to me.⁷⁹

In the final section, I want to consider the compensatory nature of reading in light of folklore's complementary functions of the validation and preservation of cultural values and norms.

3.3.3 Redressing a Different Balance: Compensation in Tradition

From her ethnographic investigation, Radway concluded that the compensatory aspect of popular romance consumption recompensed her female audience in two distinct but interrelated ways: providing personal enrichment through vicarious romantic support, and supplementing each woman's ongoing informal education with information about places, mores, and historical moments that could be usefully and strategically deployed in everyday life to the general benefit of her self-esteem (1987, 113-14). In this sense, reading

⁷⁹CHANG Huiching, interview. 1 September 1995. Tape T95HCC-16.

romances validated the women's emotional and intellectual needs as important and worthy of male solicitude.

At the same time, however, Radway concluded that these readers' momentary subversions of patriarchy, through their insistence on allowing themselves time to read, for example, did not radically displace or challenge the dominant ideology of male control. Rather, habitual reading seemed to equip these women with a willingness to acknowledge its role in their lives and, more significantly perhaps, to facilitate an acceptance of the day-to-day compromise of their own potential by their tacit agreement to work within, rather than actively protest, the boundaries established by the paradigm of masculine culture (78). In this regard, it may be said that reading helped maintain the status quo by helping women acquiesce to their disadvantaged positions within the larger social structure.

The compensatory function of reading then, seems to occupy a position intermediate to the other two functions of folklore which Bascom identified, and to subsume aspects of both. This chapter as well as the previous one foregrounds a measure of readers' celebration of the vibrant cultural and historical elements found in the genres from which they derive obvious pleasure. People maintain a sense of cultural connection through reading, even though they may be acutely aware that their experience of contemporary social reality may not measure up to the utopian —or at least less socially constrained— environment of the novel.

Justice and romance provide a case in point. Elsewhere,⁸⁰ I discuss the different concepts of masculinity as manifested in the hero-types and the essential operating principles, or basic philosophical orientations, which are emphasized by romances and

⁸⁰See "Paperback *Haohan* and Other 'Genred Genders': Negotiated Masculinities Among Chinese Popular Fiction Readers" (Kozar, 1997).

martial arts fiction. These are the *caizi* (才子), or talented scholar and *qing* (情) or love/sentiment, and the *haohan* (好汉) or “true, brave hero” and *yi* (义) or righteousness/justice respectively. Although these ideals are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they demand the hero’s unwavering devotion and are not found in their purest forms in the real world beyond their generic embodiments.

In his seminal study of the history and popular traditions associated with knight-errantry in China, however, Liu highlights several points of convergence and contrast between the chivalric concern for justice and the views expressed by prevailing political and philosophical ideologies throughout Chinese history, and he further suggests that the righteous ideal could be taken to unnecessarily violent extremes (1967, 5-12). These historically grounded provisos aside, Meifang mentioned earlier in this chapter a possibility echoed by other readers, that people attracted to kungfu fiction are compelled by the pursuit of justice. Likewise, Zhongning suggested that readers of kungfu novels found a measure of redress in an unfair world:

WZN: ... the social system is limiting, so people cannot find the solution in, what do you call— true, actual world. So they just read that kind of *gongfu* novel look for a fair system and fair things in the novel! It’s kind of, what do you call— compensation? [SK: Compensation.] Yeah, compensation. I think it’s a very important factor for so many people to read that kind of novel.

On a comparable note, some mature male readers may turn —either periodically or regularly— to romance reading, like their younger counterparts, “to learn something about love,” but for reasons that have less to do with curiosity than a sense of loss. For example, I interviewed an older male student at Memorial University who was then a postgraduate in the Chemistry Department. He was close to fifty, and highly respected by younger colleagues and associates, who frequently sought his advice. He had, however, one habit that some of his male compatriots found difficult to reconcile with his otherwise sagacious

demeanour. He exhibited a curious penchant for reading “books for ladies,” notably the popular romances of writers like Qiong Yao, whose works were absolutely anathema to diehard, exclusive martial arts aficionados. When I delicately asked him about his seemingly unorthodox predilection, he replied: “It’s simple. As a young man, I was sent to the countryside like many others. *And we were not allowed to fall in love.*” Yubin also expressed a rather poignant regret at not being able to read as much as he felt he should have when he was younger. Although he has remedied this to some extent in later years, he feels that the reparation, at best, is incomplete:

HYB: I regret very much I didn’t read enough when I was young. And later I read some [novels], and I suddenly realized many things I didn’t realize. So I felt it was a great pity....one thing is particular, you know, I was, I just reckoned I was not romantic enough. The simple reason is just I didn’t read enough novels! When I feel that, that feeling was caused by novels, just by reading novels. So I just feel the difference, so I just felt I should have done that. And look what I missed, the loss I missed, and it was too late. You know something, you can’t compensate when you get old! You know you can get a lot of lessons, revelations from novels.... And especially when you are young, I think you should read as much as possible.

For some readers, it appears that the genres they find most appealing are those which simultaneously allow them experiences and small victories that they might otherwise continue to be denied —the fleeting chance “to live a life which is always too far for you” as one reader put it in the preceding chapter— within a narrative framework replete with the historical and literary allusions that imbue them with profound joy and pride. Compensation for unredressed wrongs or unrequited passion need not be made, it appears, at the expense of a basic love for cultural identity.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has been concerned with the exploration of the complexities of readers' aesthetics, their uses of reading —as escape, instruction and compensation— and the connections between these essential purposes and the functions of folklore. I also attempted to define the operation of readers' disbelief and its pivotal importance to an understanding of the differences between key reading patterns which were described by participants in my study, such as fans and addictive readers. In addition, I examined some of the complex associations attached to important concepts and processes, like "fan" and "identification." In the next chapter, I undertake a diachronic overview of the generic antecedents of the contemporary martial arts novel, as well as a synchronic investigation of some of the significant features of the contemporary genre.

Chapter Four: Chinese Martial Arts Fiction

4.1 Introduction

Try to imagine the fascination that *might* be exercised among English readers by a (hitherto non-existent) genre combining the content of good old-fashioned cloak and dagger romance (well told— a rattling good yarn, preferably set in seventeenth-century France, or during the Jacobite uprising, or in the British Navy during the Napoleonic Wars, or the late British Empire), with a certain amount of material from the Occult (the Knights Templar, the Cathar Treasure, Nostradamus, etc.), and a lot of detailed (indeed fanciful) description of some national sport that combined the excitement of duelling and boxing with the underlying 'national philosophy' of cricket (Minford 1993, 3).

The above hypothetical description of an English equivalent to the popular literature which is the focus of this chapter, Chinese martial arts fiction, provides some idea of the complexity of this genre. Martial arts fiction is the adventure genre most widely read by the readers who participated in this study. In particular, because of the acknowledged mastery of one of the genre's best known authors, Mainland-born Hong Kong newspaper editor Louis Cha (Zha Liangyong, 查良鏞) who is known internationally to Chinese-speaking fans of his novels by his pen name Jin Yong (金庸).⁸¹

Briefly, contemporary *wuxia xiaoshuo* (武俠小說) or Chinese martial arts fiction can be thought of as a descendant of the vernacular fiction tradition whose forebears include especially works such as *Water Margin* (*Shuihu chuan*, 《水滸傳》). Although strict usage of explicit structuring devices such as poetically framed chapter titles and chapter-driven prefaces and endings ("If you would know what happens next...") seems to have fallen into disuse in modern works and/or their many reprintings, the novels are basically

⁸¹For a brief biography see Minford (1993, 4).

episodic in nature, and each may run to several volumes. Such characteristic organization also reflects the historical importance of serialization to the development of this genre and its popular audiences. Many martial arts novels were first published as newspaper and magazine installments. As I discussed in an earlier chapter, this formal patterning makes it possible for readers to read portions of stories out of sequence and still ultimately develop and retain a sense of the overall narrative— a useful feature when, for whatever reason, the volumes of printed or electronic texts are unavailable in their original order.

Essentially, most readers agreed that most martial arts novels followed, with some variation, the basic pattern which I have outlined below:

1. A *chivalrous hero*, or occasionally
2. A small band of gallant knights-errant (one of whom usually is, or becomes, superior in skill and temperament and is acknowledged as leader by the others) who is/are
3. *Seeking a gifted master* or maybe a text or other record of secrets of their martial discipline (*mijue*, 秘诀) in order to improve his/their skills, possibly in order to
4. *Exact revenge* for some wrong done to a family member, brother-in-arms or the fighting lodge to which the hero belongs. Along the way
5. There are *numerous, vividly described battles* and skirmishes. Through these the hero may meet
6. A martial *heroine* or perhaps the daughter or young female relative/disciple of a bitter enemy or rival fighting clan. They may well
7. *Become romantically involved*. Their relationship will likely experience many stormy moments (*yi bo san zhe*, 一波三折).⁸² Besides romance, the hero may come into riches, which he will likely scorn. Certainly
8. His *fame* will be known far and wide throughout the outlaw society, the "brotherhood of rivers and lakes." Somewhere along the way, a *mystery* may be solved which
9. Sheds light on the reasons underlying the hero's *inner motivation*. The tale may end

⁸²Basically, "storm-tossed" or "one wave has three breaks."

10. Successfully (*yuanman jieju*, 圆满结局)⁸³ as with traditional dramatic finales, but with some very skilled writers a bittersweet or open-ended epilogue is also possible, and often more moving for the reader.

However, as this chapter demonstrates, readers suggest that there is more to martial arts fiction than these basic elements. Good martial arts fiction must strive, as one male reader put it, to provide the essence of the narrative, the “nucleus of the description” (*miaoshu de zhongjian*, 描述的中坚)⁸⁴ of the tale. Tentatively, I would characterize this central set of ideas or concerns as roughly analogous to the concept of an “emotional core” in a ballad or a folktale (Evans 1982, 315; Toelken 1979, 106). A martial arts novel that is true to its tradition is one that foregrounds certain concerns fundamental to Chinese cultural and interpersonal interaction, such as loyalty and friendship that endures despite any intervening hardships or distances. This notion of friendship subsumes and enlarges the sense of social connection or *guanxi* (關係) which can be defined as “matters that relate, and relations that matter.”

Guanxi represent a central cohesive force in Chinese worldview: relations bind people to the responsibilities and pleasures enjoined in their own existence and identity by connecting them in a network of meaning to the signifying others around them. Huiyuan describes this as a kind of “energy” which is a key component of the novel. From the context of Huiyuan’s other comments during the interview, I developed the impression that this chivalric energy is intensified not so much through the act of controlling the life force or *qi* (氣) that comes with martial discipline, but by reinforcing the friendships formed, tempered and refined through competition and conquest:

⁸³“A satisfactory result for all concerned.”

⁸⁴WANG Yongji, interview. 29 September 1995. Tape T95WYJ-23.

慧元: <说英语开始> 需要非常的坚韧不拔 <不清楚> 其实我觉的武功, 或者江山, 这个都是基本东西。别的 - <停顿> 很难说, 也很难觉到。因为有的人可能会有说武侠小说很重要还一定也要功夫, 一定也要侠客, 然后一定要一些江湖将的斗争恩怨传奇。我觉不知道不仅。因为其实武侠它只是一个 - 我说武侠是一种精神。是那武侠的精神使它成为武侠小说。不是一些外在的东西包装它使成为武侠小说。 <讨论一本小说解释> 我觉得武侠这种精神你需要武侠基本上的精神不关你有没有外调的功夫或江湖怎么样怎么样的情节。是包装我觉得都不重要。重要是那个精神。

CHY: {Begins in English: "Actually, I think the hero or heroine in *gongfu* fiction must got a very strong mental power. And they have to be very—" } they should be very steadfast and firm, <unclear, begins speaking quickly> actually I think martial arts, setting, these are all basic things. Others— <pause> it's very hard to say, very hard to decide. Some would say that in kungfu novels it's very important, and even essential, to have *gongfu*, and knights-errant, then ongoing battles within the *jianghu* [subculture], "tales and legends of loyalty and enmity." I feel I don't know whether that's not all there is to it because actually martial arts fiction is just {in English: it's kind of—} I would say that martial arts have a kind of energy, and it is this energy which develops into martial arts fiction. not some external packaging which creates martial arts fiction....[Discusses a book mentioned in her questionnaire responses about players in a Chinese chess competition which she feels also fits the framework of a martial arts novel.] I feel that martial arts has this energy and essentially, you need the martial arts energy regardless of whether or not you bring in *gongfu*, or whether the *jianghu* has this or that going on in the plot. I think the wrapping is all unimportant. It's that energy that's important.⁸⁵

This chapter focuses on the three areas most frequently discussed by readers of martial arts fiction who informed my ethnographic research: the history, heroic character-types and their subcultural and linguistic landscape, the "rivers and lakes" (*jianghu*, 江湖), which provide the setting and potential for the compelling "kungfu novel" story-world. In this chapter, I discuss the hero and the narrative setting in comparative terms, in order to provide some points of reference with certain adventure genres which may be more familiar to western readers of this work. Also important to my exploration of heroic figures is a consideration of the range of expressive behaviours and guises open to the Chinese martial arts hero, from the stalwart *haohan* (好汉) —the "brave, true, hero" concerned with justice

⁸⁵CHUNG, Huiyuan, interview. 25 August 1995. Tape T9SCHY-a-12.

and righteousness— to the picaresque trickster (*liumang*, 流氓, literally, “rogue, hooligan”) figure who, as several scholars have noted (Meyer 1980, 98, 106; Uysal 1968, 142-43; Childers 1968, 116-20), often remains closer to the ideals of folk heroism than the nobler members of a culture’s heroic pantheon.

A division of character-types according to the absolute presence or absence of virtue is not recommended, however, since the *picaro* can also embody a certain noble pathos and dignity beneath the facade of wry humour and trickery which mark his usual strategies for survival (Babcock 1978, 99, 107-08; Childers 1968, 118, 120). Indeed, for some readers the skilled depiction of a trickster-hero may stand out particularly vividly against all other character-types. In her initial questionnaire answers, Huiyuan responded to a question about typical male and female characters by considering the very atypical Monkey King in the classical novel *Journey to the West* (*Xi you ji*, 《西游记》). Monkey, accompanying the monk Tripitaka and a motley band of less-than-perfect acolytes on a journey to retrieve the true scriptures, is a clever immortal who has mastered many feats of combat and transformation, but who —on the surface at least— seems a long way from enlightenment. However, his “simian” humanity is at once humorous and deeply spiritual: his actions and words frequently seem to manifest an essential purity which is lacking in the other pilgrims, including the monk who is his supposed mentor, although Tripitaka himself can also be seen as a kind of comic hero who falls short of his potential (Hsia 1968, 125–29, 135). Huiyuan touches on one aspect of Monkey’s contradictory personality which for her makes him such an intriguing character:

《西游记》的男人是和尚！女人都非痴即愚，不然就有大智慧，中间没有过渡的。男人，悟空算不算？都很人性的缺点即使他法力无穷聪明机智，仍然有一些性格上的缺点，我很欣赏作者这样的手法。

Journey to the West's male character is a Buddhist monk! The females are all either very silly almost to the point of foolishness, or they possess great wisdom, none in the middle. Males, how to reckon {Sun} Wukong [Monkey]? He has very human shortcomings even though his ways are extremely clever and resourceful, still there are some imperfections in his character. I really enjoy this kind of writing style.⁸⁶

Furthermore, scholars and readers alike have cited this novel as an important influence on the development of contemporary martial arts fiction (Chard 1991, 7; Liu 1967, 82). For some readers, experiences with what they consider the classical antecedents of today's "kungfu novels" inform their interpretations and continued appreciation of the modern genre. These readers also assert, however, that while contemporary novels may reflect a rich heritage of influences, they should not seek to recreate or rewrite those earlier works in modern guise, a point discussed in the previous chapter. Rather, as Show-fen put it as we were formulating a question on folkloric and classical elements in current popular fiction for the revised questionnaire, the "shadows" of older, well-known characters may populate the narrative, but they should not be brought to life. Although it may seem to a reader that Zhuge Liang or some other ancient figure is sighted throughout a narrative, reports of his activities should remain not so much greatly exaggerated as tantalizingly *unconfirmed*.

Moreover, Minford finds that heroic and picaresque elements can meet in the knight-errant figure, especially since, by definition, all members of the brotherhood of "rivers and lakes" are rogues or outlaws in relation to traditional Confucian society (1993, 2,10). Several readers also remarked on the curious mixing of polarities of conduct and outlook within the complex persona of the martial hero. From readers' comments, I sense that whether a reader categorizes a character as a rogue or a gallant depends, to a large extent, on whether the character upholds or flouts the codes of conduct within the outlaw

⁸⁶QP-01.

community itself. These complexities notwithstanding, if we take Schofield's assertion that the course of the heroic myth is consistent in that it usually involves "a young nobody of unknown origins [who] rides in from nowhere and eventually turns out to be someone from somewhere" (1990, 18), then I think that it is important to open this discussion with an investigation of the various genres of literary and oral tradition which contributed to the shaping of contemporary Chinese chivalric fiction.

4.2 The Roots of Contemporary Martial Arts Fiction

The Chinese name for "kungfu fiction," *wuxia xiaoshuo* (武俠小說), provides a clear indication of the genre's main concerns: fighting and prowess in traditional military or martial arts (*wu*, 武) and chivalry or conduct exemplifying a chivalrous warrior (*xia*, 俠), that is, a concern with righteousness, loyalty and honesty. A knight-errant may be referred to as a "hero" (*yingxiong*, 英雄), or more often as a "chivalrous person/traveller" (*xiake*, 俠客) and, as I mentioned earlier, specific characters may be hailed as "brave, true heroes" or *haohan* (好漢). Interestingly, as Yubin describes shortly, *haohan* literally means "good (Chinese) man." The Chinese conception of the masculine hero signifies a person who is larger than life, someone who embodies the most profound cultural resonances as expressed in the highest levels of personal discipline. As Fang Jing remarked: "Often martial arts fiction tells readers that while kungfu is important, conduct is more important." Yubin elaborated on this idea, concentrating on the importance of righteousness and virtue as the organizing principles which should ideally order and direct the hero's responses, not only in combat, but in every aspect of his life, including his training and any quests he may elect to undertake:

HYB: <in English> If someone has *de* (德, virtue) it's very important according to the theory [the ideals of martial arts fiction]. If you don't have a strong sense of morality probably you can't get somewhere in terms of your martial arts. Probably such ideas are still in the novels, and also in practice, that's just a reflection.... And those people [characters in kungfu novels] value *yi* (義) very much. The conception of *yi* I think governs brotherhood, fraternity and friendship in that specific sense. They envelope those things because "friendship" in English sometimes just means "sociability," or "acquaintance." So the elite of that community — the *jianghu* — are called *haohan* (好漢), "good man." But it doesn't mean "good man" in English. In English "good man" means a kind person, but *haohan*, that means a person who is really masculine or heroic. And *jiang yiqi*, (講義氣) promoting righteousness.⁸⁷

Not surprisingly perhaps, most English translations do not adequately express the interdependence between skill and behaviour. The term "martial arts" places an almost exclusive emphasis on combative techniques (Minford 1993, 2), while "chivalric" — at least in the minds of many non-Chinese readers — may connote a correspondence with western medieval traditions associated with the practice of knight-errantry that obscures some very important differences. Whereas western medieval knights were generally of the nobility and employed in the service of the king for which fealty they in turn enjoyed his sanction and favour, Chinese knights-errant originally came, for the most part, from many classes of society and formed a kind of subcultural class that stood opposed to the central tenets of Confucian order, and they did not subscribe to any formalized, court-inspired romantic code such as existed in many western European societies (Liu 1967, 5, 7-9, 195). Still, I use these labels in conjunction with the term "kungfu novel" or "*gongfu* (功夫)

⁸⁷HE Yubin, interview. 31 August 1995. Tape T95HYBc-11. It should be understood however, that Yubin and others went on to point out that upholding "righteousness" as it is conceived in the outlaw community often requires or at least condones behaviour that not only subverts expected patterns within official society, but also may well demonstrate the extremely violent and subjective enactment of a narrow and rather paradoxical definition of "justice." See also Liu (1967, 5-6).

novel” because these were the names used by readers surveyed in this study, fans and non-fans alike.

4.2.1 Chivalric Themes in Early Popular Fiction

Liu's *The Chinese Knight-Errant* (1967) remains one of the classic studies of the *xiaoke* tradition in history and literature, indeed, many consider it still *the* definitive treatment of the subject. This work, which places the figure of the Chinese chivalric hero in the texts and contexts of the changing times and genres in and through which he lived, does not restrict itself to classifying traditional martial arts fiction strictly in relation to the “serious” classical military romances like *Water Margin* and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. These and other thematically related works certainly helped shape later popular manifestations of the martial hero in fiction, however, as readers suggest in this and previous chapters, they should not be thought of as providing some kind of fixed template that subsequent examples of the genre merely imperfectly reproduced. As I have already described, a number of readers have indicated other narrative traditions which contributed to the development of martial arts fiction, such as Chinese detective fiction and tales of fantasy and the supernatural featuring memorable figures such as the astute Judge Bao,⁸⁸ the short stories of Pu Songling, *Journey to the West*, *Sanxia wuyi* (《三俠五義》, *The Three Knights and the Five Righteous Heroes*) and *Feng shen yanyi* (《封神演義》, *The Investiture of the Gods*).

I will return to this point in a moment, however, as I described in Chapter One, it is important to understand that although the first written or fully compiled and edited version of a story might emerge in published form in a particular year of a given dynasty, that does

⁸⁸See Chapter Five for further discussion.

not mean that the themes or central character-types of the story did not exist in other versions in oral and print traditions prior to the first known date of formal publication. For example, McLaren (1985, 188, 191) notes a broadside or *cantefable* (*cihua*, 詞話) character which appeared in late Ming editions of the *Three Kingdoms*, especially popular “picture-strip” (*zhizhuan*, 志傳) editions, but which was also found less frequently in some printings of literary, historicized *yanyi* (演義).

McLaren further suggests that, although this character, a gallant and rather roguish figure called “[Hua] Guansu” ([花]關素), is absent from the *dramatis personae* of Luo Guanzhong’s (羅貫中)⁸⁹ (circa mid-1300s) edition of the story of the *Three Kingdoms*, he may have known about it and included it in an earlier prototype manuscript, the inclusion having then been subject to later editing, either by Luo himself or a subsequent editor. It is not inconceivable that the character, who likewise undergoes a transformation over the course of his narrative life from a brigand to a filial son,⁹⁰ would have been known to writers and compilers such as Luo: he appears in a *pinghua* version also called *The Three Kingdoms* several decades earlier and records from around 1100 cite “Guansu” as a popular nickname for bandits and entertainers (162, 181, 191).

⁸⁹Although authorship of both *Three Kingdoms* and *Water Margin* are generally attributed to Luo, Hsia suggests that he compiled both works using earlier source material (1968, 77). McLaren’s essential argument is that this source material might well have drawn on oral tradition to a greater extent than previously assumed.

⁹⁰This is an interesting process in the evolution of many popular traditions and folk-heroes: they are often “tailored” over time, intentionally or inadvertently, to reflect either dominant cultural values or changing subcultural attitudes. See for example Lai’s (1992) analysis of the transformation of the character of “Lady White Snake” in folklore and popular media and Roberts’ (1983) examination of the evolution of “Stackolee” in black culture.

This last point is of interest to a discussion of the development of martial arts literature because “bandits and entertainers” are the very sorts of people whose occupations and outlook are most commonly used to describe the characters found in the subculture of later martial arts fiction. While I am not suggesting that an ancient broadside or early precursor of what we might today call a “chapbook” or even a “comic book” marks the definitive beginnings of kungfu fiction, it appears that the “rivers and lakes” adventure setting and its outlaw heroes, like the “greenwood” of ballads, and much more recently the “frontier,” in both its “western” and “cosmic” manifestations, has been a fascinating landscape for audiences long before such genres were named —and more often than not, dismissed by those undertaking such classifications— as popular entertainments.

Even before the emergence of the Ming dynasty vernacular novels which fans and scholars most closely associate with the narrative tradition that became contemporary Chinese adventure or martial arts fiction, there were *bianwen* (變文) tales of heroes and saints from the sixth to the tenth century which also express some of the themes that would become central to the modern genre. These “tales and recitals of the unusual” incorporated such central kungfu fiction devices as a revenge plot, the development and manifestation of the hero’s seemingly superhuman martial and strategic powers, and the extreme violence with which the hero redresses the injustice shown to his family (Johnson 1980, 145, 148-49). Of greater importance than the presence of certain motifs which might be said to anticipate later narrative conventions is the fact that, according to Johnson, the beginnings of a written vernacular language allowed the *bianwen* to extend “beyond the constraints of narrative in the literary language to the verge of popular fiction” in which the features of later vernacular classics, though incipient and roughly-drawn, were still clearly discernible (95-96).

Discovered in quantity in the early part of this century in the caves at Dunhuang, the *bianwen* texts include a considerable quantity of what we might call popularized exempla which demonstrate not only that sixth-century Buddhist preachers knew how to “play to an audience” in order to get their messages across, incorporating material that was decidedly outside the orthodox canon, but also —since it is unlikely that these sermons and illustrative stories were themselves the scripts⁹¹ that the preachers used or the later recording of their orations— that the Tang period (618-907 A.D.) saw the rise within Chinese society of a new type of audience whose members, for the most part, had achieved a modest education, and whose position therefore fell somewhere between the orality of the folk and the classical erudition of the literati. It is probable, however, that these new readers would have had strong links to oral culture, and their level of literacy would have precluded access to the greater part of the classical canon. As such, they would have found the *bianwen* ideally suited to their tastes, especially since the content of these relatively short and uncomplicated texts reflected a “system of traditions” that was already an established part of the popular consciousness by the time a readership developed (Johnson 96, 99, 102-03).

The *bianwen* cycle with which Johnson is specifically concerned relate the adventures of a hero of the pre-Imperial state of Wu called Wu Zixu (伍子胥) and are set in the late sixth- to early fifth century B.C., which again is much earlier than even the first recorded historical and narrative accounts of characters who could be described as early prototypes of the chivalric hero. Prior to the development of a popular literature about his adventures, the literary and oral traditions surrounding his character and deeds remained largely

⁹¹See Chapter One for further discussion and a summary of this argument. Johnson also holds that techniques employed by Buddhist preachers in turn affected secular storytelling (1980, 101.)

separate, and were brought together in this popular written form (1980, 93-96). Although the *bianwen*'s relative literary merits may have paled beside the great works that would follow them, their very existence and abundance — some seven thousand documents were acquired by the British Museum alone, to say nothing of sizable French and Chinese collections— attest to a truly remarkable and enduring written tradition with vibrant connections to the oral landscape of its day which was produced over the same period that would become known in western European history as “the Dark Ages” (Giles 1944, 7, 46). Just as remarkable perhaps, is the fact that much of the *bianwen* —unlike the late Ming *baojuan* (寶卷) that also contained popular Buddhist stories and recitations and were especially attractive to female readers⁹²— came before the innovations in woodblock printing that would allow for cheap mass publication.⁹³

As can be seen from the foregoing examples, knight-errantry as it is portrayed in contemporary fiction can be understood as the product, or perhaps the *confluence*, of long-standing historical and literary traditions. Liu states that historical and fictional chivalric narratives represent two important strands of the genre (1967, 81). However, although history and fiction were separated in practice, in popular tradition they sometimes merged successfully and seamlessly, each distinct but integrated and complementary realms of wonder:

⁹²See Overmyer (1985) and the summary in Chapter One for further discussion.

⁹³Even after the development of movable type, fixed woodblock printing was preferred because of its lower cost. Woodblock printing was prevalent by the ninth century, however, in Giles' description of the manuscripts held at the British museum, he comments on the different writing styles and implements that would have likely been used to copy the *bianwen* texts by hand, as well as the paper qualities which serve as another indicator of age (1944, 13). See Ko (1993, 34-37) and Wu (1943, 1950) for further discussion.

In short, chivalric tales occupy an intermediate position between popularizations of history on the one hand and tales of the miraculous on the other. They dwell in a twilight region where fact mingles with fancy and the commonplace with the marvellous (82).

An important facet of Liu's discussion is that it draws our attention to moments when developments in history and literature —normally clearly separated in the official worldview of ancient China—⁹⁴ coincided in ways that came to reflect to some degree the progress and decline of the hero and his world, although these events and their texts could not in any way predict the enduring popularity of the chivalrous knight in the Chinese imagination. During the Song (960-1279 A.D.), Yuan (1271-1368) and Qing dynasties (1644-1911) the practice of knight-errantry declined for a variety of reasons. In the Song a rise in Confucian ideals and political policies led to a suppression of chivalric activities and principles because they ran counter to many fundamental Confucian precepts, while in the Yuan the free-spirited and thoroughly Chinese figure of the *haohan* posed a threat to the Mongol leadership, and by the Qing systems of official armed escorts rendered the independent knights largely ineffective and obsolete (Liu 1967, 7-9, 53, 71).

However, Liu suggests that overall the knights showed remarkable tenacity, surviving their fluctuating fortunes as both real people and popular personas from at least the Western Han (206-8 B.C.)⁹⁵ and possibly even up to the eve of the Taiping Rebellion ([1851-1864] 1967, 42, 135). Furthermore, even during periods of repression, the gallant brotherhood enjoyed widespread acceptance as a subject for popular literature and performance:

⁹⁴See Johnson (1980, 150) for further discussion.

⁹⁵Some timelines list the end of this dynasty as the year 24 A.D. depending upon whether the Wang Mang Interregnum is considered a separate inter-dynastic reign. The Wang Mang period lasted from approximately 8 B.C. until the start of the Western Han in 25 A.D.

regardless of whether their exploits ever made it into the pages of a promptbook or inspired a later author's fiction, Liu states that they were a favourite topic for Song storytelling and Yuan drama (72, 81).

To summarize the discussion up to this point, it is clear that although chivalrous romances were certainly an established prose genre by the early Ming Dynasty, the narrative themes existed in classical poetry as well as a variety of popular forms, such as legends, ballads, Buddhist sermons and recitations as well as plays— all of which significantly predate this era. Some tales, such as “The Maiden of Yeh” (circa first century A.D.), which anticipates later conventions by including such features as supernatural elements and a martial *heroine*, attest to a provenance considerably earlier than even the Tang Dynasty, which is the era to which most of the *bianwen* belong. According to Liu, by the Tang Dynasty tales of chivalry had also evolved into sophisticated literary forms, while by the Song and Yuan periods which followed, evidence suggests that tales of knightly valour were much sought after as the stuff of storytelling and stage performances. (1967, 72, 81-86, 99). From the seventeenth century onward, Liu notes that “new types of chivalric fiction have developed and continued to be popular to the present day” (81), an assertion borne out by Link’s surveys of readership in the 1910s and 1970s (1981, 9; 1985, 252).

4.2.2 Placing the Tradition: A Look at Story and History

At this time, I want to briefly recap the main strands of Chinese martial arts fiction and review those sources that readers perceive as the central influences on the contemporary genre. Liu emphasizes the importance of *Shuihu Zhuan* (《水滸傳》) or the *Water Margin* as a precursor of later chivalric fiction, as well as its historical place as a fictionalized

account based on the events of the Fang La Rebellion of 1121 as recorded in historical accounts (1967, 109). He notes that many stories about various members of the band of outlaw heroes who occupied Liangshan Marsh existed as story cycles before they were put together by Shi Naian (施耐庵) and Luo Guanzhong, although the exact nature of each writer's claim to authorship has been the subject of some debate, as has the exact date of publication. The original edition, like the prototypical *Three Kingdoms* by Luo which McLaren describes in his study of the influences of oral tradition on that classical novel discussed earlier in this chapter, is no longer extant. Furthermore, *Water Margin* itself was subject to considerable expansion and re-editing through the Ming Dynasty until the revisions of Jin Shengtan's (金聖嘆, d. 1661) edition reduced the number of chapters to seventy-one and removed much of the material added in previous revisions (Liu 110-11; Lu 1976, 158, 173). In general, Liu suggests that *Water Margin* may be seen as a kind of folk epic in which the characters are emphasized as heroes of chivalrous temperament, rather than brigands (112-13).

It is interesting to note the link between *Water Margin* and *The Three Kingdoms* in the minds of kungfu novel readers, as the latter book was mentioned almost as often as the former when readers discussed the relative influences of each work on contemporary adventure fiction. This trend was somewhat reversed when readers brought up specific characters for comparison with modern types, however. In that instance, admirable heroes—though often depicted in readers' comments as bearing a likeness to the fiercely loyal but rather rough-edged and impetuous Li Kui of *Water Margin*—were most frequently described as resembling the resourceful master strategist Zhuge Liang of the *Three Kingdoms*, who is perhaps if not *the* archetypal culture hero of Chinese tradition, then at

least a solid candidate for the position (Eberhard 1986, 326-27; Loewe 1984, 150).

Commenting on the necessary qualities of male characters, for example, one man wrote:

典型的男性角色有复杂的性格，有幽默感，并不是十全十美。他男子气反映在智不在力。条件许可时最好再有些才气。一个例子是《三国演义》里的诸葛亮。

The typical male character has a complex personality. He has a sense of humour but is by no means perfect. His masculinity is reflected in wisdom rather than power. If conditions permit, the best thing is a certain amount of literary talent. One example is *Three Kingdom's Zhuge Liang*.⁹⁶

Although such observations may pertain more specifically to the next two sections, I include them here because they illustrate one kind of powerful connection between classical and contemporary adventure fiction for some readers that I alluded to earlier: the reflection but not exact reproduction of specific traits or even particularly memorable character-types in other fictional personas and situations. Additionally, Lu mentions that both *Water Margin* and *Three Kingdoms* were printed together in the late Ming (1976, 173), and they may also retain some residual association in the minds of readers because the same person is credited with the compilation of both works. Also, it is not inconceivable that there is some degree of readers' pride operating among the enthusiasts who participated in this study as far as their assertions of generic tradition and heritage are concerned. Besides their acknowledged status as forerunners of the modern kungfu novel, *Water Margin*, *Three Kingdoms* and *Journey to the West* have also long been considered hallmarks in the canon of Chinese fiction.

Although the two novels bear some similarities, there are also important differences in such things as setting, language and characterization. Both novels deal with the concepts of loyalty and "sworn brotherhood," however, *Water Margin* is more clearly in the "rivers

⁹⁶QHR-03.

and lakes" tradition, and the language reflects the down-to-earth origins and surroundings of many of the characters, though both novels express a variety of registers, depending on the narrative context (Hanan 1981, 15-16). In *Water Margin*, according to Hsia:

...the more memorable characters inhabit by and large a picaresque world of military officers and yamen officials, merchants and innkeepers, thieves and prostitutes, Buddhist monks and Taoist priests, who constitute a far more diversified and vibrant landscape than the world of the *Three Kingdoms*. It is this bustling and often savage world that gives *The Water Margin* its distinctive aura of human truth (1968, 85).

Three Kingdoms is set much earlier than either *Journey to the West* or *Water Margin*, during the period of disunity at the end of the Eastern Han (25-220 A.D.) when China was divided into the opposing states of Wei (220-265), Wu (222-280) and Shu Han (221-263). The novel concerns the friendship and exploits of Liu Bei (劉備) who established rule of Shu Han, his advisor, the gifted general Zhuge Liang (諸葛亮), the virtuous and refined knight-errant Guan Yu (關羽) and the warrior Zhang Fei (張飛).⁹⁷ In his analysis, Liu differentiates stories of historical knights-errant in the form of chivalric tales from, on the one hand, historical romances, and on the other, tales of the supernatural. I will return to the second distinction in a moment, however Liu states that historical romances are more concerned with "professional warriors who lead armies into battle" than with knights who act independently and are more concerned with acting on personal courage than making tactical decisions (1967, 81-82). *Three Kingdoms* is generally described as a historical romance, although Hsia prefers the term "historical narrative" as opposed to novel (1968, 34).

⁹⁷For a translation of this work into English, see Brewitt-Taylor (1995).

From talking to readers, my sense of their overall conception of the underpinnings of martial arts fiction is that there is an essentially direct line of descent within the chivalric tradition from *Water Margin* to many of the martial arts novels of today, at least to those that put greater stress on martial prowess than supernatural power. The genealogy is lent an even greater nobility in its association with *Three Kingdoms*. Perhaps it would be appropriate to say that for readers, history and fiction are never completely separate in martial arts fiction: along with a dose of fantasy, mystery or love, the admixture of historical fancy and fictional truth are all part of the adventure. As I learned while collecting Chinese folktales for my M.A. thesis, *Three Kingdoms* is also a source people refer and defer to in relation to the tales they tell, as it represents a way of naming cultural truths in storytelling which resonates more deeply than even the lure of the “rivers and lakes” as it is presented in *Water Margin*. The question requires further research, but it strikes me that for kungfu novel readers who also cited both classics —as most did, and with affection— the situation may be somewhat akin to that facing readers of medieval fantasy or mystery fiction I have spoken to who have also read *The Canterbury Tales* as well as the many perspectives and interpretations of Arthurian legend: the one is a highly entertaining yarn, or a series of them, that draws on what came before and also presents it in such a way as to serve as a model for later stories while the other, for some at least, tells a story of the greatest love, loyalty and pain ever known.⁹⁸

⁹⁸See also Wu (1991) for a comparative analysis of the narrative structures of the Caxton edition of Malory's *Le Morie d'Arthur* and Jin Shengtan's edition of *Water Margin*. Although he does not draw to the same extent on the comic depictions in Chaucer, medieval historian and author P.C. Doherty has written a series of mystery novels in which the pilgrims tell those tales “recorded” by Chaucer during the day and “tales of ghosts and murder” at night. The latter are presented, like the daytime narratives, as lively vignettes or episodes interspersed with dialogue between the listeners.

As a brief aside, Liu generally characterizes works such as the late Qing *Tales of Heroic Young Lovers* (*Ernü yingxiong zhuan*, 《兒女英雄傳》) as falling into a kind of a prescriptive scholar-beauty romance tradition, although the heroine “Thirteenth Sister” (Shisan mei, 十三妹) is a chivalrous fighter intent on avenging her father’s murder. The hero is a scholar, and Liu finds weaknesses in what he describes as the inconsistent characterization of the book, especially in the portrayal of the heroine. He states: “...as Thirteenth Sister, she is a remarkable character, full of the noble and stern virtues of chivalry, but as Jade Phoenix, especially after her marriage, she is hardly recognizable as the same person” (1967, 129).

In my own research into the Chinese heroine tradition in folklore, this pattern seems to be the norm in many respects, and the domestication of the traditional heroine is perhaps less the result of a weakly drawn character than the influence of strong social constraints which come to bear on her ultimate fate. Often, the heroine is ultimately bound by filial duty or other pressures and her glorious career as soldier or scholar is sometimes, though not always, cut short. As a result, her story, as we see in Chapter Six, is often left open and unfinished. Certainly, “Thirteenth Sister” may well “start with a tiger’s head and end with a snake’s tail” at least partly because of authorial inconsistency. However, although none of the readers in this study discussed this book specifically as belonging to the martial arts genre, past audiences may have interpreted her narrative journey and final destination as retracing the steps and filling in the textual silences found in the tales of traditional warrior women such as Hua Mulan.⁹⁹

⁹⁹Alternatively, McMahon suggests that *Tales of Heroic Young Lovers* may be seen as “an antidote” to some of the themes and character-types found in *Dream of the Red Chamber* (1995, 265-82). See Chapter Six of this thesis as well as Kozar (1993) for additional discussion about the character of Hua Mulan and the martial heroine tradition.

As I have already discussed, Liu distinguishes chivalric tales from historical romances and stories of the supernatural. He writes:

Chivalric tales also differ from tales of purely supernatural events such as *Pilgrimage to the West* (*Hsi-yu Chi*, known to English readers as *Monkey*) and *Investiture of the Gods* (*Feng-shen yen-yi*). The former may contain an element of the supernatural but most of them do not strain credulousness too far; the latter make no pretence at credibility. Also the former are concerned with justice or revenge, the latter generally not (1967, 82).

These fundamental differences aside, however, several readers cite novels such as *Journey to the West* as important antecedents of modern martial arts fiction, especially because Monkey embodies the paradoxical and yet very human blend of trickster-hero and essentially pure-hearted wanderer whose insights are as astute as his exploits are comical. Within the classification of chivalric tales themselves, Liu acknowledges the contributions of the two principal streams of thematic content which run through the contemporary genre which he characterizes as "tales of flying swordsmen" and "tales emphasizing physical feats." However, he also points out that when the overriding potential of *qi* is given precedence over what any individual can achieve through the cultivation and direction of personal strengths and resources, that is: "When this metaphysical element is emphasized at the expense of physical possibility, the tales become practically indistinguishable from those dealing with flying swordsmen" (1967, 129-30, 134-35). As I have noted elsewhere, many readers perceive this duality as a kind of tendency which certain authors emphasize in one direction or the other depending upon their preferences and style. However, many contemporary novels combine a little of both, though most readers favour Jin Yong's novels for what they see as his "realistic" grasp of human physical and metaphysical

capacity. The art of *qigong*, according to Jade, is about control of the body, and the writer too must discipline the kinds of descriptions he relies on:

[Says that adept practitioners could destroy a wall or barrier without striking it]
CYY: If there is a wall, they don't have to punch it to destroy it. Maybe they can stand far away from it. Not too far, if it's too far, then some— in Jin Yong's novel usually it's not too far because he is more realistic. You don't have to touch it to destroy it. [SK asks whether a novel without *qigong* would lose something.] Yes, because they say qigong is not only you practise more, and then you will be good. *Qigong* you have to have the talent... and this is one factor. And you have to <pause> have something in your heart, I don't know. You have to be quiet, to think <pause> I don't know! <laughs> You have to master your *qi*, control your body, how to use it, something like that.¹⁰⁰

In the next section, I look at the character of the Chinese chivalric hero in greater detail, comparing him to some of the familiar heroic personas found in various western narrative traditions.

4.3 The Chivalric Hero: A Comparative Exploration East and West

Folk heroes, like villains and other archetypal figures in folklore and local history, personify some of the basic concerns of the human condition (Klapp 1949, 20, 24). However, they often do so in such a way as to allow, encourage, or sometimes even require multiple readings of the heroic tradition by members of the community to which the hero belongs, especially since part of the folk hero's appeal often lies in those aspects of his character and actions that leave his heroism, but not his basic and quintessentially fallible humanity, open to interpretation (Slater 1980, 191). Moreover, a hero need not behave in a consistently "heroic" or tragically noble fashion in order to claim an honoured

¹⁰⁰CHEN Yuyuan, interview. 19 December 1994. Tape T94YYCb-07.

place in the folklore of a culture: rogues and clowns whose antics typify fundamental folk ideas or cultural values are often more closely identified with and/or more frequently and fondly spoken about than figures who are, if not above reproach, then at least certainly larger than life.¹⁰¹

A number of studies of the folk hero exist, with particular emphasis on American legendary and quasi-historical types and the traits and accomplishments attributed to them through the dynamic processes of popular tradition—helped along in some cases by literary license and/or self-promotion, or at least carefully controlled modesty on the part of a “living legend” and (his) biographers or popularizers (Meyer 1980; Humphrey 1980).¹⁰² Some analyses emphasize the hero’s masculine embodiment of cultural or subcultural values (Abrahams 1966; Roberts 1983), while others stress the hero as a kind of metaphoric vehicle for the expression of dissent by members of social classes without access to direct forms of protest or political influence (Coggeshall 1980).

Several studies, including a number of the foregoing, discuss the hero as a specifically situated cultural folktype, that is, a person, whether real or legendary, whose life, character and escapades come—through the dynamic processes of transmission in oral and popular tradition—to reflect or fit a kind of generic pattern. As a structuring concept, “pattern” like

¹⁰¹See for example Uysal’s (1968) comparative analysis of the Turkish “Robin Hood” K roghlu with stories of the Hodja Nasreddin. For discussions of particularly “creative” rogues, from a cosmological as well as a microcosmic, everyday perspective, see Newall’s (1984) study of Anansi tales and Strauss’ exploration of Coyote as a “sacred fool” (1996, 96-103).

¹⁰²As the literature is vast and the topic is not directly related to this thesis, for reasons of brevity I do not explore the phenomenon of “tall tale” heroes here. However, I think that such a comparison would be particularly useful in a study of the kinds of narratives told by young Chinese readers about their fictional heroes, especially if readers were familiar with Chinese as well as western characters and storylines, such as might well be the case with comic book audiences, for example.

“formula” plays an important, but sometimes overly constricting part in our understanding of the ways in which the signifying elements of heroic identity are organized. For example, Raglan’s well-known delineation of the essential configuration of heroic attributes is intended to describe the cultural variations of a specific character-type whose life and identity could be seen as the cumulative product of “ritual incidents in the life of a ritual personage” (1965, 150). However, as Jezewski points out, Raglan’s system does not accommodate the usual patterns which tend to emerge in the creation of female heroes (1984, 70). She provides the following definition of “hero” which avoids an excessive or misplaced emphasis on characteristics such as “goodness” or “masculinity”:

... a person whose life story is passed on by oral tradition and/or written accounts and is remembered for exceptional deeds that have as their basis qualities exemplified in courage, power or magic. The hero may be a character of folktale, legend, myth or history (1984, 55).

Jezewski’s analysis is useful because she also takes into account folkloric sources in the scope of possible influences which may contribute to the creation of a hero. In particular, her observation regarding the potential relationship between folklore and history in the hero’s formation has applications for the study of Chinese popular fiction, especially since many skilled authors, particularly Jin Yong, enlarge minor historical moments and characters within a fictional frame, much to the delight of readers. She writes:

If, in fact, the pattern of the life story of a hero who is “real” is similar to the pattern of the traditional hero who has not lived, then the question is raised why these patterns are similar. It may be that the life stories of historical heroes are altered to fit a pattern or that fiction is made to fit life (56)

As I have already discussed, history and fiction often complement each other in the minds of readers, and many readers state that they prefer to read books which have

instructional as well as entertainment value. Not surprisingly perhaps, the range of variables which may contribute to the creation and development of a hero/ine of popular fiction often differ significantly from those identified as either essential or likely for the emergence of a mythic champion. Furthermore, the fictional hero's progress will also be affected by both the author's imagination and his desire to conform to or challenge existing "templates" of heroic behaviour, as well as readers' perceptions of the dialectical emphasis of invention versus convention which informs the narrative's overall rhetorical structure.

In a much earlier article, Klapp also commented on the interplay between legend and history in the making of heroes. Concentrating on the legends which come to be identified with historical figures, he cites a common repertoire of mythic character-types, themes and events which are selectively associated with particular individuals. Moreover, he states that: "Even popular heroes of the present day are subject to a myth-making process" (1949, 17). Therefore, folk heroes are frequently portrayed in story as undergoing tests of various kinds, participating in contests which foreground superior physical and/or strategic skills, and having to perform feats which attest to their special status and, most importantly, afford them the recognition and approval of their respective communities which is fundamental to the very definition of the heroic role (18-20). Several of the hero-types from Klapp's taxonomy are found in martial arts fiction, although, as I discuss in Chapter Six, readers often speak of the invincibility of the "conquering hero" with certain reservations if not outright criticism of his excessively perfect and unrealistic nature.

Still, this hero-type strikes a chord in the hearts of many readers as he represents a kind of swashbuckling gallant untroubled by human emotion and imperfection. Often, he is also the first hero-type that martial arts fiction readers encounter, especially when they are young. Although they may ultimately come to prefer more complicated and human

characters, many readers retain a soft spot for this kind of hero, and use him as the first reference point in a continuum of character development, which Cawelti notes is also possible with Westerns as a popular genre. With that tradition, the outlaw can be seen as evolving from an unambiguous outcast to a “lone ranger” who exhibits more nobility than either the town he defends or the undisciplined forces he defends them against, to the tragic “gunslinger” whose inner conflicts ultimately exact his own destruction (1971, 47, 53-56).

As the starting point, many Chinese readers mention Linghu Chong (令狐冲) who appears in one of Jin Yong's earlier novels,¹⁰³ *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer* (Xiao ao jianghu, 《笑傲江湖》). He is frequently compared with the unlikely and reluctant picaresque hero of Jin Yong's last novel, *The Deer and the Cauldron* (Lu ding ji, 《鹿鼎記》), a prostitute's son who goes by the decidedly unheroic name of Wei Xiaobao (韋小寶) or “Trinket.” I will return to Xiaobao in a moment, however, I would like to take a closer look at the character of the “Smiling, Proud Wanderer,” Linghu Chong. I first became aware of the contrast between these two heroes during my interview with Jade who said that she liked both types of heroes and both styles of novel. The heroes start out very differently: Linghu Chong appears to be a conquering hero whose reputation precedes him while Xiaobao is extremely reluctant to live up to any notoriety, save perhaps that which accompanies the lifestyle of a polygamous scoundrel:

[Jade has brought two books to compare] CYY: In the first book [*The Smiling, Proud Wanderer*], Jin Yong feels that he put many characters in, and he put lots of plot in, but he didn't describe much about their thought, what they think, and why

¹⁰³This novel was published in four volumes in 1963, and revised in 1980 (Minford 1993, 8). Since its publication, it has become the basis of a number of popular films and series. His last novel, *The Deer and the Cauldron*, was published in 1969-72, and revised in 1981.

they act like this. And he thinks it's not so deep into the heart. But for me, I think it's good enough already. I like the main character [Ling Huchong]. He is very—he is quiet, he is honest. And the only one fault of him is he is too perfect. He is not like a real person.

Then about this one [*The Deer and the Cauldron*] the main character is still a child, about twelve years old or something. He is the son of a prostitute [SK: "Oh, I think I know that one."] Yeah? He has no character of a traditional hero. But I think it's a different concept of Jin Yong. The nationalism is not so important now. [Talks about how people ask the protagonist to resist the Qing Dynasty, but he is reluctant because he doesn't like to struggle. He would rather stay home with his numerous wives, and he is not certain of his own ethnic background, he might be Manchurian himself.] And I think the ending is— there is some meaning of the ending: it isn't so important what he [Wei Xiaobao] is, or where [he comes from].

Where Xiaobao must come to live up to his destiny, Linghu Chong's fame is tarnished before he even arrives on the scene. The following excerpt from Chapter Three gives some indication of the seriousness of his alleged infractions. A nun and a master from two rival fighting orders are reviewing the charges: he is accused of compromising the virtue of a young female novice, he consorts with blackguards and ruffians like "Tian Boguang" who subvert the honour of the chivalrous code, and he is a wild, drunken, unrestrained fellow who has no control over his language or his habits. To compound everything, he had taken flight and is unwilling to answer for his actions. While Linghu's superior tries to gloss over his transgressions to some degree, it is clear that this is an unworthy member of the brotherhood, a man without honour who has flouted every tenet held by chivalrous society:

The Huashan disciples' hearts raced wildly and they all thought: "Learned Elder Brother brought the Hengshan nun to the wineshop to drink and ruined her reputation, already a major infraction against the house rules. What's more, he keeps company with the likes of Tian Boguang, this is a complete and utter mess!"

After some time, Lao Denuo [a master of the Huashan Lodge] said: “Master Uncle,¹⁰⁴ perhaps Elder Brother Linghu Chong just met up with Tian Boguang by accident, and they aren’t really associates. Elder Brother Linghu has been drinking excessively lately, he is not thinking straight. A drunk’s actions don’t matter...”

Dingyi [the old nun and master of the Hengshan School who is responsible for the “compromised” novice] spoke up: “A drunk is three parts sober— this is a grown man, can’t he distinguish right from wrong?”

Lao Denuo replied: “Yes, yes, but we don’t know where he’s gotten to. Let the disciples find him and reprimand him, let him kowtow and apologize to Master Uncle, then present himself before my Master for more severe punishment.”¹⁰⁵

However, it soon becomes apparent that Linghu is a true hero after all. His actions toward the young nun become clear in her testimony, as do her feelings for him. He rescued her from the wicked Tian and sustained injury in a battle for her sake. Though he can certainly select and execute blasphemies with the same precision as he does moves and counter-moves, even his obscene language and colourful insults against the novice’s lodge, and especially the old nun who is her instructor, were a ruse intended to make her leave during a lull in the combat so that she might get safely away. Ultimately restored in the eyes of all for the moment, if somewhat grudgingly perhaps, Linghu achieves status as a leader within his lodge, though he does not officially assume full command. Like a genuine champion, he remains set apart, and often faces challenges alone. His relationship with the young nun appears to be a stormy one, however it must also be remembered that they are,

¹⁰⁴Apparently, it is acceptable for older female adepts to be addressed in masculine terms. This may have something to do with their asexual status as nuns, or may be a form of address reserved for female fighters who are *also* nuns. The Chinese word in the text is “*shu*” (叔) which means “uncle.” It is preceded by “*shi*” (师), which means “master, teacher, or instructor.”

¹⁰⁵This excerpt is my translation, as is the one that follows. I have not read the complete text of *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer*, however, several chapters are available for online reading. See Appendices A and B-1 for further information. To my knowledge, this book has never been fully translated.

first and foremost, fighters from opposing schools, and Linghu is wary of romance in general, and nuns in particular. Elsewhere in the story, he presents himself as something of a gambler. Nuns, he says, set him off his stride.

Later, in Chapter Eight, Linghu is meditating and anticipating a confrontation with the young nun, but is met instead by a mysterious male opponent. As we will see in a moment, Linghu's fighting style differs markedly from the (literally) underhanded tactics employed by the young Xiaobao in the early part of his career as a knight-errant:

That evening he had trouble sleeping, and so he sat cross-legged on a large stone practicing a *qigong* technique, only he felt uneasy in his mind and practicing took great effort. The slanting moonlight reflected the cliff clearly. Linghu Chong saw there "Fresh wind blowing," three large characters. Stretching out his finger he traced the vestiges of the characters on the cliff face, finishing them in a single stroke.

Suddenly, before his eyes a shadow covered the cliff face, Linghu Chong started and smoothly brought his long sword to his side, but did not completely unsheathe it. Ready to strike a backhanded blow, he called out gaily: "Little Sister Novice!" But he could not steel his resolve. Turning, he saw some distance from the mouth of the cave a man, his long, lean form garbed in a green robe.

The moonlight shone behind him, his face veiled in a green cloth so that only a pair of eyes showed. Apparently he hadn't yet seen him and Linghu Chong shouted: "Honoured emissary, who are you?" and followed along up to the cave opening, sword drawn.

Readers may focus on the hero's qualities of detachment from the more mundane concerns of life. As a reader's written comments suggested in the second chapter, this aloofness can be a compelling and admirable quality in the hero, who is someone who is "always lonely, content with... communicating with the inner self or the wilderness (mostly he is not religious and most often he has to endure)." Speaking of Linghu Chong, one man remarked:

男读者：在我最喜欢小说典型的男性角色想——令狐冲！<笑，妻子说：“你一定像‘小师妹’！”>没有，没有，没有，一定是令狐冲。[莎娜：为什么？]这是说<妻子说，不清楚>对，他不去预示去整理些，这是<停顿>对，那些虚荣，那些东西全属，那些东西——这是说他超脱离这些东西。

Male Reader: In my favourite novels, a typical male character is— Linghu Chong! <Laughter, wife says: “You’re thinking of ‘Little Sister Novice!’”> No, no, no, certainly it’s Linghu Chong. [SK: Why?] <wife speaks, unclear> Right, well, he doesn’t make [grand] predictions; he doesn’t try to make things neat and tidy. That is <pause> yes, those things that are shallow or vain, those things all belong to— that is to say, he separates himself from these kinds of things.¹⁰⁶

It may be easier for the archetypal conquering hero to endure loneliness and worldly detachment, however, if his fortunes are as dependable as his fighting skills. Later in the interview, the same reader quoted above went on to say, with some admiration:

Male Reader: Sometimes you don’t care about something —you don’t care about doing this or you don’t care to struggle— they come [the things you want.] And some people do that, a lot of people do that, and they [the desired results] didn’t come. And this Linghu Chong, he never cared about anything. He just— doing his own way and don’t fight or follow other people for the right money, or something. But everything came <laugh> came to him!

The other “hero” most frequently mentioned by martial arts fiction enthusiasts was Wei Xiaobao, hero of Jin Yong’s last novel. When we first meet up with him, he is a troublemaker like Ling, but hardly a gallant knight fallen, either in fact or rumour, from the way of honour. He lives in the brothel where his mother is a singsong girl, and though he can also swear like a trooper, the words carry a much different sound and weight, coming as they do from a small boy. Interestingly, most people have strong opinions about Xiaobao, they either love or hate him. He is both an unpromising hero and a clever one, according to Klapp’s categorization (1949, 20), a juvenile Cinderella who breaks with Chinese tradition insofar as other heroes of this type —readers cited Guo Jing (郭靖) of

¹⁰⁶Male respondent, interview. 12 October 1995. Tape T95XHZ-25.

The Eagle Shooting Heroes (*She diao yingxiong zhuan*, 《射雕英雄傳》)¹⁰⁷ as an example— usually compensate for any strategic disadvantages by strength, perseverance and honesty, rather than trickery.

By contrast, Guo Jing can be thought of as occupying an intermediate position between the clever trickster and the decisive, strong hero. He is certainly brave, loyal and strong, just a bit slow on the uptake. Still, he is an admirable hero who, according to Huiyuan, exemplifies a particular kind of traditional Chinese hero, one who makes up in integrity what he lacks in natural wit:

慧元: 这个很奇怪, 中国民间故事里面是常常有的聪明女人然后嫁了一个笨的男人然后帮助他, 照顾他。 <不清楚>。 [莎娜问她笨的英雄可以吗?] 郭靖吗? <笑> 笨的英雄我觉得可以接受因为他其实不是真的笨他只是缓慢, 迟钝 <笑, 英文再说> 而后他并没有负面的 <英文解释> 他正直, 很勇敢, 很坚韧不拔 <英文解释>。

[Speaking about “stupid” heroes and clever heroines, comparing Guo Jing and Huang Rong.] CHY: It's quite strange, because Chinese stories often feature a clever woman who marries a stupid man, and she helps and looks after him. <unclear> [SK: “Is a stupid hero alright?”] Like Guo Jing, right? <laughs> I think a stupid hero is okay because often he's not really stupid, just slow. {in English: He's just a bit slow, you know! <laughs> However, he doesn't have any negative points. He doesn't have any negative features in his character. He's just slow but he's very—} He's very upright, very brave and steadfast. {in English: But he's just a bit slow. It's like, everyone can have shortcomings [shortcomings] in his personality. So it's what it is. He's not a bad person. He's a hero, he became a hero after all and he's studied very hard for his *gongfu*. He's very honest, and very loyal to his friends and his wife, and his *shifumen* [master teachers] you know, his teachers, and friends, and his parents— his mother as well. So he's a positive, I would say he's a positive hero.}¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷See Chapter Six for further discussion.

¹⁰⁸This excerpt is taken from the same interview as the previous quote. In this segment, I have included Huiyuan's comments in English in the translation only, set off by braces ({}). In the Chinese text, I have only indicated where she switched to English to explain or give examples.

However, I think that in some ways, Xiaobao may represent a process which Cawelti calls “stereotype vitalization,” in which a character is made to embody traits that are normally contrary to its type as an instrument of generic innovation, such as can be seen, for example, in the more unwholesome habits of Sherlock Holmes, in particular his addiction (1976, 11). By foregrounding human weakness, such devices bring the hero closer to the villainy he opposes, which makes for a narrative with shadings of motivation, instead of a black-and-white tale in which complete good triumphs over absolute evil—even though this action may well move the generic goalposts and upset the basic formula of the game in the opinion of some readers.¹⁰⁹

The Deer and The Cauldron is set in the mid- to late-seventeenth century, at the beginning of the Qing dynasty. China is in the control of the barbarian Manchus, and the story opens on two different fronts: the underworld that Xiaobao is part of, and the now underground life of a few intellectuals who are close friends and Ming partisans, and who lament the passing of the Chinese dynasty. As discussed in Chapter One and earlier in this chapter, Jin Yong’s mastery of the vernacular idiom accommodates a variety of registers and scenes of interaction. In these excerpts from John Minford’s translation of the opening chapters, we move from scholars reciting poems with double meanings as veiled protest to miscreants using double entendre and more obvious insults in order to stir up more immediate confrontations. I have chosen rather lengthy selections in order to emphasize the stark contrasts between the relatively genteel domesticity of dissident scholars and the

¹⁰⁹See Minford (1993, 8) for excerpts from the postscript to his last book, in which Jin Yong addresses readers’ objections to the anti-heroic nature of Xiaobao.

world of the “rivers and lakes.” First, three scholarly friends are gathered together, and one makes a toast:¹¹⁰

Gu Yanwu raised his winecup and, in ringing tones, recited the following couplet:

The cool wind sways not me, howe'er it blow;
For me the bright moon still shines everywhere.

“That’s a splendid couplet of yours, Liuliang,” he said. “Whenever I drink wine now, I have to recite it. —And do it justice too,” he added, with a ceremonious flourish of his wine-cup.

In spite of Lü Liuliang’s patriotic unwillingness to serve, a local official, impressed by what he had heard of Lü’s reputation, had once sought to recommend him as a “hidden talent” meriting a summons to the Court for suitable employment; but Lü had made it clear that he would die rather than accept such a summons, and the matter had been dropped. Some time later, however, when another high-ranking official sent forward his name as a “distinguished scholar of exceptional merit,” Lü realised that his continued refusal would be construed by the Court as an open slight, with fatal consequences for himself and perhaps his family. Accordingly, he had himself tonsured (though not in fact with any intention of becoming a real monk), whereupon the government officials were finally convinced of his determination and ceased urging him to come out of his retirement.

Gu Yanwu’s enthusiasm for Lü’s somewhat pedestrian couplet sprang from the fact that it contained a hidden message. In Chinese the word for ‘cool’ is *qing* (the word chosen by the Manchus for their new ‘Chinese’ Dynasty) and the word for ‘bright’ is *ming* (the name of the old Chinese Dynasty they had supplanted). So the couplet Gu recited could be understood to mean:

The Qing wind sways not me, howe'er it blow;
For me the Ming moon still shines everywhere (Minford 1993, 19-20).¹¹¹

¹¹⁰See the Appendix for a “Note on the Electronic Texts.” Minford’s translation aptly captures the very different ambience and intent of the two scenes. I highlight the scene in which we are introduced to Xiaobao because it illustrates how far removed he is from any sense of chivalrous conduct. Readers emphasized that a real hero with proper training would *never* resort to Xiaobao’s techniques. The excerpts’ original orthography and punctuation have been maintained.

¹¹¹This part of Minford’s translation seems to be somewhat more explicit than in the Chinese text, probably for the benefit of western readers. For Chinese readers, the cool/bright, Qing/Ming association would not require much, if any, elaboration.

Next, the second excerpt brings us to a pleasure house in Yangzhou. A group of salt smugglers have stormed the establishment, looking for a member of a rival triad among the “decent” salt merchants availing themselves of the brothel’s various amenities. The ruffian they are looking for got drunk and insulted their illustrious company, an offense that requires swift and painful reckoning. They try to enter one room, and are violently — and in one case fatally — resisted by a fellow with a bushy beard named “Whiskers” (who will become young Trinket’s travelling companion). The leader of the smugglers confronts him and Trinket arrives on the scene to avenge an affront to his mother, demonstrating fighting tactics that, though not elegant, are certainly effective:

At this point the ringleader [of the smugglers] stepped forward and peered into the side-room: in the dim light he was just able to make out the form of a great bewhiskered fellow sitting on the bed, his head wrapped in a white turban. There did not seem to be any trace of a scar on his face, and he was most definitely not Triad (or was it turtle?) Jia [the person the smugglers were looking for.]

“That was no mean feat, sir!” exclaimed the older fellow. “Might I have the honour of knowing your name?”

“Your own father’s name’ll do me fine!” barked the man. “Just call me dad! Why, me young whippersnapper, have you even forgotten your own father’s name?”

At this one of the singsong-girls in attendance could not help giggling. One of the smugglers weighed in and slapped her smartly twice across the face. The unfortunate woman began sobbing and snivelling.

“What’s the big joke, you dirty slut!” snarled the smuggler. She was far too scared to reply.

A lad of twelve or thirteen came running out from the side of the hall, crying:

“You dare hit my mum, you rotten turtle! May you be struck by lightning and your hands fall off, your tongue rot, your belly fill with pus, your guts drop out, your...”

The smuggler (who wasn’t going to stand for this) went for the boy, but he darted behind one of the salt-merchants. The smuggler’s left hand smashed into the merchant instead and sent him flying, while with his right he swung round and began pounding away at the boy’s back. The singsong-girl (whose giggling had caused all the trouble) cried out in alarm:

“Spare the boy, sir!”

But the boy was a crafty little blighter and had already ducked down between the smuggler's legs. On his way he reached up, grabbed hold of the man's balls and squeezed them for all he was worth. The smuggler let out a great howl of pain; by now the boy was well out of his reach (58).

Most readers who liked Xiaobao readily admitted that he was not much of a hero: his martial skills are as unprepossessing as his shady background. Also, as Jade suggested, his reluctance to come to the aid of Ming sympathizers may well stem from the fact that, as the son of a prostitute, his own cultural heritage is somewhat suspect. As the almost direct antithesis of the loyal, honest hero who contends tirelessly against the enemies of chivalry, Xiaobao survives by cunning rather than courage. In the following excerpt, a male fan who cited Xiaobao as his favourite character paints an unflattering but accurate portrait of this picaresque anti-hero. The interview took place with a group of other students, all of whom were at least five years older than this reader, a graduate student in his mid-twenties from Malaysia. The small group of readers numbered about six people,¹¹² including me, and we were all crowded into an over-furnished office. While he was speaking, the only Chinese woman reader in the room sat listening intently. As I discuss in Chapter Six, this woman displayed interesting and complex tactics for claiming the floor from her more verbose colleagues. Not only did she keep up a steady stream of quiet and excited commentary throughout the discussion, but she helped to make sure that more reticent speakers, like the Malaysia student, had their say. However, as this exchange shows, the way of the trickster is not confined to either masculine characters or conversation and, it struck me then that if Xiaobao had come alive for a moment in their delighted chat, he had most probably

¹¹²The woman's husband was also in the room, though he did not participate in the interview itself. He observed, and his laughter can be heard on the tape, along with that of the other participants. The total number of people in the room at any one time averaged between five and six.

whispered in *her* ear since, with half a dozen well-timed words, she not only stole the floor, but also had if not the last laugh, then certainly one of the biggest:

男读者：他不是一定的英雄，他是一个很平凡的人物，不合可——可以考到好象是一个——真不象作里面英雄。虽然他的功夫也是平凡吧，一般的人。
<女读者：“但是文挺好。”>不，他这是人比较精巧，头脑比较的颖慧<笑，女读者说：“很清楚。”>对，所以你看的... <不清楚>

女读者说，开玩笑：“你是小宝，是吧！”<人家都哈哈大笑。>

Male Reader: He's not exactly a hero, he's a very common sort of character, not suitable, you can — you can see how he doesn't really seem like a hero from his behaviour. Also his martial arts skills are pretty ordinary. <Female Reader: "But he presents himself pretty well —" [i.e., he's basically educated, sophisticated]> No, he's the sort of person who is ingenious, his mind is clever and precocious. <laughter, Female Reader says: "Oh, very clear."> Yes, so you can see...<noise, pages turning, unclear>

Female Reader <teasing>: "You're Xiaobao, aren't you!" <loud laughter from everyone>¹¹³

Although many kungfu novel fans said that they liked the way women were portrayed in Jin Yong's novels, a point I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Six, they did not tend to discuss heroines in as much detail, or with the same relish. The same held for villains, only perhaps to an even greater extent. Frequently, villains were not actually named, though readers did sometimes indicate that, although good and evil were sharply delineated in most novels, sometimes with Jin Yong it was hard to tell immediately, and often it took a few chapters before a knave's true colours showed through his carefully managed veneer:

[Writing about *The Smiling Proud Wanderer*]: Jin Yong has given a theme in that the virtues of people can not be judged from where they come, be it a 正人 [zhengmen, "(someone) on the side of right"] or a 邪道 [xiedao, "(someone who) has evil ways"]. The most disgusting character in this novel, 岳不群 (Yue Buqun), appeared as a 正人君子 [a man of honour, a gentleman] at the first half of the novel.

¹¹³Group interview. 12 October 1995. Tape T95VAR-26.

In Jing Yong's novels, some of the 坏人角色 [villains] are not very 清楚 [clear]. Most interesting characters are between 正 [upright] and 邪 [wicked].¹¹⁴

Fictional heroines merit a study of their own, and as such is a project beyond the scope of the present work. One of the questions I would like to explore along these lines is whether and to what degree both female and male readers perceive a continuum of feminine heroic action. Also, if such a continuum exists, what sorts of characters mark its limits? I suggest that I would need to look at contemporary authors' innovations in feminine characterization, as well as the sorts of traditional heroine models which are available in folklore and literature. Perhaps the fictional heroine in kungfu novels, like traditional romance fiction and the heroine of folklore, does not really form a sharply defined tradition: her gallant company has been underground for so long and assumed so many guises that she has mastered the element of surprise and just turns up in the fray of the reader's engaged attention. Perhaps her emotions prevent her from realizing her true martial potential, and her ultimate concern for relationships over righteousness or some other aspect of her existence within a patriarchal story-world hinder her progress toward higher chivalric ideals, especially since those ideals, as they stand, are essentially masculine in nature and purpose. In Chapter Six, I make a very preliminary investigation of some of these questions, however, they are definitely worthy of further research. In the final section of this chapter, I attempt to survey the narrative setting and subculture that is so fundamentally important to the hero's adventures, the *jianghu*.

¹¹⁴QRE-04.

4.4 The Chinese “Greenwood”: Landscapes of Escape and Possibility

Landscapes and the names by which people navigate and reinforce their associated boundaries and frontiers are fundamental sites of signification in any culture's worldview. Place-names in ballads, for example, may evoke memories connected to actual places known to listeners and singers. Conversely, they may metaphorically designate a juxtaposition of larger concerns, such as the displacement associated with death or with losing one's way —thereby temporarily forfeiting a sense of rootedness in the spatial/geographical and temporal/moral order of the community— or the encroachment into otherworldly or unknown realms (Narváez 1991b, 338, 354; Nicolaisen 1973, 309-12; Rieti 1991, 56-66). However, the landscape and its names may also “fix” people both spatially and spiritually, providing them with associations that transfer to other contexts, triggering thoughts which may cause individuals to feel the need to remember their world and restore themselves and their places in relation to it (Basso 1988).

Also, according to Hall, attitudes toward landscape, distance and space and how they change over time and across and within cultures may be discerned by reading literature not only as a system through which an author structures particular content, but also “as a source of data on man's use of his senses” (1969, 94-100). This way of reading literature was illustrated in an earlier chapter in which a reader mentioned that he experienced delight in reading and re-reading *Dream of the Red Chamber* because, among other things, he could view its gardens and pavilions again and again. As a student of architecture whose study included the analysis of classical historical and literary documents in order to understand ancient urban environments, his mind's eye was finely attuned to particular

issues of space and landscape. Likewise a woman reader described how reading is for her a kind of landscape of possibility, a backdrop or scenario across which alternative historical outcomes may be enacted.

Radway suggests that the women romance readers in her study identified not only with the fictional heroine, but also with the setting:

...in a complex process of world construction through which the reader actively attributes sense to the words on a page. In doing so, that reader adopts the text's language as her own and appears to gesture toward a world she in fact creates. Because the process must necessarily draw more or less on the language she uses to refer to the real world, the fictional world created in reading bears an important relationship to the world the reader ordinarily inhabits (1987, 187).

In other words, the meanings associated with the language of the novel and the world it describes are more or less contemporary with the readers' own experiences and associations. In this way, Radway argues, the texts create a narrative landscape by telling a story about it, or rather, the women bring the world to life and chart its dimensions in the act of reading (188). For readers of martial arts fiction, I think the process of establishing a vantage point in relation to the story-world is similar, but there are some important differences. First, although the *jianghu*, as many readers have remarked, is a fascinating and colourful world —like the reverse side of an unlined tapestry where the ordered flower gardens, temples and harmoniously placed animals belie any hint of the chaos beneath in which the vibrant threads tangle and cross with a life all their own— it is a dangerous one whose workings are distinct from the normal social order. As already noted, Zhongning remarked at the start of our very first interview: “*Ren zai jianghu, shen bu you ji* (人在江湖，身不由己),” that is, “a person within the ‘rivers and lakes’ cannot control himself.” He may have been referring to both the unrestrained dispositions of many of the characters who inhabit the novels themselves, as well as to the addictive qualities of reading which

temporarily direct the reader away from family, friends— and sometimes even the most basic concerns of everyday existence, such as rest and food.¹¹⁵

Like the desirable but double-edged feelings readers may experience in response to a text's challenge to their (dis)belief systems as noted in the previous chapter, *jianghu* also carries connotations that, though captivating, are not entirely positive. For example, Yubin said of kungfu fiction and its world:

HYB: What interests me is the emotional communication. I just feel I share some escapades <unclear> with the main character. When he fights, it seems I am fighting as well! <laughs> My sadness and happiness are totally dependent on his fate. And of course a further feature should be the heroism, and heroism is supported by other superficial things, like martial arts, high skill in martial arts. But the opposite kind [of fiction], as I said, seems to have left society or reality if you like, so far. So the readers, the audience can easily think—think into a sort of different dimension. A totally martial dimension, a supernatural dimension or—

[SK: So would you say that *jianghu* is more concerned with this type as a concept?] Yes, but I think this one is a development from *jianghu*, because *jianghu* this word is really neutral. Even derogatory sometimes. If you say “*chuan jianghu*” (闯江湖), basically, “to roam, make one’s way through the ‘rivers and lakes’ ” “*zenme jianghu*” [possibly, “(what/such) a tramp (这么江湖)], you really don’t understand what colour it has! Commendable or derogatory! <laughs>

[SK: Can you give me a definition of that term ?] *Jianghu* ? <laughing> I think it deserves the space of a book! *Jianghu* as a noun it can mean a society, a communication, a special communication. It’s certainly different from “black society” [*hei shehui* (黑社会), “the underworld.”]¹¹⁶ because “black society” is full of crime, but in *jianghu* it can be filled with whatever. It is a blend of very opposite things, can be criminal can be heroic, you know that sort of thing sometimes are blended.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵See Chapter Three for a discussion of addictive reading habits.

¹¹⁶As a designation, “black society” does not carry any racial overtones to my knowledge. Rather, it refers to institutions and behaviour which are outside the law. As another example, *hei shou dang* (黑手党, “party of the black hand”) is a name for the Mafia.

¹¹⁷Excerpt taken from the same interview as Yubin’s earlier quote.

Secondly, *jianghu* as a spatial designation and a symbolic geography is a realm of wonder that is far removed from these readers' daily lives and normal language registers. The world of the 'rivers and lakes,' as the converse of the social tapestry, gives strength and distinction to the interwoven significance of face, politeness and communicative expectations. Although these rules are suspended among close friends, for example, the *jianghu* is a world upside-down where readers are surrounded by frequently noble but unrefined strangers who play out their most deadly feuds and closest friendships before their very eyes.

I was interested to learn that chivalric fiction signified more to readers than the stuff with which it was ostensibly concerned, namely, martial arts. Most readers emphasized that a poor kungfu novel was a work that could be described as "all kungfu, no novel." In fact, relatively few had an interest in martial arts beyond the tales themselves, and many stressed that they generally skipped over the fight scenes. Of the people who could be described as at least technical aficionados of martial disciplines, fewer still spoke of actively following any kind of *qigong* regimen at any point in their lives, though some might have felt embarrassed to discuss the more esoteric aspects of Chinese physical culture with a westerner. The combat scenes are replete with shifting descriptions of stances and moves, with names that evoke poetic yet deadly force, such as "Piercing the Stork in Flight" ("*Ti liao jian bai guan shu chi*," 提撩剑白鹤舒翅). Other names express straightforward technical strategies, like "Plunging to Lunge in Quick Succession" ("*Jin bu lian huan dao*," 进步连环刀).¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸These are Mok's (1993, 161) renderings of Jin Yong's set move designations. Readers have said that while they are highly evocative of the names of actual movement sequences in various martial disciplines, the descriptions differ slightly and many readers feel that for the most part the fictional moves are, as Fang Jing put it: "perfectly impossible."

Besides providing readers with “ringside seats” from which to watch pitched battles between the agents of good and evil, martial arts fiction appears also to give them a place from which to reflect on their own cultural values, as if beyond the ‘rivers and lakes’ they can see home. By speaking to the essential aspects of friendship and enmity, freedom and obligation, for some readers, kungfu novels, like other forms of inversion, seem to “remind us of the arbitrary condition of imposing an order on our environment and experience, even while they enable us to see certain features of that order more clearly simply because they have turned insight out.” (Babcock 1978, 29).

From the foregoing discussion, it should be clear that *jianghu* is a pivotal concept in martial arts fiction. Without it, several readers suggested, the genre could not exist in its present form and would have evolved into something else. Almost without exception, when I asked respondents in e-mail or taped interviews what they thought *jianghu* signified they said that the subject merited a book or a thesis all on its own. Parallels can be found in other spatially open-ended domains, notably “the greenwood” or “the hills” of balladry where fugitives found refuge and those that made the laws —or a pretence of their enforcement— feared to tread (Keen 1987, 2), and the open road:

Jianghu 江湖, like *xia*, is a keyword in Martial Arts fiction. It signifies a whole Chinese ‘world,’ with its own way of life, its own argot. To a certain extent where the Chinese say “on the water” we would say “on the road.” It is the world of the travellers, street performers (our circus folk), people who have to live by their wits, outsiders, sometimes hermits, nearly always elements considered disreputable by society.... Above all this ‘brotherhood’ exists in defiance of the stifling conventions and hypocrisy of Confucian society, it brings together men and women whose quest for freedom has driven them outside society (Minford 1993, 9-10).

In Chapter Six, I look at *jianghu* as a gendered construction from the perspective of women readers. Although most women concur that the *jianghu* represents a space full of potential in which “everything — anything— can happen. And everyone can meet, you can

meet anybody you like or you don't like,"¹¹⁹ a female character's potential may be subject to constraints and trials that are different and more pervasive than any her male compatriots might encounter. Still, as Meifang describes, women and the feminine element are important to the overall harmony of the outlaw society, a significance that is perhaps heightened by the concern with the connection between cosmology and martial training:

CMF: *Jianghu*— <voice contemplative> it could be, a good people, they fancy for solving the problem, unequal problem, by physical forces, but not by war. By war, if they resort to war, I don't call it *wuxia xiaoshuo*. They believe in, in training your will and break the extent [push the boundaries] of your physical power. And a kind also— I think most important— the *yinyang* element is working in *wuxia xiaoshuo*. You should try to cooperate *yin* and *yang*. But certainly, it's like in Jin Yong's *xiaoshuo*, some will just insist to promote the *yang* and forget the *yin*, they become a kind of twisted person....And so most *yin* and *yang* element come to play in *jianghu*, and so that's people— And the most fascinating thing is there should be somebody who is a master of medicine, something of Chinese medicine coming into play.¹²⁰

In a similar vein, many readers said that they enjoyed kungfu novels, especially those of Jin Yong, as much for the way they presented information about Chinese philosophy, beliefs about physical culture and worldview as for the historical allusions and outright adventure. Unfortunately, these aspects were the most difficult for readers to elaborate on. My understanding at this point is that the main heroes of the novels are usually not religious themselves, although their mentors may have closer religious ties. More frequently, however, it appears that masters favour reclusive lifestyles, living in the mountains as independent ascetics sought out by prospective students. Also, it is not uncommon for villains and minor “shady” or potentially treacherous characters to pass themselves off as

¹¹⁹CHUNG Huiyuan, interview. 4 September 1995. Tape T95CHYb-17.

¹²⁰CHEN Meifang, interview. 5 September 1995. Tape T95CMFb-20.

fighting monks or priests. Martial clans themselves, as was demonstrated in *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer*, are often organized around particular sects. In future studies, I would like to explore these issues in greater depth, as well as the importance of the master-student/disciple relationship to readers' evaluations of the development and disposition of the hero.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has been concerned with an in-depth investigation of the diachronic and synchronic analysis of an indigenous genre of Chinese popular fiction, properly called *wuxia xiaoshuo* (武俠小說) or martial arts fiction. I have provided some historical background which traces the development of the genre, as well explored the characteristics of the Chinese chivalric hero and his environment and compared the Chinese knight-errant and outlaw hero to characters from other cultural traditions. Because of readers' overwhelming preference for his work, however, I have dealt almost exclusively with characterizations and commentaries on the work of Jin Yong. Future studies might examine more closely audience responses to other writers such as Gu Long, Liang Yusheng and Huanzhulouzhū. In the next chapter, I explore the history and development of two other genres whose principal themes and motifs often find their way into the 'rivers and lakes' even though they also stand as distinct genres in their own right, romance and detective or mystery fiction.

Chapter Five: Romance and Detective Fiction

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the historical development and some of the central themes in Chinese romance and detective fiction. Readers in this study usually referred to Chinese romance fiction as either *yanqing xiaoshuo* (言情小說), *wenyi xiaoshuo* (文藝小說), or sometimes simply “love stories” (*aiqing xiaoshuo*, 愛情小說). Readers from Taiwan seemed to employ *wenyi xiaoshuo* slightly more frequently in their descriptions. Also, “love stories” may represent a phonemic substitution. For example, Link cites a subgenre of bittersweet or tragic romance fiction popular especially in the early decades of this century called *aiqing xiaoshuo* (哀情小說) which distinguished romances with sad endings from the normally happier denouements found in the *yanqing* variety (1981, 62-64).

Readers generally called detective fiction *zhentan xiaoshuo* (偵探小說), although some also combined this term with *zhiguai xiaoshuo* (志怪), which is roughly analogous to “mystery” or “fantasy” fiction.¹²¹ In particular, readers spoke of fiction that involved both detection and supernatural elements in these terms, using the labels “detective” and “mystery” almost interchangeably. It is possible that some readers felt that traditional detective fiction had strong ties to tales of the supernatural, a connection I explore in some depth in a later section of this chapter.

¹²¹See Zeitlin (1993, 4).

It should be understood that the both the readers and the genres discussed in this chapter do not comprise a clearly delineated audience or tradition to the same extent as is the case for martial arts fiction and its readership. For one thing, only fifteen men and women who participated in my field research indicated either romance or detective fiction as their first or primary choice of genre, a combined figure that represents less than twenty percent of the total number of readers polled, as compared with forty-eight percent who indicated a primary interest in martial arts fiction. However, although they are in the minority in this particular sample, they still constitute important audiences. As already stated, my treatment of each genre reflects the emphases found in the ethnographic data I was able to gather. Future studies focusing primarily on Chinese romance or detective fiction readers are certainly called for, especially with regard to the influences of western translated fiction on these two genres.

Interestingly, a total of forty-one readers, twenty-six men and fifteen women, stated that they often read *inclusively*, and incorporated either detective or romance fiction (or both) within the scope of their normal reading repertoires.¹²² Overall then, in contrast to the relatively small number of exclusive fans of any genre, inclusive reading patterns, which included the consumption of detective and mystery fiction, were found in almost fifty-two percent of respondents. This finding lends support to Cawelti's assertion that certain generic themes or shadings, such as "mystery" may lend themselves to other genres in order to advance the plot, and as such are borrowed into other formulaic patterns quite frequently (1976, 41). It is possible that some readers detect a similar fluidity of generic boundaries, and they derive considerable pleasure by negotiating them through their everyday reading selections.

¹²²See Chapter Six for a more detailed discussion of gendered reading preferences.

In the previous chapter, I mentioned that supernatural elements or a more mundane mystery, such as a theft or the reasons behind a vendetta, might come to light in a kungfu novel. Furthermore, I also discussed readers' consensus that every good martial arts novel included a certain degree of romance, and noted that even a traditional detective novel was likely to unravel the threads of some situation involving romantic tension or jealousy, and the central sleuth and moral authority might be surrounded by chivalrous knights or slightly shadier members of the *jianghu* community who do his bidding. Likewise, traditional romance novels might contain knight-errant figures who, though generally fighters and not lovers themselves, are instrumental in uniting or reuniting star-crossed couples (Liu 1967, 117).

The first section of this chapter concentrates on an analysis of romance fiction, while in the second I explore traditional detective and mystery formulas. Unfortunately, despite the fact that some western protagonists and authors, notably Conan Doyle and his stories of Sherlock Holmes ("*Fu er mo si*," "福爾摩斯") have greatly influenced both the shaping of the genre and its patterns of reception, especially since the May Fourth era (Lee and Nathan 1985, 386; Link 1985, 253),¹²³ a detailed treatment of the influence of western fiction is beyond the scope of this ethnographic work. However, I think that additional ethnographic research among Chinese readers of western detective fiction represents a path of inquiry that has not been fully explored, particularly since figures such as Holmes —despite what some might call his quintessential "Englishness" or perhaps "English eccentricities" as understood against a backdrop of Victorian middle-class culture— seem to have been so successfully transposed into another cultural milieu to the extent that some of the readers in

¹²³See also Kinkley's (1985, 90, 94-95) comparison of Holmes and traditional detective characters like Judge Bao.

this study spoke of their surprise when they first learned that Holmes was *not* originally a Chinese character. Nevertheless, I want to focus my attention at this point on a discussion of some key aspects in the development of Chinese romance fiction as seen through the eyes of a few of its many readers. Although some similarities can be drawn between western and Chinese romantic novels and the preferences of their respective female readerships in particular, I will also point out a number of important differences in reader aesthetics.

5.2 Romance Fiction: A Dialectic of “Exceptional Feelings”

In contrast to the code of chivalric righteousness as it is expressed in martial arts fiction, the ideals of *qing* (“feelings, sensuality, love,” 情) according to Ko traditionally signified a far wider range of emotional responses than those normally associated with romantic attachment. Furthermore, *qing* itself did not form “a unified body of doctrine” that could be fixed along particular narrative lines: like a bittersweet ending, *qing* resisted closure and remained open to interpretation. The increasing concern with *qing* from the seventeenth century onwards emphasized women’s superior capacity to experience emotions in all their subtle nuances. At the same time, it reinforced the concept of “separate spheres” and the idea that women, as the inner-directed, emotionally-guided sex, were unsuited to active lives in the outside world (1994, 111).

This same divided sense of the place of romance exists to some extent between the fans and non-fans of novels that could be classified as primarily romantic. On the one side, some readers dismissed romances as “books for ladies” and characterized the genre and its imagined readership as “too emotional.” On the other, readers who enjoyed romances emphasized the genre’s concern with people and relationships, not just love. Speaking

particularly of novels by well-known Hong Kong author Yi Shu (亦舒), one female reader in her early twenties from Malaysia described the novels as realistic in their characterization, a statement which stands in direct refutation of non-fans' most pointed criticism, that the characters — especially the women — are too dreamlike and perfect. In her questionnaire responses, she described the most important features of a good book, as well as typical male and female characters in the following terms:

我想最主要的因素应该是人物都有情有性，比较能够引起共鸣，启发人思考。<英文解释小说的人物要栩栩如生。>

男 - 有文化，有思想。感性以及有固定职业。

女 - 性情中人，易感，外冷内热，独立，教育水平蛮高，对物质品味蛮高。
<英文解释。>

I think that the most important factor is that the characters must all have emotions and personalities. They should be able to strike a responsive chord, and make people think. <In English, writes: "Every character must have life in it.">...

Men (characters): cultured, thoughtful, perceptive, and has permanent employment

Women (characters): mediating temperament, emotional, outwardly cool and inwardly warm, independent, educated, expensive tastes. <In English, writes: "Both very typical city-born person with exceptional feelings toward life.">¹²⁴

For critics of the genre, however, whether readers who are disinclined toward romances in particular, or scholars who are dismissive of this type of contemporary popular fiction in general, works which exemplify the "lucrative 'pulp fiction' of love and romance set against the middle-class commercialism of Taipei or Hong Kong" (Lee and Nathan 1985, 391) are generally given short shrift. However, it is just this profile of the urban, educated, economically self-sufficient, if not moderately well-off, sensitive

¹²⁴QRH-17.

character with which the genre seems most keenly concerned, and which perhaps marks its place within a larger romantic tradition to the degree that such a continuum *can* be founded on a basis as dynamic as that signified by constructs such as “emotional sensibility.” In order to understand the significance of “exceptional feelings” to a genre that is itself capable of inspiring deeply positive or negative reactions in readers, it is necessary to look first at an earlier popular tradition as well as a novel that would become a universally beloved classic which both fulfilled and challenged the notion of “romance” on a grand scale, *Honglou meng* (《紅樓夢》) or *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

5.2.1 Scholars and Beauties, Symmetry and *Qing*

By the seventeenth century a genre of popular romance called “scholar-beauty” (*caizi jiarén*, 才子佳人) fiction had developed into a well-established literary form with widespread audiences. The label basically describes the occupation and appearance of its principal characters, though as I discuss in this section, the heroine in such stories is usually also quite scholarly and the hero is often as delicately beautiful as his lady. In contrast to the complementary but still largely asymmetrical romantic themes found in much of martial arts fiction, which may be at least partially due to the genre’s situation within a world whose main signifiers —courage, loyalty, fighting skill— are predominantly physical rather than intellectual pursuits, the popular romances of this period are characterized by the almost perfect symmetry of their protagonists’ superior physical, emotional and intellectual attributes, as well their social standing. In the scholar-beauty configuration, each character completes the “corresponding image” (*duixiang*, 對象) of his or her predestined mate. In particular, their emotional and poetic sensibilities are especially well-refined, thereby forming a perfect meeting of minds and hearts despite the

machinations of an imperfect world, not unlike the classical conception of (male) literati friendships or companionate marriages between scholarly men and women (McMahon 1995, 99; Ko 1994, 183-85).

McMahon suggests that the provenance of the genre can be traced back to stories of the famous Han dynasty lovers Sima Xiangru and Zhuo Wenjun,¹²⁵ as well as Yuan and Ming dramas such as the *Romance of the Western Chamber* (*Xixiang ji*, 《西廂記》) and *Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting*, 《牡丹亭》). Furthermore, just as two distinct subgenres of martial arts fiction emerged, one emphasizing martial success through physical development, the other through metaphysical cultivation and supernatural assistance which tended to merge in many contemporary works, likewise there are two traditions of “scholar-beauty” romances, the chaste and the erotic, whose generic distinctions and devices also intermingled in later novels, a point I will return to shortly. However, I want to first outline the main differences which obtain in chaste and erotic romance fiction.

Basically, the two traditions differ primarily in three areas. First, the two subgenres appear diametrically opposed in their respective handling of sexuality, both in manner and frequency of expression. In chaste romances, there is little or no explicit sexual description. The lovers are more a “matching couplet” than a couple, and their passion, though ardent, is expressed through the restrained and disciplined medium of classical poetry. As McMahon puts it: “...the intercourse of the lovers is verbal, modeled on the polite medium of the written word, through which the youths pass the test of marriage by that time-honored means of establishing one’s worth, poetic expression” (1995, 123).

¹²⁵Not surprisingly perhaps, this story also has a long-standing place in oral tradition. See Hensman (1971, 107-26) for one version of this well-known tale.

By comparison, although the heroine of an erotic romance might be basically chaste herself, and so ultimately rewarded for her relative virtue with the rank of “first wife” or at least “most favoured concubine” in a polygamous household, the male protagonist of these novels not only indulges his appetites through many vividly described liaisons, but also often plays his various women off against each other. This point relates to the second difference between the two subgenres: the one affirms any symmetrical equivalence that may exist between the hero and heroine, while the other actively subverts domestic power relations. The deliberate introduction into the narrative of an asymmetrical relationship between the man and his wives and between the wives themselves is not present in the chaste novels. In those narratives, even in cases where the hero marries his capable sweetheart *and* her faithful maid —often because the heroine does not want to be parted from her devoted lady-in-waiting and wants to see her set up in a “good situation” — the women do not succumb to feelings of jealousy. The hero in a chaste romance likewise presents a complementary figure in the household, or may even appear subordinate to his wives’ harmonious administration of domestic affairs. The central male character in an erotic romance plays a pivotal rather than supporting role.¹²⁶

As a brief aside, the motif of the hero marrying the lady and her maid also exists in folklore and popular drama. Again, however, it is necessary to point out that the plots and characters found in many of these popular tales and performances might not be called entirely “chaste” in the strictest sense. In my earlier research, for example, a number of Chinese respondents I interviewed mentioned “The Story of the White Snake” (“*Bai she*

¹²⁶This essential binary opposition between chaste and erotic as (excesses) of containment and consumption is explored through the analysis of a range of novels and gendered character-types in McMahon’s work, particularly in the fifth (99-125) and sixth chapters (126-49) respectively.

zhuan,” 《白蛇傳》) in which the maid, who is often called “Xiaoqing” (小青) or “Little Green,” comes to reside with her mistress after her ill-fated marriage to a mortal— although the exact nature of her relationship to her mistress’ husband was usually unspecified in the oral accounts I recorded. Similarly, in the eyes of some of the people I interviewed, the maid from *Romance of the Western Chamber* provides another example. Clearly, the maid does not let traditional morality stand in the way of good sense. In this case, the servant’s scheming succeeds in securing a happy match with the hero for her mistress, and simultaneously assures her own future as concubine.¹²⁷

Finally, there are important differences in the treatment of cross-dressing. In the chaste romances, it is a device which demonstrates especially the heroine’s equality and peerless spirit in relation to her feminine contemporaries who themselves could never aspire to the same level as a man. Her successful disguise, which may be further reinforced at some point in the story with her beloved’s temporary adoption of feminine accoutrements or mistaken female identity, serves to erase or at least significantly mitigate the social constraints of gender by constituting the heroine not as the hero’s helpmate, but as his equal, if not his *better*.¹²⁸ Conversely, in a pattern not unlike comic ballads in western tradition which feature men disguising themselves as women, cross-dressing in the erotic romances takes on very different connotations and goals: the hero usually adopts feminine guise as a ruse, his objective less gender transcendence or effacement as subjugation

¹²⁷See Kozar (1993, 173-75, 281-93). For an overview of how each story has changed refer to Lai (1992) and Lu (1976, 95-98, 162, 182, 390).

¹²⁸See also Chow’s (1993a, 112-14) discussion of *duixiang* as a correspondence that intentionally transcends gender and displaces notions of feminine identity.

through heterosexual and/or homosexual seduction (McMahon 1995, 99, 113, 115; Duval and Stephenson 1984, 5-6).¹²⁹

Concerning the chaste tradition specifically, McMahon suggests that its development may have been at least in part a political reaction designed to counter the degeneracy associated with the end of the Ming Dynasty and emphasize the chastity of (Han) Chinese women and literary men from the scholarly class in the newly founded Qing (1995, 102, 105). In addition, although a tradition of erotic fiction was already firmly in place by the end of the Ming, Lu also cites the existence of not only chaste variants on the scholar-beauty theme, but also, more specifically, works which explored a theme of virtuous, superior love within a length of ten to twenty chapters, a feature which may have also helped to popularize this style of romantic narrative in the Qing period (1976, 232-41).

Interestingly, although a number of people described themselves as romance and detective fiction readers, most did not name a contemporary romance or detective novel as their favourite or most memorable read. In fact, unlike kungfu novel fans, very few discussed specific books and characters at all. More often than not, these distinctions went to *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which most readers cited as the forerunner of good modern romances. Because of the rather ambiguous sexuality of its narcissistic hero Jia Baoyu (賈寶玉), McMahon places this novel in a position intermediate to the two traditions I have already sketched above. That is, *Dream* is neither entirely chaste or erotic, but draws on certain conventions of each subtype (1995, 177). In the company of his many female cousins and the serving-maids who populate the gardens and pavilions around the declining splendour of the Jia family estate, Baoyu —while hardly a profligate scoundrel— is also far from the model of a serious, noble-spirited scholar. True, he is sensitive enough,

¹²⁹See also Greenhill (1995, 167-70).

indeed, many readers remarked that he is *overly* so. However he is guilty of loving not just more than one woman, but the very concept of womanhood to the extent that he actively seeks to redefine the social boundaries which his own masculinity and position as the only son in a family of women have enjoined upon him. By his reckoning, women are superior creatures, it may be said, by virtue of their gender, that is, by the purity inherent in their essential natures.

Moreover, though certainly not homosexual —he is on intimate terms with his maid, falls in love with one cousin but ends up partially discharging his filial and conjugal duties by marrying another cousin in accordance with familial wishes, and finally leaves the secular world of scholarship, service, family and impending fatherhood— Baoyu cultivates an effeminacy that may be viewed as a kind of protest against his lot. Baoyu's character shares some common features of disposition and behaviour with modern protagonists of Chinese fiction and film. In the words of Rey Chow, Baoyu "partakes of a narcissistic avoidance of the politics of sexuality and of gendered sociality that we would, in spite of the passive "feminine" form that it takes, call masculine" (1993a, 114).

Contemporary readers' reactions to the influence of this classical novel on characters in modern popular fiction are mixed. Again, it brings up the idea that desirable things may be double-sided in their cultural significance. Baoyu and his cousins, especially perhaps, the most consuming (and consumptive?) object of his attentions, the physically delicate but emotionally volatile Lin Daiyu (林黛玉) are memorable characters to be sure, but not necessarily thoroughly *likeable*. Despite their eccentricities, or perhaps because of them, they continue to make lasting impressions on readers' imaginations. For example, the Malaysian reader, whose ideas about what features were important to a good book and

well-drawn male and female characters have been quoted above, also stated that in the romances she preferred:

亦舒小说里的男主角都很尊重女性，像红楼梦里的贾宝玉。

The male protagonists in Yi Shu's books all treat women with respect, much like *Dream of the Red Chamber's* Jia Baoyu.

Similarly, a Taiwanese woman who completed postgraduate study and was working in the United States responded to an electronic version of my questionnaire by saying that although her favourite novel was Lin Yutang's *Moment in Peking*, the characterization bore a strong resemblance to the earlier classic:

In "Moment in Peking", Mulan's [the heroine] cousin, Redjade, is almost an exact copy of the character "Dai-yu" (Blackjade) in "The Dream of the Red Chamber" (Classical literature). Both characters are hyper sensitive, talented, intelligent, narrowminded, beautiful, and prone to physical illnesses. Both suffer the fate of mistakenly believing that their lover has married another woman, and die afterwards from shock + grief.¹³⁰

Likewise, a woman in her mid-twenties working as a travel agent in London returned a handwritten questionnaire by post in which she described, among other things, her criteria for a good novel:

好的情节，不仅曲折，吸引人，还应具有社会，人性的意义。

Must have a good plot, not only complicated, but also attractive to readers, and it should also have a social and humane meaning.

She also gave the reasons why *Dream of the Red Chamber* was her favourite, despite the fact that she considered herself primarily a reader of detective novels:

¹³⁰QRE-20. Original orthography as presented in questionnaire response.

《红楼梦》内涵丰富，人文，文学，社会意义强。

Dream of the Red Chamber, full of significance <“abundant connotations”>, strong literary, cultural and social meaning.

Finally, in response to the question about typical male and female characters, her reply again reflects the powerful effect that this novel and its main characters have in the shaping of readers' associations. Though not “typically likeable” perhaps, Baoyu and Daiyu are certainly exemplars of a heightened, powerfully resonant *type* of character.

《红楼梦》中的男性角色是宝玉，但他并不是令人喜爱的男性角色。女性角色黛玉亦然。

Dream of the Red Chamber's main male character is Baoyu, but he is not a good (example) of a typically likeable hero; the female character Daiyu is the same.¹³¹

However, it should also be understood that some readers who participated in this study, mainly those who do not read contemporary romances, did not consider *Dream of the Red Chamber* exclusively, or even primarily, a “romance” at all. Rather, the novel represents a kind of epic account of the everyday life of a family in an era now passed:

刘力：爱情故事在里面是很主要的一个部分，但是我们不能说《红楼梦》是一部爱情故事这是不一样。它是写的整个那个大家族，或者是那个时代的生活。爱情是其中的一个部分。

LL: The love story in it is a very important part, but we cannot say that *Dream of the Red Chamber* is a romance, that's not the same thing. It concerns an entire clan, or the lifestyle of an era. The love story is among its components.¹³²

¹³¹QRH-19.

¹³²LIU Li, interview. 26 October 1995. Tape T95LL-28.

In her interview, Peihong mentioned that she enjoyed reading writers such as Lin Yutang (林語堂) and Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang, 張愛玲) whose stories, though set more recently than *Dream*, are also often situated in the domestic arena of large extended families. I think that for many readers of romance novels, whether classical or contemporary, the concern with family life and the tensions between tradition and change, an individual's independence versus his or her place and connection within the shared social network of familial obligations and expectations, is a major attraction:

ZPH: I like the fiction written by Lin Yutang, and another woman writer I like is famous—Zhang Ailing. And their stories are often about very large, traditional families, families all live together, sort of like the *Honglou meng*. But— their story is more, not so long ago as *Honglou meng*'s hundreds of years, it's more recently. <pause> When you read *Honglou meng*, I think you have a little difficulty to understand the circumstance, the society at that time because it's so old. But in their novels, in Lin Yutang's and Zhang Ailing's, it's usually 1930s, 1920s— it's not so old, and I think I can understand better. I think Chinese culture is embedded in the family. By studying the family, by looking at the stories happening in a huge family, you can learn a lot about Chinese culture.¹³³

In the next segment, I look at a popular romantic genre which has strong ties to the earlier scholar-beauty tradition, a style and formula which came to be known derisively as the "Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School" (*Yuanyang hudie pai*, 鴛鴦蝴蝶派) because of the tendencies of many of its authors to rely on traditional symbolic representations of marital harmony. From romance readers' observations, I surmised that the language, themes and conventions of these earlier, urban romances which were popular during the early decades of this century, had a significant effect on the development of modern romance formulas. Although respondents stated that most modern writers use modern expressions and styles, they also affirm that there is a certain beauty or refinement present

¹³³ZHU Peihong, interview. 16 May 1994. Tape T94ZPH-05.

in the descriptions which seems to recall the earlier conventions of Chinese popular romance narratives.

5.2.2 A Note on Language

In Chapter One, I described the ability of vernacular Chinese to encompass and express a range of registers and language styles. Historically, vernacular fiction was often geared toward a mixed or moderately educated audience who may not have had a grasp of the various levels and nuances of the classical idiom. In his analysis of Butterfly fiction and its early audiences, Link describes how writers producing novels —or, more frequently, serialized instalments and short stories— which featured updated scholar-beauty themes and characters consciously rejected the western influenced “plain speech” (*baihua*, 白話) and literary styles championed by the elite writers of the May Fourth era during the 1910s and 1920s in favour of a combination of storytelling conventions and literary styles modeled on earlier classical forms, such as the *chuanqi* (傳奇) of the Tang Dynasty (1981, 58-61).¹³⁴

Although popular styles and the literatures that employed them have frequently been criticized as lacking sophistication and refinement relative to more polished works,¹³⁵ favouring verbosity over virtuosity, for example, it appears that the styles adopted by writers of popular fiction during this period not only appealed to a moderately educated readership eager for stories with a kind of traditional “ring” to them, but also suited and

¹³⁴Ch'en describes these “tales of the marvellous and usual” as the elite counterpart to the popular Tang *bianwen* discussed in Chapters One and Four (1961, 461).

¹³⁵See, for example, Idema's comments on late Ming and Qing chap literature (1974, liii-iv).

could be adapted to and exploited by the technology of the time. Readers could access materials whose tone, if not completely familiar, was at least not foreign. Furthermore, writers in this new industry could in turn establish themselves by a kind of mass-mediated literary piecework in which every character might contribute to the author's long-term reputation —and, more immediately, to his pay (Chard 1991, 10; Link 1981, 12-13, 89). Next, I investigate the different paths taken by western and Chinese heroines, as well as the importance readers attach to the use of beautiful or poignant language to express stories that are often sad, and which —for all their supposed “fictional unreality” — act like powerful folktales warning of the impossibility of total happiness if one ventures too far outside the social order. And, like folktales, such narratives frequently echo larger truths or realities for those actively engaged in their reception.

5.2.3 Butterfly Fiction and “Bodice-Rippers”: Divergences of the *Romantic Route*

At this point in the discussion, I want to draw a comparison between certain aspects of Chinese and western romance fiction. Although most western readers probably have a certain level of knowledge about “Harlequins” and other similar novels, I think it is necessary to delineate certain aspects of the history and key features of the “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly” genre, which I will refer to hereafter simply as Butterfly fiction or novels. I have purposely headed this section with reference to two essentially derogatory labels, one standing, as I said earlier, for a class of popular romantic fiction whose themes, language and content stood in opposition to many of the western-influenced literary language reforms of May Fourth writers, the other signifying the stereotypical “steamy” romance novel and/or its focal —and possibly violent— seduction scene.

My deliberate choice of these terms is intended to reflect their “outsider” usage when compared to common fan parlance. I have only ever heard western romance readers use graphic generic labels sparingly and in jest, and *none* of the Chinese readers in this study referred to romances from the first half of this century as “Butterfly fiction,” even though they might be well acquainted with the various generations of its authors, such as Zhang Ailing and best-selling Taiwanese author Qiong Yao (瓊瑤).¹³⁶ Interestingly, these labels and their accompanying connotations suggest one of the first important similarities between western and Chinese romance reader aesthetics: in accordance with Radway’s findings, both groups seem to reject explicit or over-emphasized sexual description (1987, 65, 73-74). In the case of Chinese readers, this preference appears to hold for men as well as women. For example, Zhengqi likes Qiong Yao’s romances because her descriptions are refined and “beautiful,” incorporating lines from classical poetry¹³⁷ and avoiding direct depiction of physical intimacy, while still employing contemporary language:

LZQ: She [Qiong Yao] writes LOTS of romance books, but her writing is very beautiful. [SK: “What do you mean by ‘beautiful’?”] I mean she uses lots of Chinese ancient poems.... Actually, she never describe sex or anything like that, she only describe the —how to say it? <laughs quietly> [SK: “Romance?”] Yes <pause> [SK asks about “traditional style” as descriptive conventions rather than

¹³⁶Even readers who are critical or dismissive of romance fiction have observed that “Qiong Yao is to love stories what Jin Yong is to martial arts fiction.” Also, like Jin Yong’s works, many of her books have been made into films.

¹³⁷Many readers noted that Qiong Yao’s books make use of classical poetry. Although poetry also appears in rather more limited quantities in some of Jin Yong’s tales, a number of readers found it especially prevalent in Liang Yusheng’s (梁羽生) martial arts fiction. Whether poetry appeals to readers beyond their initial recognition of its inclusion in a novel is a matter of personal taste. In general, I found that romance readers showed somewhat more open “poetic sensibilities” than kungfu novel fans, however, members of both groups felt that authors were well advised to refrain from summoning the ancient muses too often.

exact language used. LZQ confirms that Qiong Yao uses modern language.] but actually she treats this very beautifully.¹³⁸

Similarly, the male professor of biochemistry and long-time fan of Qiong Yao's works who commented on the beauty of her novels and the care with which she portrayed romantic relationships in a previous chapter, wrote: "Girls in her books are ideal for a romantic man." In his words:

I started reading novels when I was about 10. At that time, I quite like the military stories (not fairy stories), and even wanted to be a communist military commander (DON'T LAUGH). A lot of boys around me shared the same interest. (Can you find a psychological reason for this?) As I grew up, I gradually got bored with them and my favorite reading was about romances at the universities, (which was reasonable), and I am still in love with them, because I think feeling, particularly between young male and female, is just beautiful than anything else, since it is difficult to cultivate and fragile.¹³⁹

In contrast to Radway's assertion that a western romance novel is "first and foremost, a story about a woman" (1987, 64), for the Chinese readers profiled here, a romance is a novel about feelings and relationships and the conflicts and displacements that may occur when transcendent love runs up against the values of a less-than-perfect society. The heroine of the western romance may bear some similarities to the heroine of a Chinese novel: she may be beautiful, independent, resourceful and decisive in a variety of situations. However, readers' responses prompted me to consider that the focus of the Chinese heroine's trials and the final outcome of those efforts might be very different from the actions and ultimate fate of a western romantic heroine. Again, I sense that this is related, as in the heroine tradition in Chinese folklore, to the fact that the heroic woman's

¹³⁸LU Zhengqi, interview. 16 May 1994. Tape T94LZY-M-04.

¹³⁹QRE-13i.

independence is defined and constrained within a much larger social arena than her western analogue.

The typical "Harlequin heroine" might be a high-spirited lass whose main object is making the hero see her worth, while at the same time paradoxically recovering her sense of self (which the hero may have intentionally or unintentionally violated through social, emotional or sexual rejection, or even abuse) and then adapting that recovered self-esteem to fit within a circumscribed, but protected and cherished place at the hero's side (Radway 150). In complete contrast to this pattern, the heroine of a Chinese romance also may be a beauty who, despite her exemplary physical, intellectual and moral traits, is *without* her scholar for most of the time, and may in fact be parted from him forever (Chow 1993b, 476). Instead of the heroine having to put up with her man's potentially cruel masculinity until he sees the light, the lovers may share, as in the earlier scholar-beauty tradition, a chaste —or *chastened*— but attenuated symmetry that is temporally and spatially disrupted by social pressures: their only indiscretion may be that they are not meant for each other according to the forces which take precedence over individual feelings— however *exceptional* those feelings may be.

Link's reading of Butterfly romances highlights the complementarity of the lovers as in the scholar-beauty tradition, however, the lovers' remarkable natural endowments and their heightened sensitivity foreshadow their bittersweet courtship and ultimate decline, a trajectory he calls "the Romantic Route" (1981, 65-76). However, Chow finds that the tales manifest an inherent asymmetry because not only is the heroine often bereft of her *duxiang*, but Chinese romances of this type are not just "about a woman" seeking love and fulfilment through a relationship which at once binds her more firmly to patriarchal structures and delivers a limited vision of its promised comforts.

Rather, Chinese romances are often about a woman's continual negotiation and *self-negation* of her place within her family, her chosen career, her romantic ideals versus the domestic compromises and sacrifices that may be set out for her (1991, 51). As one romance reader wrote, a traditional Chinese character is one who exhibits forbearance without pride: "中國傳統刻苦耐勞沈默的個性," that is, "Chinese traditional nature is to bear hardships in silence, without complaining."¹⁴⁰ She went on to write that this profile was especially true of romantic heroines. From either analytical perspective, it appears that love does not generally win out in the end, and the heroine contends with more than convincing an individual man of her own "spunky" individuality.

To my mind, the fundamental difference between some of the traditional Chinese romances readers spoke of and the western varieties with which I am familiar may lie in the fact that they are products of very different cultural worldviews. Indeed, a "Chinese" romance which assumes a western perspective of individual agency and choice on the part of the lovers, particularly the woman whose actions and options are overdetermined by society, family and gender, suggests a culturally impossible text. Speaking of the image of "woman" and the overriding concern with "female" emotions and content in Butterfly fiction, Chow states that female characters (and, to a large extent, their readers) confront:

...interlocking *social* as well as written texts: customs, rules, taboos, and a tightly-structured extended-family system in which one constantly runs up not against "God," but against other watching, listening human beings. The ubiquitous nature of Confucianism as a monitoring social system that encompasses all aspects of Chinese cultural life means that "individual" ontological freedom, which remains to this day a valid source of resistance against systematized ideology in the West, is much more difficult to establish in China. Individual "psychology," together with the rightful priority of one's own physical existence and personal interests is, strictly speaking, irrelevant. Accordingly, when ideological systems (in the form of social pressures one continues to encounter within one's lifetime) turn unbearably

¹⁴⁰QRH-15.

oppressive, it is difficult, if not impossible, to use the notion of "individual truths" to subvert or counteract them. As a "well-bred" woman turns inside to "herself," she runs straight into the two-thousand-year-old definitions, expectations, and clichés of what she always already "is" (1991, 61).

As might be expected, most Chinese romance readers stated that their most memorable stories did not end happily, an aesthetic point that also stands in contrast to the findings of other studies (Radway 1987, 66; Heggli 1993, 13). A good story should be moving, something that "sounds the heartstrings," (*dongren xinxian*, 动人心弦), but it need not end on a happy note. Readers' observations add a new dimension to the assumptions that romance fiction is necessarily "light reading" which readers turn to for entertainment or escape, or, for that matter, that "women's fiction" is trivial or playful at all. Although this is an area with many more questions than this brief analysis of romance fiction can hope to answer, perhaps part of the "comfort" or "escape" for some readers lies in the fact that a sad ending resists complete closure, opening a space for people to deliberate and speak silently through the text and aloud through discussions with others.¹⁴¹

I consider the heroine's case again in light of gendered preferences and reading patterns in Chapter Six. In the next and final section of *this* chapter, however, I take on a case of a completely different kind and turn to a description of certain aspects of traditional detective fiction.

¹⁴¹See for example, Rofel's (1995) ethnographic study of the reception of a popular soap opera in post-Tiananmen Beijing by viewers from different occupational backgrounds, most of whom were young adults during the Cultural Revolution, the time period in which the serial was set.

5.3 Deep, Dark, Bright: Mystery and Justice in Detective Fiction

I have always felt that every artful conversation, every really connected interview, like any significant narrative event, such as the sharing of a ballad or a story, has a kind of “emotional core.” For me, some of the most significant “ethnographic moments” occur in those silences when, while trying to juxtapose and integrate the parallel stories of what I have asked with what the person I am talking to has heard and answered, we together hit upon *the* question or problem and its tale. One striking example of that occurred during my interview with Chen Meifang in Edinburgh. A bright postgraduate whose travels and studies had brought her into contact with a wide range of Chinese and translated literature, she was a woman possessed of strong aesthetic opinions on the subject of fiction, and she expressed them in an engaging, forthright conversational style. She had little use for modern Chinese poetry (“It doesn’t make any sense! It’s like it’s another language!”), and a romance, particularly one in the style of Qiong Yao’s accustomed formula, could be summed up like this:

CMF <voice deadpan>: It’s always in the early 20s, 30s, 40s, or if it’s in Taiwan, it must be in the early 40s. And it’s always, you know, a youth — to be handsome, rich, gentleman from a very prestigious family — coming from China because of the Civil War. And to Taiwan, couldn’t find a decent job, and suffer a lot of his own melancholy. Then he found, you know, a very pretty, graceful, but very poor, “has-a-lot-of-miserable-stories-to-tell” young lady. And then fight the environment, and fight with the parents <laughter> and just to be together, and figure out it’s going to be fruitless!¹⁴²

¹⁴²CHEN Meifang, interview. 5 September 1995. Tape T95CMFa-18.

Before she got into a discussion of her clandestine experiences of reading martial arts fiction in university, Meifang enumerated a list of “famous detectives” with whose stories her boyfriend was well acquainted, such as Holmes and Poirot. I realized at this moment that she equated “detective” or “detective fiction” with the logical, deductive personas of the western genre. Having “exhausted all the possibilities,” or so I thought, I began to ask her whether she had seen any operas, plays or television programs about the ancient investigator and administrator “Judge Bao” (Bao Zheng, 包拯), since most of the other readers I had spoken to up to this point were familiar with this figure through other popular media.¹⁴³ “Oh, I love that!” she said suddenly in Chinese and, switching back into English, excitedly began to tell me why:

CMF: Well, you know, it's really so weird because, I think it's so— because people at that age, when they want to justify justice, they resort [to seeking out] the power of ghosts, and most of them are the, you know, dead people became ghosts. They come back to you and report what happened to them, what you should have done certain things. It's so interesting I think, and I try to compare it with the English language literature I have read and I hardly could find the equivalent element. I start to wonder what's inside a Chinese mind, why do we treat a dead person? It seems we show fear to a dead person or we believe in some way they become a hierarchical [an authority]— <pause> and they could empower you. Also de-power you. That's the fascinating part of it. And also I really like the wisdom shown in judgment by Bao Gong. It's like, once two women were fighting for children, but at this time you know birth registration was not set up. The Bao Gong just call the little kid of five or four, and have the two women pull one of his hairs. [SK: “Like King Solomon.”] And then he knows. And I think it's quite reasonable, you try to think what's the deep side, the dark side, the bright side of human beings.

Although she first came into contact with this character through stories when she was a young girl, and later saw television serials and plays, Meifang's curiosity as to whether this

¹⁴³Although a number of readers cited Judge Bao stories as contributing to martial arts fiction involving supernaturally-tinged revenge plots, as discussed in Chapters One and Four, Meifang discussed the stories and the character of Judge Bao in the most detail.

was “real ancient history, whether this really happened”¹⁴⁴ led her to read about Judge Bao and similar figures in earlier popular literature when she went to university, and her delight has evidently remained. As I demonstrate in this section, however, the goals and methods of this traditional Chinese detective figure would shock even Holmes as completely irrational. Still, compared with this Song Dynasty magistrate, Holmes is really just a young fellow — with a lot to learn.

Readers commonly referred to the stories of Judge Bao as *Bao Gong an*, (《包公案》) or *The Cases of Judge Bao*. This appears to be a shorthand title, since there are in fact, a number of “cases” involving judges or “academicians” as principal investigators, although the most celebrated of these seems to be Bao. According to Hanan, “court case” stories date from the Song and Yuan Dynasties, and took the form of puppet plays and later oral performances. The actual term *gongan* (“public case”) appears to be a later appellation (Hanan 1981, 40). Additionally, although several scholars attest to their widespread popularity,¹⁴⁵ particularly during the Ming and to a lesser extent in the early Qing periods, there are relatively few complete collections extant.¹⁴⁶ Detailed attempts to date and compare the content of the different collections and determine their provenance and authorship or compilation have been undertaken (Ma 1975; Hanan 1980). Furthermore,

¹⁴⁴Elsewhere in the same interview, Meifang describes a story with what seems to be a variation of a “singing bone” motif. This bone takes on a frightening life of its own after people knead the bone, which has been ground into a powder, into a ball “that swallows and spits things.” The Judge apparently has to solve the murder with which the bone is associated. Aside from bones, the Judge also hears testimony from murdered revenants, whose revelations assist him in solving crimes.

¹⁴⁵See, for example, Johnson (1985, 65).

¹⁴⁶However, I understand from readers that contemporary editions of selections of tales are available, as are comic book adaptations for children.

Waltner distinguishes between Ming detective fiction and "legal casebooks" from the same era. She states that the latter "represent a genre of administrative writing," although both depict different socially constructed and nuanced interpretations of "a world view where justice prevails" (1990, 281, 284).

Western detectives and their fiction, whether from the old world or the new, originate from very different places and proceed along different lines of inquiry with manifestly different cultural rationales. According to Grella, the British-style whodunit "remains one of the last outposts of the comedy of manners in fiction," whereas the American hard-boiled flatfoot is heir to: "a mixed tradition, encompassing folk tales, medieval literature, Gothic novels, and the works of writers like Scott and Cooper" and where the former is preoccupied with class-related concerns, the latter, owing in part to a strong residual Puritan influence, is "obsessed with sin" (1980, 88, 104).

By contrast, Kinkley states that although some contemporary Chinese detective novels emulate western models, and those models have themselves periodically come under fire for their reflection of "bourgeois values": "China has known crime stories for a millennium, but what remains alive today, in operas, movies, and conversation, is the *gongan* or "criminal case" tradition, in which a renowned wise judge (such as Bao, Di or Peng) solves a difficult crime" (1985, 92). He suggests that the tradition emerged in Yuan and Ming drama, and developed later in fiction and Peking opera. Where the logical intricacies of detection are the western sleuth's main enterprise, the Chinese stories place greater emphasis on the restoration of the moral fabric of society, and just retribution against the parties whose actions disturbed the harmony of the cosmic order in the first place. He may use disguise in order to entrap a guilty person or infiltrate a criminal's space

or sphere of activity, and he views torture —judiciously applied— as a reasonable means of exacting a confession.

While both the western detective and the Chinese magistrate are primarily concerned with the discharge of justice, they differ greatly in the means they use to get there:

At bottom, the Chinese and Western traditions inhabit different epistemological universes. Western whodunits take place in a positivist, nineteenth century world that is the sum total of an immense but calculable number of phenomena waiting to be apprehended as clues.... In Judge Bao's world, there are demons. Moral principles such as filial obligations take concrete expression as blood debts; revenge takes precedence over professional process in achieving justice. And spirits of the deceased solve cases by entering the dreams of the Judge, who was once himself reckoned the Stellar God of Literature (Kinkley 1985, 94).

The vivid supernatural elements in Judge Bao stories call to mind other well-known collections, such as Pu Songling's *Strange Tales*, which I discussed earlier in relation to readers' ideas about influences on martial arts fiction with a strong supernatural or magic emphasis. Readers who were familiar with western detective fiction also tended to mention the work of Robert van Gulik (1910-67). Van Gulik, a Dutch-born scholar and diplomat stationed in China, wrote a number of novels modelled on courtcase fiction which featured as the protagonist a Tang magistrate named Judge Dee. In order to appeal to western tastes, van Gulik made several important stylistic changes. He allowed for the solution of the crime at a later point in the story than a traditional Chinese tale, and while he included strong undercurrents of sex and violence juxtaposed with the Judge's unshakable probity and belief in justice, he downplayed the Judge's absolute, almost omniscient confidence and made him less open to the discernment of supernatural portents (Lach 1979, 10-11). Despite these formal changes, Chinese readers cited his stories with admiration, however, their comments placed his work squarely outside their own indigenous detective

tradition. As Yinong said of the stories by “that fellow from Holland”: “They’re quite good. Pretty interesting, *very Western!*”

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has considered particular lines of traditional Chinese romance and detective fiction. Specifically, Ming and Qing scholar-beauty stories, *Dream of the Red Chamber* and early twentieth century Butterfly fiction were discussed as they suggest a discontinuous but enduring tradition ordered around a set of themes and devices, such as a concern with symmetry and the importance of emotional resonance, or *qing*, as well as the place and displacement of love and lovers within the extended framework of family and society. A discussion of detective fiction centred on stories based on popular courtcase literature which featured the decisions and investigative strategies of a wise judge or magistrate. Comparisons with western genres and reader responses revealed some similarities as well as fundamental differences in narrative content, structure and the worldviews which underscore the different textual universes and their audiences.

Clearly, there appears to be a greater concern in the Chinese genres with the social and cultural implications of either deliberate or inadvertent individual transgression of established norms of behaviour. This characteristic was also emphasized by readers familiar with these genres. Although the study of the Chinese heroine is one of my enduring interests, and one which I explore in the context of popular fiction in the next chapter, my sense of romance and detective fiction readers differs from martial arts fiction fans in that from the outset they are witnesses —and perhaps participants— in a different kind of struggle. With no alternative world in which to challenge and confront the strictures of society —with perhaps even little chance to see the surrounding environment through

other than the eyes of the long-suffering heroine or wrongly accused miscreant— these readers make a different, but still profoundly important journey into the “deep, dark and bright” spaces of Chinese tradition and character.

Undoubtedly, the precise paths taken by each individual reader into these questions and the resonances that such an excursion could produce would likely have something to do with individual experiences of gender socialization. In the next chapter, I look at how genre and gender interact to shape reader preferences, and the ways in which readers confront gendered and “genred” assumptions through their selection of texts and the practices by which they actively construct and rework readings.

Chapter Six: Gender, Genre and Chat

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I examine some of the different ways men and women construct readings of their favourite genres, and how they constitute gendered identities through reading. I look at the issue of “gendered genres,” traditionally masculine or feminine varieties of fiction, for example, and suggest that this focus, for some readers at least, may actually represent a misplaced emphasis. That is, perhaps —as Crane observes of the western medieval romance, a genre whose feminine name in many ways draws attention away from the reality that its historical audiences were comprised of both women and men— we should reformulate our questions about genres and audiences as well as the assumptions *they* in turn engender (1994, 10). Speaking in reference to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, she writes:

The parallels between gender and genre move in two directions. One line of connections to investigate would be how historical men and women “perform” romance— how their behavior imitates or inspires romance’s representation of gender and how they receive, interpret, and circulate particular romance texts. My question in this study is how romances “perform” gender rather than the reverse— how they construe masculinity and femininity, how they work out the paradigm of difference and the challenge of intimacy and how they relate gender to other expressions of social identity (Crane 12).

For a number of the readers in my study, it appears that the conceptual space between biological sexuality and socialized gender is an unstable region open to a certain degree of personal negotiation, especially when it comes to reading preferences. Historically, masculinity and femininity, in Chinese culture as in many western cultures, were largely fluid constructs, fixed to their respective moments by social mores and conventions, but always threatening to shift (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994, 12; Penley and Willis 1993.

xviii). In short, concepts of gender are “fictions” —in the literal sense of something at once made and invented— social texts that are not consumed “verbatim” by all readers, but which are instead selectively edited in individual readers’ reproductions of themselves and their own definitions of reading pleasure. Between typically “masculine” or “feminine” literature and being a man or a woman, adventurous readers have consistently found that there is considerable latitude for playful, subversive and compensatory readings (Jenkins 1992; Radway 1987; Bacon-Smith 1992).

In order to begin to appreciate the workings of the gender/genre dynamic among the readers surveyed here, it is necessary first to consider some of the issues surrounding gendered communication more generally, and then to place those issues within a specifically framed discourse of Chinese popular tradition. To accomplish this, I want to focus my tentative theoretical assertions about gendered reading styles around the pivotal construction of space and social relations in Chinese culture, the concepts of inner and outer spheres and their particular and pervasive influence on the historical and contemporary lives of Chinese women in general and literate women in particular.

Numerous important studies have appeared which analyze the profound implications of the inner/outer distinction across such diverse cultural and historical contexts as Song period (960-1279 AD) women’s experiences of marriage and family life (Ebrey 1993), women authors and audiences of the Ming (Ko 1994), as well as how traditional western notions of gender and place are challenged as a result of our engagement with new media (Meyrowitz 1985, 201-09).

This dynamic and the concepts of gender which individuals both maintain and subvert in relation to it may also be usefully applied to a discussion of contemporary reading, as Gullestad has so convincingly demonstrated in her discussion of another popular cultural

practice— house decoration in Norway (1993). She suggests that home decoration and improvement reflects a complex, ongoing negotiation of gender and class identities. Although the successful performance of home renovation often requires, in many respects, a separation of labour along gender lines, Gullestad states that this takes place “in a transformed traditional sense” (153), in which each partner contributes to the project according to a qualitatively different sense of aesthetic pleasure, but with the same joint goal in mind. Where men might actually carry out most of the improvements, women tend to be the ones who carefully select the materials and budget for the private rituals of home (re)making (143). Collectively, these expressive practices stand as couples’ personal acts of renewal, and their homes become localized, shared inscriptions of resistance in eloquent juxtaposition to the fragmentary social institutions writ large all around them (135, 149-51, 159).

In the aforementioned study, synchronic and diachronic ethnographic evidence pointed to the fact that while the traditional spheres of male and female activity were certainly still identifiable, they were fluid constructs that were continuously negotiated and reworked under different class and social conditions. In my opinion, the flexibility which underlies the everyday, unofficial mediation of masculine and feminine domains of experience is an important feature which ethnographers should bear in mind. Just as it is not sufficient to say, for example, that male and female readers responded to me in the ways that they did *solely* on the basis that they were reporting reading habits to a foreign female researcher, I also do not think that a characterization of their responses as simply reflective of particular genres or gendered effects provides an adequate picture of the processes acting on their respective communicative competencies and performances.

Thus, to say that one group's talk about reading was framed by members of that group as information, while the other group's contributions were subject to the aesthetics normally associated with gossip and a generally playful delivery —while descriptive— does not necessarily fully articulate the range of expressive styles and purposes individuals assume, especially across different cultural contexts. Women's spoken texts and creative acts of popular production are often portrayed as non-serious, if somewhat subversive or resistive, play (Bacon-Smith 1992, 290-91), especially in comparison to men's activities. In fact, the latter are often explicitly depicted within the dominant culture as having intrinsic "instructional merit" (Bird 1992, 143-47) because they actively reproduce hegemonic discourse values and strategies. It is important to point out, however, that in many other women's narrative traditions this emphasis is reversed. For example, men may choose, even within the private tradition of the domestic arena, to adopt a more "public" persona and repertoire by performing "private" stories about particularly amusing incidents or people, whereas women are relied upon to fill in the details of what normally occurs —or *should* occur— during family observances and gatherings (Baldwin 1985, 153-55).

In each case, the separation of masculine and feminine spheres of influence and experience are present and discernible in the presentations of both men and women. However, the boundaries between inner and outer, public and private are not only more permeable, but also more readily and frequently traversed than we might at first think. Enlarging on the spatial and dramatic metaphors captured in Goffman's (1959) theory of region-specific behaviours, Meyrowitz argues that while the home is simultaneously the principal venue of female performance and male "rehearsal and relaxation," it is also a transitional space through which women are spectators of the processes involved in the scripting of masculine onstage behaviours, and as such the contrasts between men's on-

and offstage personas provide a focus for feminine parody and critique (1985, 206). In other words, the public behaviours of one individual brought into a customarily private context and temporarily disregarded, or even discarded, may become, in another person's onstage domain, material for serious commentary or playful deconstruction, possibly in that individual's *own* backstage region. Indeed, if it is true, as Goffman asserts, that: "A region may be defined as any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception" (1959, 106), then it is important to understand that sometimes the barriers separating certain regions and their associated behaviours may be redrawn through resistance to prevailing perceptions. According to Gal, women's talk can be generally understood as resistance which, she states:

...occurs in two ways: first, when devalued linguistic forms and practices (such as local vernaculars, slang, women's interactional styles or poetry, and minority languages) are practiced and celebrated despite widespread denigration and stigmatization. Second, it occurs because these devalued practices often propose or embody alternate models of the social world (1995, 175).

Similarly, I suggest that this kind of shifting, resisting and redefining of gendered regions of action and preference becomes even more pronounced when genders, genres, behaviours and responses transect each other in deliberately subversive ways that, though certainly pleasurable, are not always construed as play.

In this chapter, I attempt to show how the complementary domains of inner and outer can become reversible narrative worlds for many readers, and how they adopt different kinds of discourse strategies in order to navigate them. To accomplish this, I have divided this chapter into three sections. The first presents a summary of some of the research into masculine and feminine speech styles and gossip in western scholarship, and draws a comparison with the meanings and importance attached to the conversational genre of *chat* or gossip (*liaotian*[r], 聊天, 聊天儿) in Chinese culture, especially as an instrument of

“oral literary criticism,” (Dundes 1966) as it relates to popular fiction. Secondly, I look specifically at some of the patterns of reading behaviour exhibited by men and women who participated in this study, paying particular attention to their perceptions of traditional “masculine” and “feminine” genres and how they view their own places as readers both within and without various popular traditions. Finally, I explore a traditionally masculine narrative space, the *jianghu*, or “rivers and lakes” of martial arts fiction, from the viewpoint of female readers, examining such issues as women’s potentiality as characters, consumers and producers in a world where, for chivalrous *heroes* at least, “anything can happen.”

6.2 Chatting East and West: Some Thoughts on Style and Power

Throughout this work, I emphasize that certain aspects of theory and practice which aptly describe the dynamics of specific western popular culture audiences may not adequately capture the complex processes at work within other cultural groups, whether the processes in question concern an attempt to explain the developmental or psychosocial factors which underlie an explanation of the compensatory nature of gendered reading, or the forms of humour found in electronic communication. As Kaplan argues, while western critical paradigms can be productively applied to the popular texts of a different culture —as indeed, I must largely do in this analysis— a certain degree of reflexivity is required in order to prevent displacing the texts from their primary spheres of meaning (1993, 9-10). Consequently, I want to make a few preliminary remarks based on my understanding of conversational aesthetics and speech genres as a folklorist in light of recent sociolinguistic research into gender and language in order to frame the discussion of readers’ responses which follows.

First, as Hymes notes, discourse patterns within speech communities need to be understood as the syntagmatic and paradigmatic integration of a “sequence of speech acts and in terms of classes of speech acts among which choice has been made at specific points” (1986, 57). With specific reference to male and female readers’ ways of talking about books, I would add that their choices of books as well as the conversational strategies employed to explain and/or justify those generic selections do not necessarily fall within what may be assumed to be the same kind of “gendered” norms that we may associate with western audiences. For example, Tannen’s well-known contrast between “report-talk” and “rapport-talk,” that is, men’s information-oriented versus women’s relationship-centered approaches to communication and her assertion of the potentially ambiguous nature of the dynamic interaction between *status* and *connection* (1990, 36-37, 76-77) —or, *power* and *solidarity*, as described in some of her later work (Tannen 1993, 166-68)— manifests a degree of gender as well as cultural bias.

As a case in point, scholars working in western and eastern speech communities have noted that neither “women’s language” nor, by extension, its masculine counterpart, can be taken as a single, unified communicative instrument. Rather, researchers acknowledge that gendered language can have many dialects, and forces other than gender socialization may help to shape notions of proper or effective speech for men or women. “Women’s language” across cultures, for example, varies in response to factors such as age or the desire to present a youthful or authoritative image (Okamoto 1995, 313-14), the mutual awareness of the construction and preservation of face as shown by both speakers’ adoption of standard speech forms or pronunciation (Deuchar 1988)¹⁴⁷ as well as the

¹⁴⁷For further discussion of face, face-threatening acts and face-saving politeness strategies in language, with particular emphasis on hedging, see Brown and Levinson (1987).

deliberate use of hedging and tag-questions as a means to facilitate the flow of conversation and to maintain face— a discursive device whose varied and practised employment seems to argue against earlier assertions that such questions were proof of feminine uncertainty (Coates 1988, 113-14, 117-19).¹⁴⁸ Certainly, as Kallik's research shows, unfinished, emergent "kernel stories" may represent a particularly powerful discourse strategy that speakers may selectively choose to elaborate and exploit, depending on the "conversational resource" and direction of group talk at any given moment (1975, 4-5, 8). As another side to this kind of strategy, Wachs points out in her study of crime-victim narratives that listeners may interject narrative asides to interrupt the course of talk as a way of resetting or clarifying the contextual frame, or dialogue may be used to give listeners a closer perspective on an incident (1988, 46-48).

Finally, with respect to *gossip* as a conversational genre or a set of specific communicative acts and goals itself, I want to put forward the point that, although women may take pleasure in the subversive delight offered by sharing speculative or private information (Bird 1992, 147-51; Brown 1994, 19), gossip nevertheless does convey information, just as certain informational media, such as newspapers in Victorian England, America and turn of the century China (Bird 1992, 8-18; Lee and Nathan 1985, 394), —which, furthermore, could be assumed with some confidence to cater to a predominantly male readership, even if they were also read by women— contained their fair share of scandal. Also, as scholars of folklore and history have demonstrated, gossip is not only *not*

¹⁴⁸See Crawford's (1995) critique of Lakoff (1975) and proponents of the "two-cultures" approach to masculine and feminine conversational interaction in general. She asserts that it is insufficient to locate the different strategies and outcomes of men's and women's communication completely or even primarily within a theoretical framework of either incommensurable styles or childhood socialization without also questioning the political and social structures which reinforce those communicative patterns in men and women (88-101).

gender-specific, but also it is not confined to particular social classes or occupational groups (Pocius 1988; Kodish 1980; Gustavsson 1979).

Although women's communication may make special use of the social properties of gossip in order to further its own preferred ends and reinforce the types of interactions most valued by female speech communities, I avoid classifying the responses of the men and women in my study in this way —especially since, as I show in a moment, women's responses were as often "informational" as men's were "gossipy." Essentially, I feel that to do so runs the risk of simply reifying the privileged place that *information* holds in much of western, or perhaps I should say *postmodern*, culture, that is, as an unmarked, essentially masculine category.

In addition, I suggest that while scholars are turning their attention to the social implications of mass-mediated technology and the utopian promises it cannot fulfil because any comprehensive understanding of it must be grounded in the real world (Robins 1996), which in turn suggests other promising developments for this kind of research, our everyday lives are still very much influenced by the preeminence of information and society's need for it, in forms and modalities that give it to us better, faster and more accurately. As a final aside, if it is indeed true that gossip is the purposeful linking of at least two possibly unrelated ideas in order to yield new information,¹⁴⁹ then surely the creation of webpages represents a kind of computer-mediated gossip, as do many of the speculative leads and connections we make in the process of conducting research via the Internet. Moreover, the foregrounding of information as perhaps our most valued resource is seen in the fact that, unlike previous epochs, we name the present history of our age after

¹⁴⁹See Pocius' (1988) treatment of furniture as masculine gossip for further discussion.

it, a distinction once reserved almost exclusively for monarchs, then later shared between the often mutually profitable domains of royalty or government and industrial conquest and invention. Finally, the primacy of information is demonstrated in the fact that, despite all of the changes that have been observed in day-to-day communication with the advent of electronic mail, hypertext and other communicative technologies and the texts and ephemera we generate as a result, we have not collectively termed this era “the Age of Gossip” — though such a designation might be singularly appropriate.

The issue of gendered language and power as it is understood in contemporary western scholarship is also valuable to a discussion of Chinese women’s communication. Returning to Tannen’s configuration of the shifting relationship between power and solidarity as a primary site of gendered meanings, and ultimately, of communicative success or failure between differentially powerful groups, she acknowledges that, on the one hand, in certain instances the two goals need not be mutually exclusive —that is, that an expression of solidarity can also be an expression of power— and on the other, that there are many cultural interpretations of the power-solidarity dynamic (1993, 169). However, as noted earlier, reducing the effects and effectiveness of gender differences in language to mismatched styles can serve to deny or gloss over the socially entrenched power structures that are continually reproduced when female communicative strategies are read as problematic or as the result of underdeveloped communicative competency relative to male analogues (Crawford 1995, 38–40). As scholars such as Cameron (1995) and Edelsky (1993) point out, the “powerlessness” of so-called “women’s speech” may be less a function of any inherent linguistic or paralinguistic features, and more a question of the kinds of arenas women often find themselves trying to speak in (Cameron 205).

Nevertheless, even Gal's position outlined at the beginning of this chapter, that women's talk can be seen as resistance (1995, 175), requires a certain amount of circumspection since, as Ko notes, "resistance" and "passivity" were typically viewed by historians and other commentators as the two responses extensively adopted by Chinese women, an assumed polarity which, while useful as a political metaphor for victimized, feudal China,¹⁵⁰ in fact contradicted the reality of many women's lives (1994, 1-2, 8-11). Furthermore, Ko finds that "Chinese women" as a social construct —and, therefore, as female agents of status and power as well as socialization— must be understood in terms of the intersection of class, age, geography and the regional practices which were connected to particular places (7). Aside from the choices of outright resignation or resistance, Ko states that educated women in urban centres like seventeenth-century Jiangnan chose to work within their "inner" boundaries, and to extend their experiences into the "outer" world through literary networks, reading with and writing to women in other places. She stresses the complementary nature of the "inner" and "outer" domains, particularly for women's culture, noting a relationship characterized by degrees of domestic seclusion, but certainly not complete *exclusion* from masculine potential and influence, which in turn could be channelled to help achieve feminine aims, such as the distribution and/or publication of works by women writers, or other texts that were popular with female audiences:

In fact, while shared concerns, routines, rituals and emotions distinguished the female world from the male, the very construction of such routines and rituals was a product of interactions with the prerogatives, networks and enterprises of men. No single word such as "domination" or "subjugation" can adequately describe the nature of relationships between these men and women. Since the borders between inner and outer, or between private and public, are ambivalent, shifting, and open to negotiation, cases of women crossing boundaries are particularly revealing of the nature of those boundaries and the terms of their negotiation (Ko 13-14).

¹⁵⁰See also Chow (1991) and Chung and McClellan (1994) for further discussion on the literary treatment of women in the May Fourth era.

Certainly, I do not intend the foregoing observations as a universal reflection of Chinese female experience across historical periods and social demarcations. Rather, as the aforementioned scholars of Chinese history and society and many of their contemporaries maintain, I seek to provide some insight into an alternative set of responses that might, in many respects, be compatible with those provided by some of the educated, contemporary readers, both male and female, who contributed to my survey: that within the dialectic of resignation and resistance, the reader can find space for renegotiation and deliberation on the ways in which popular genres and their multivalent readings shape, subvert and transform notions of gender. As Greenhill's analysis of cross-dressing ballads demonstrates, even within "traditional" genres there may be a myriad of gendered voices, some of which risk being inevitably and —perhaps irrevocably— muted or silenced by overly "centred" methodologies that are only geared toward univocal, or certainly more or less *unequivocal*, interpretations (1995, 157, 163-64).

6.2.1 Variorum Verbal Texts: Reading "Chat"

In *An Analysis of Junk Fiction*, Roberts asserts that "there is nothing to compare with the variorum object in an unlearned bookscape" (1990, 190). That is, popular fiction audiences do not have the same resources that readers of classical literature do: the recorded, codified critical texts which comment upon and interpret the works of Shakespeare or Milton, for example, and which often acquire a sort of canonical status in their own right. Yet, although as a folklorist I take issue with certain practices associated with reader-response theory and literary criticism in the last decade as outlined in an earlier chapter —namely, the lack of ethnographic findings which could richly and realistically inform the construction of "the reader"— literary theorists such as Stanley Fish have

looked specifically at variorum interpretation and found it wanting, not only in the critical assumptions which obtain in the handling of ambiguities, but also in its very existence as a plausible object, or scholarly enterprise at all (1980, 152, 158, 162). He views interpretation as a process enacted by *interpretive communities* “made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions” (171).

Returning to Roberts’ statement, a student of folklore would probably counter with the observation that the fact that the informal, popular interpretations of reading experts are ephemeral and unofficial does not mean that they do not exist, at least in the everyday contexts of conversations about books. Moreover, Roberts’ use of the term “unlearned” privileges elite literature over popular genres in the sense that his distinction overlooks the reality —although he alludes to this point elsewhere— that readers of genre fiction must learn how to read within a complex range of systems and formulas, and that often the products of that learning do include written or artistically crafted commentary in the form of parody, jokes, fanzines and so on.

In his analysis of fiction readership in Guangzhou in the late 1970s, Link found a number of close connections between “gossiping” or “chatting” and the consumption of fiction (1985, 222-23). Aside from the shared social functions of escape and entertainment and the expression of everyday frustrations through the medium of storytelling, fiction and gossip mutually reproduce each other in many ways: each feeds into the other’s network such that chatting constitutes and draws upon material that may contribute to various non-verbal —though not necessarily officially printed— texts,¹⁵¹ and fiction provides substance for discussion and debate. Furthermore, both may borrow topical items from

¹⁵¹See Link’s (1989) discussion of handwritten literature.

news of current events. According to Link: "The distinctions among fiction, news and gossip are blurred on China's grapevine. Each feeds off the other two inside the one great cornucopia of 'stuff to talk about' " ("Fiction" 223). While certain conditions may no longer apply, for example, Link mentions the relatively limited access to popular media at the time as a factor in the enduring popularity of chatting, I agree with his assessment that Chinese culture holds informal verbal artistry in generally high regard:

But, regardless of whether the items for gossip are big or small, people who are good at telling stories —embroidering and dramatizing them— become known as skilled chatters and even a bit honored as such. In sum, *the institution of chatting is partly recreation, partly a social grace, and partly a supplement to the press* ("Fiction" 223, italics added).

From my experiences talking with Chinese people in Canada and China, I would say that chat as a conversational genre merges, as Link suggests, "playful" gossip and "serious" information. While there are certain gender- and regionally-based stereotypes which also serve as sources of comic or ironic observation —Beijing men are known to be great talkers,¹⁵² for example— I would have to say that both men and women engage in the kinds of frequent informal discussions characterized as "chat," though the specific content of their interactions is likely to be influenced, understandably, by such factors as setting and audience composition. Certainly, chatting gives readers a medium for the collective formulation of oral critiques of the genres and specific texts that hold meaning for

¹⁵² I saw a live cross-talk performance at a Beijing university that deliberately parodied this regional characteristic, a fondness for verbosity which some people attributed to the fact that Beijing is the source of the "official" dialect, as well as a long-standing seat of government. This particular scenario had to do with the way people from different regions ask who is at the door. Responses ranged from the preferred, laconic "Who[']s there[']?" or "Shei?" (誰), to a loquacious Beijinger who came up with something on the order of: "Who-is-that-come-to-visit-me-and-knocking-on-my-door-so-late-rousing-me-from-my-slumber?" Finally, the performer ended with the observation: "Surely we know this was someone from Beijing; where there is one good word, a Beijinger finds nine."

them. Of questionnaire respondents, sixty-three percent indicated that friends' suggestions were an important, if not the primary, means through which they selected books, followed by personal recognition of the author's name or reputation.

Additionally, discussing books with friends seems to function as a forum through which to assess and reflect on the experience of reading in general, rather than merely as opportunities to recount singularly vivid but possibly minor details, although these might also be an important and pleasurable facet of conversation for some readers. In my research, most readers did not concentrate on specific particulars of characterization or even plot as much as they emphasized how they felt about certain books, character-types, settings, and the associations these evoked.

Similarly, Narayan found that layers of signification in certain types of women's songs from Northern India became clear in narrative elaboration about events, conflicts and especially the emotions that unfolded within both the lyrics and the actual performances themselves. Indeed, the women's understanding of their song traditions went far beyond, and sometimes appeared to completely avoid, the identification of discrete symbols. She states: "Dealing with Kangra songs, for example, I soon found that asking about 'the meaning' of constituent symbols met with no response. Reframing my question to ask what was happening in the song, however, usually evoked a long narrativized interpretation" (1995, 259).

Although I was studying the consumption of popular fiction by mixed audiences and not the transmission of women's traditional songs, my earlier research experiences examining Chinese heroine tales taught me a similar lesson. I quickly learned not to restrict my queries to "stories about heroic Chinese women," but to ask people to "tell me a favourite story you recall from your home town." Consequently, during my most recent

field research, I did not focus my face-to-face and electronic discussions with readers on a fixed set of popular genres. Instead, among other things, I asked people what they liked to read, how they felt when they read the things they liked, and how their preferences might have changed over the years. Through their spoken and written narratives, their oral histories as readers, I was able to gain insight into a much more varied picture of audience practices, including the importance of "chat." It appears that many readers' early experiences as students back home are closely tied to fond recollections of discussions about popular novels in which the relative merits and shortcomings of certain books were debated, sometimes well into the night:

[SK: Did you ever have evenings when you would get some classmates together and talk about the novels?] WZN: Sure! Yeah, we — you know that! <laughs> We call, in Chinese we call the *ye tan hui* (夜谈会), that means "talking." [Literally, "talking late into the evening."] It's around 11 o'clock to 12 o'clock p.m. Because after 11 o'clock, lots of students go back from library, and they just go to bed. But haven't sleep, fall asleep, so they just talk about things. Like novels, like which book is good, and something like the social, or something else. Most of that time we just exchange the opinion about the book, about novel we like. So from that kind of situation, or the other situation, other opportunity, we talk with each other about novel, I can KNOW that book is welcomed by most people and it's very good, and lots of people like it, I can know it.¹⁵³

On another occasion, after a particularly animated group interview with some postgraduate students in Glasgow who collectively answered my readership questionnaire on tape by discussing each question in considerable detail, the lone female participant made a striking comment in English: "This was a GOOD TALK." I should perhaps mention that this interview possibly most closely resembles a spontaneous conversation of the sort that Zhongning refers to in the foregoing quote, except that this exchange took place in the

¹⁵³WANG Zhongning, interview. 16 October 1993, 26 January 1994. Tape T94WZN-03.

afternoon. As with natural, multivocal chats of this sort generally, I found transcription difficult, and at times impossible when all of the voices covered each other in a cacophony of happily divergent opinion.

However, I did notice some interesting patterns. Specifically, the woman's voice is heard in the background in a steady, persistent stream throughout the discussion, and she facilitates interaction by moving speakers on to the next topic, countering their assertions or spurring them on to greater elaboration, and generally getting her "two cents' worth in," which I confess, was more than I managed for the most part. Perhaps unintentionally, the shape of the interview evolved to focus on the emphatic and sometimes comic musings of a male reader, whose garrulity was held in check, more or less, by the female reader. In fact, at certain points the interview seems like a cross-talk performance about books. Although I felt badly that I had been unsuccessful, or so I thought, as a moderator, the woman was in high spirits at the end of the interview, saying later that she had not had such a pleasant chat about literature in a long time. Without a doubt, I had witnessed an example of Chinese oral literary criticism first-hand, and seen the unmistakable delight and satisfaction of experts at work —and play.

Another point Narayan makes in her study of Indian women's songs is that although cultural metafolklore might be difficult for ethnographers to document —since by their very nature such expressions may subsume values and understandings that are normally unspoken, either because they signify cultural elements that are assumed and largely unconscious or subversive— efforts of this kind are fundamental to an appreciation of "artistic productions like folklore texts not just as cultural *objects* but as *practices* by positioned subjects" (1995, 260). Furthermore, she maintains that a concern with perceptions of "the folk" about their folklore:

...induces us to grant the people we work with respect as complex subjects who know some things and not others, and also as agents who are in a position to actively embroider meanings around texts. It reminds us that "interpretation" as a category may take different forms —based on cultural style, social identification, individual predilection and so on— and that it is often partially a product of a relationship with a researcher (260).

In the next section, I explore some of the gendered patterns of response which emerge from readers' reflections. Although to some extent, these patterns can be attributed to individual reactions to me as a foreign, female ethnographer, as well as perceptions of what people thought I wanted, there are some interesting aspects of readers' expressive behaviours which I believe deserve further investigation.

6.3 Within and Without Romance and Chivalry: Mixed Readings

As noted in previous chapters, twice as many male readers participated in this study, however, female readers were more likely to respond to a variety of survey techniques and to agree to at least one follow-up electronic or face-to-face interview. Also, in general, I found that women were more likely to extrapolate and expand their readings both within and beyond the text in ways that men did not. I was especially impressed, as I describe later, by the women's critical understanding of the possibilities and limitations which confronted female characters in martial arts fiction. Before I turn my attention to the specific issues related to the dialectic of opportunity and constraint which seems to underlie feminine readings of that traditionally masculine genre, I would like to touch on a few other points.

In the pilot distribution of my questionnaire, I posed two questions related to the interaction between gender and genre. First, I asked respondents whether they thought traditionally masculine or feminine genres existed. Second, I asked them whether men and

women could enjoy the same fictional forms. While all twelve respondents positively answered the second question, replies to the first were far less clear-cut. Three readers, two of whom were women, answered yes, however, four responded negatively and the remainder either stated that they were not sure, or left the question blank.

Thinking that there could be a degree of ambiguity or repetition in the wording of the two queries, I modified my approach in the revised survey. This time, I asked readers whether they agreed that there were "contemporary forms of fiction which are intended for a primarily male or female audience," and whether they would concur with the following generalizations: "Kungfu novels, fantasy and science fiction and detective novels are basically 'male reader' fiction," and "Romances are basically 'female reader' fiction." Next, I asked them to predict the preferred genres of male and female readers of varying ages from adolescence to "thirty-plus."¹⁵⁴ In this way, I hoped to find some indication of readers' perceptions regarding "traditionally gendered" Chinese fiction,¹⁵⁵ as well as their ideas about how reading patterns might change for men and women over time.

Taken together, twenty-three respondents out of a total of forty-seven who answered the revised electronic and handwritten questionnaires agreed with a traditional breakdown of popular genres along the lines I suggested. Nine people declined to answer the question

¹⁵⁴Although this might seem like a small interval, I shaped my question based on the observations made by many readers that they began their independent reading lives in "middle school," and that their preferences shifted after they graduated from university, married and had children.

¹⁵⁵As discussed in Chapter Five, while traditional Chinese detective fiction does not appear to carry the same kinds of immediate associations with a female readership that say, western authors like Ellis Peters, Agatha Christie and even Conan Doyle might, like martial arts fiction, the genre is certainly open to female readings. Like *Star Trek* and other ostensibly masculine texts, some feminine audience responses to detective fiction can evolve into active and elaborate expressions of fan culture, such as the "Adventuresses of Sherlock Holmes" group (Redmond, 1984, 65-66). See also Wachs (1988, 2).

conclusively, usually leaving it out altogether. The remainder disagreed with me either completely, stating that reading preferences depended on such factors as age, education and cultural background, or in part, suggesting that these statements did not reflect a true picture of gender and readership.

In this instance, six readers, both male and female stressed that “masculine” genres, like martial arts and detective fiction, were also widely enjoyed by female readers. In addition, two men and one woman conceded that romance fiction was probably almost exclusively a feminine genre and, of these three, only the woman described herself as a romance reader. I should mention that many readers appeared to be in two minds with respect to this question: of the two assertions, slightly dissenting respondents were more likely to allow the first, however, in a number of cases they did so with qualifications, writing specifically that many women enjoyed masculine fiction as much as men did, as can be seen in this response, where the reader uses her own preference patterns as an example. In response to the question of traditionally gendered popular fiction belonging exclusively to male or female audiences, the woman who described herself in an earlier chapter as “an engineer, now full-time mother” replied simply: “未必。我是女性读者却很喜欢武侠科幻小说。 Not necessarily. I’m a female reader and I really enjoy kungfu and science fiction.”¹⁵⁶

Notwithstanding the survey’s finding that five men stated they mainly read romances, while six others affirmed that romances numbered, though not exclusively, among the genres they enjoyed, no one made a similar case for male romance readers on the questionnaires themselves. By contrast, although the content of the taped interviews largely reflects, in many respects, similar trends —a result likely due in part to the fact that several

¹⁵⁶QRH-14.

of them were conducted, as I said, with respondents who had already completed questionnaires in an effort to allow readers to elaborate on particular aspects of their reading behaviour in greater depth— some of these face-to-face exchanges were the site of some rather amusing revelations. For example, during the group interview I mentioned earlier, which was comprised of a woman in her early thirties from Mainland China and three men, two “Mainlanders” and a Malaysian whose ages ranged from twenty-six to forty, one of the older men made a startling admission as to his decidedly unorthodox generic predilection— a source of personal enjoyment of which his astonished colleague had been apparently completely unaware prior to the interview.

By way of setting the scene, I should perhaps mention that all of the participants in this group interview gathered in a rather cramped graduate student office. From the beginning, the fellow I refer to as “B”¹⁵⁷ below has been holding forth on the relative merits of his favourite genres. “C”, the female postgraduate, is present, and her husband is seated at a desk in the back, watching the proceedings with considerable amusement, though he does not interject at this time. “A” and “B” are the oldest participants, and after “B” states that he prefers classical fiction, particularly *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, “A” interrupts with the announcement that he subscribes to rather different generic propensities, preferring “romances” of an altogether different sort:

A: 我喜欢 romance.

B: 啊呀 - - ! < 大家哈哈大笑 >.

[莎娜: 你喜欢什么爱情小说?] A: Any kind. < 大家讨论 >.

A: 对, romance 是好看. < 笑 >.

B: 科幻呢 - 不喜欢看. 科幻呢, 都是下面的. .

¹⁵⁷In this interview, respondents did not give me permission to quote them by name, although they all expressed great interest in my study, and a willingness for their material to be used. They also did not supply me with pseudonyms, therefore, I have assigned letters in alphabetical order to help distinguish speakers.

A: 对, 大多数, 对, 科幻的小说不是太干净清楚。但是, 一般人对那个金庸的武打还可以 - -。

A: 有点儿看武打, 功夫。

B: <取笑> 但是, 他不太看那个功夫, 看爱情小说。<C说话, 不清楚>。

A: 都是下面的, 都是假的! <大家哈哈大笑> 英雄不秀了, 英雄不<不清楚>都象无肉。我想英雄 - - 没有带 errors.¹⁵⁸

A: <says suddenly>: "I like romances!" {Uses English term for genre.}

B: <Loud, drawn-out "OH-HO!" and surprised laughter from other participants>

[SK: "What kinds of romances do you like?"]

A: <in English>: "Any kind."

{Others mention different authors, determine that A likes famous female romance novelist Qiong Yao, and "... that other one from Hong Kong," which A fails to name. He takes suggested names from the rest of the group, but mostly concentrates, musing to himself, "And which others?"}

A: <very affirmatively> "Oh yes, romances are good reads!" <his choice of words is a pun on "good-looking" in Chinese, and there is laughter from all> "But I don't like science fiction, all science fiction is low-level stuff."

B: <interjecting> "That's right. Science fiction is too complicated. But many people like Jin Yong's martial arts fiction."

A: "That's right, I've read a little martial arts. Kungfu."

B: <teasing> "But 'A' doesn't read kungfu novels. He reads romances! <C's voice interrupts quietly in background, unclear>

A: "It's all rubbish, it's all fake! <laughter from all> The heroes are not handsome, first-rate [Kungfu] heroes lack <unclear> The heroes have no meat to them, no substance. I think the heroes have no - <laughs, then in English, says carefully> errors."¹⁵⁹

Clearly, this exchange exemplifies a certain level of aversion which seems to centre primarily on the romance reader's idea of how the central male protagonists are constructed

¹⁵⁸In the Chinese transcription, I left background interaction details to a minimum, as I felt it was difficult to explain in Chinese the overlapping simultaneity of communication when others were contributing to "A's" statements. Note that a phonetically similar word in "A's" description of kungfu heroes would signify that "...the heroes have no *tenderness*." In either case, the implication seems to be that kungfu heroes are too perfect and too perfectly masculine. In addition to excellence, *xiu* (秀) carries the additional connotation of gentleness and refinement. Also, saying that "characters have no flesh" was a fairly common way in which questionnaire respondents expressed the idea that in order for a novel to be good, the author must avoid flat or insipid characterization.

¹⁵⁹Group interview. 12 October 1995. Tape T95VAR-26.

in a traditionally masculine genre like martial arts fiction. This reader's statement of rejection was unique in two ways. First, relative to male readers generally, the antipathy "A" feels toward most kungfu fiction is reversed: it was more usual for a kungfu fiction fan to unilaterally dismiss romances than vice versa. Furthermore a common point of comparison upon which such rejection was predicated was the suggestion, mainly put forward by diehard male kungfu novel enthusiasts, that most women (except for educated female readers who can see past the violence to uncover the historical and cultural merits of exemplary chivalric fiction) do not read kungfu novels because they are so violent, and, similarly, men (in general, but especially educated men) do not read romances because women do.

Additionally, Jin Yong's martial arts fiction was not well or widely received among female readers due to the fact that Qiong Yao's romances became available around the same time, according to Zhongning. Other readers from Mainland China made similar observations as to the approximate time of introduction of both authors' novels to audiences in the People's Republic.¹⁶⁰ Zhongning's emphatic rejection of "books for ladies" carried a ring of dismayed disbelief at the popularity of such works, even women in his own family were not immune to their inexplicable appeal. They are, he stressed:

... just like the bestseller in Western country. And lots of women like to read it. Even MY SISTER! After work, she don't do anything! She just read Qiong Yao's novel, about thirty or forty or fifty books, I don't know.

¹⁶⁰Although I do not have precise dates, I suspect that the availability of Qiong Yao's works followed a similar timeline to Jin Yong's novels. According to the general consensus of most Mainland respondents with an interest in Chinese language popular fiction, most genres experienced an increasingly wide distribution in the P.R.C. in the early to mid-1980s.

Another male reader spoke of gender as well as educational differences as factors in the development of reading tastes. In an earlier chapter, this respondent described the addictive qualities of certain books for those readers for whom reading "is like a drug" and generally voiced his rejection of escapist reading, a category of reading motivation and behaviour from which Jin Yong's books were excluded —on account of their concern for history and masterful literary style.¹⁶¹ When I mentioned that there is kind of a tacit cultural stigma in many western societies which discourages young men from openly reading romances, he had this to say:

男读者：这个，这是说明，说明它的西方那个言情小说写得不好！写得不好！<笑>中国那个言情小说写得好，<笑>男的喜欢看！<笑，妻子说话，不清楚>很多，我知道很多，很多年青的人也喜欢看，但是，大部分那个读者也是女性。一般年青人喜欢看侦探小说，武打。... [讨论，他想文化水平和阅读习惯有关系。] 但是，你知道在中国，有的人，这是如果他是driver，或是他是什么服务员。这专看言—武打小说，专看言情小说。那么别的对 history, culture—they never care.

Male reader: This, this is explained, explained by the fact that western romances are badly written! Poorly written! <laughs> Chinese romances are well written <laughs> so men like to read them! <laughs, wife talking, unclear> Many, I know many, many men who read romance, many young people who like to, but the greater part of readers are women. Most young people like to read detective novels, martial arts... [Discussion, says that he thinks there is a connection between education level and reading habits.] But, you know, in China, some people, this with say, a driver, or an attendant or something—they will almost exclusively read rom— martial arts novels, exclusively read romance fiction. Other works concerning history, culture—they never care.¹⁶²

Secondly, "A's" apparent generic exclusivity is unique in that most readers of both sexes who enjoy romances and genres containing elements of "the fantastic" in Todorov's sense—that is, mystery, fantasy, and to a lesser degree sci-fi and traditional Chinese

¹⁶¹Several other readers expressed similar views, and many of those who, like "A," expressed an overall dislike of the genre, held Jin Yong's fiction in high regard even if they had only read a few of his works.

¹⁶²Male respondent, interview. 12 October 1995. Tape T95XH-Z-25.

detective fiction in which readers momentarily hesitate over the unexplained— often read across a wide range of genres. In my survey, over half of all readers stated that they sampled from several types of fiction, however, this figure was slightly higher for women readers. Among female respondents, multi-genre reception patterns accounted for nearly sixty percent of audience preferences.

In fact, Roberts suggests that most readers follow a pattern of broad rather than narrow preference hierarchies, and that exclusive tastes may partly be a function of the reader's age (1990, 72-73). Overall, his premise seems to accord with my own findings, which, in some respects, makes "A's" declaration that much more interesting as a statement of enduring fandom, given that the reader was in his late thirties when the interview took place, and would probably have had fairly free access to romance fiction of various kinds shortly after the end of the Cultural Revolution when, as Louie notes, love themes experienced a resurgence in popularity (1985, 63-64). Furthermore, Cawelti proposes that mystery may be less a genre in its own right than an important component of other genres, and that melodrama is a kind of super-genre which subsumes most forms, including especially romance and adventure narratives (1976, 47, 91).

It is possible, then, that both martial arts fiction and romance novels, as Chinese popular entertainments, can be situated on a continuum of melodrama which ranges from themes that are primarily concerned with chivalrous adventure, to themes that are primarily concerned with romance. As many readers acknowledged, romances can contain elements of adventure —though these may have more to do with intrigue, mystery and even supernatural events than actual martial conquests— and kungfu novels often have a romantic sub-plot. Although the dash of love and/or war, as the case may be, is never allowed to dominate the central and defining generic formulas, the readers who took part in

the group interview, for example, agreed that romantic tension and a love interest for the hero, however subordinated to the main business of combat, definitely adds "special spice."

In order to provide another frame of reference for the appreciation of the dynamic between romance and chivalry in Chinese fiction as perceived by the readers in my study and presented in turn to largely non-Chinese audiences, I would like to suggest that western chivalric romances occupy an intermediate position with respect to their underlying source of heroic motivation, but that they differ in several significant ways. While heroic Chinese and western knights-errant shared a deep concern for justice and righteous conduct, the former came together from many social classes and were outside not only the accepted Confucian social order but also largely beyond the enforced jurisdiction of even Imperial authority, while the latter were historically bound to class, Crown and society (Liu 1967, 196-97). Furthermore, chivalry as "courtly love" was not part of the code of conduct for Chinese knights-errant. Therefore, courtship in martial arts fiction does not form the same kind of natural complement and extension to the bonds of loyalty and affection that connect the hero with his comrades-in-arms, or those of respect which bind him honourably to his most worthy (masculine) opponents (Crane 17, 39, 54).¹⁶³

Returning to the analysis of audience responses, although the relative proportion of male to female cross-genre readers is not really significant in itself perhaps, the ways in which individual preference hierarchies define and influence interactions are interesting. All of the women who read across genres seemed to do so in distinctly individual patterns,

¹⁶³See also Davies' discussion of gender bias in the political thriller, in which he argues that the hero's real complement is the villain, and his ultimate connection with another character the moment of "symbolic exchange" when the hero and his nemesis meet in the final showdown (1989, 128).

combining a favourite genre with most often one or sometimes two or three others. One woman said she read everything. By contrast, in seven cases male readers showed a strongly related, repeating pattern: an aesthetic configuration which either revolved around kungfu fiction combined with classical literature and history or with history and contemporary biography, *or* around romance fiction as a tripartite integration with martial arts fiction and classical literature, or with classical literature and history.

While these genres are all clearly related in certain traditions, such as the vernacular military romance, it is interesting that men did not explicitly state that they read within martial arts and romance genres without some mediating influence from the classics or history. Women made this connection quite frequently, often combining these two genres with either detective fiction, fantasy or other genres. I would hazard a guess that there is something more than "what genres of fiction real men read" operating here. It is possible, for example, that women may have focused their responses on the question at hand, largely leaving out more elite selections because they sensed no particular need to justify or juxtapose the subjective canons they constructed *within* the context of their experiences of reading against any "official" or "objective" external standard. Conversely, some men, at least for the benefit of a female researcher, may have opted for this strategy, and described their preferences for popular fiction in terms of their experiences with "serious" literature, especially perhaps when talking about the enjoyment of a genre whose contemporary form is generally thought of as "feminine."

Also, women's willingness to combine or read inclusively across genres appears partially dependent upon how adjunct generic formulas measure up against the primary objects which form a given reader's normal engagement with text. A woman accustomed to the relatively strong portrayal of women in martial arts fiction, for example, may be less

likely to accept what she views as the traditionally weak and generally passive heroines associated with conventional romance fiction. Likewise, a romance reader may eschew martial arts fiction because of the violence, or a reader of travel literature the same genre because the “rivers and lakes” do not reference a real locale.

Finally, men were somewhat more likely to connect kungfu fiction with detective and science fiction, perhaps on the level that each type of novel is concerned with the discovery and mastery of the environment through the cultivation of strength and knowledge that is either physical and spiritual or intellectual and/or technological. According to Changlong, the formative stages of modern martial arts and science fiction manifest certain similarities in their early concern with technical, if occasionally implausible or even downright fanciful,¹⁶⁴ descriptions over the treatment of emotions and relationships:

NCL: 我觉得武侠小说, 开始的武侠小说大概有一般, 一般的时间。就一百多年的时间。以前有一个叫“环珠楼主”他是第一个写小说的人。他写的武侠小说是主要注重你这个武侠, 功夫的本事。很少探索思的问题和人的基本感情。但是吧金庸还有古龙现出来以后, 他们就出果这个武侠 scenes <不清楚> 武打也有这样的, 主要探索的人的思维, 人本身自己问题 <不清楚>。科幻小说也是这样的, 法国的那个 - Oh, I can't remember his name. 他写的那个《海底两万里》他的那个小说也是关于技术方面, 没有那个思维和那本事的描写。现代的写科幻小说也是注重的思维问题和那本事, 不是注重技术它们。我想这是一个, 照的一个 trend.

NCL: I think that martial arts fiction, the *start* of martial arts fiction, probably happened around, maybe around a hundred years ago. In the past, a writer called Huanzhulouzhuzhu, he was the first martial arts fiction writer, his main emphasis was on martial techniques, rarely did he explore peoples' thoughts and emotions. But once Jin Yong and Gu Long came along, and afterward, even as they dealt with martial arts “scenes,” <unclear> their main purpose was to explore character's ideas and questions of the human condition itself <unclear>. Scientific fiction was

¹⁶⁴Here I am referring specifically to the novels of Huanzhulouzhuzhu, whose works are categorized in Liu's *Chinese Knight-Errant* as “tales of flying swordsmen” (1967, 130-34). Huanzhulouzhuzhu (環珠樓主, “Master of Pearl-Rimmed Tower,” or possibly, “Master of the Returned Pearl”) was born Li Shanji in 1902. Although he had some experience as a serial fiction writer prior to the end of the Sino-Japanese War, his writing career really began in earnest after 1945 (Chard 1991, 8-9).

similar, with that French — {I can't remember his name} he wrote [Jules Verne, 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea]. His novels were also concerned with technological explanation, not with the description of ideas and emotions. Today's science fiction is concerned with such things, and not only with [scientific or technological] explanation. I think this reflects a trend.¹⁶⁵

Only two women combined any of these genres, and their taste preferences also extended to romance and, in one instance, travel writings.

Because I deal with this subject to some extent in previous chapters in light of processes of reader identification/implication as well as “heroes” and “heroines” of various types of genre fiction, my treatment of the influence of gender in central character construction will be brief here. However, I want specifically to look at some of the ways men and women described “typical” male and female characters, and how these generic depictions either accorded with or diverged from their aesthetic formulations of how admirable characters are, or should be, portrayed.

As with folktales about Chinese heroines, respondents — particularly women — have stressed that although certain authors, such as Jin Yong, open the field to female protagonists to a greater extent than do more traditionally-oriented writers and genres, women's potential is circumscribed, to some degree, by their environments and by the skills they can bring to bear on situations and conflicts. Female characters' mastery of martial skills, for example, often focuses on a limited range of highly developed techniques, and women must often rely on intelligence and quickness of mind, movement and speech to get themselves out of unequal confrontations. One of the opening scenes of Jin Yong's *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain* depicts a male chieftain of the Horse Spring banditry locked in fierce combat with a female member of the Northern Branch of

¹⁶⁵NING Changlong, interview. 30 August 1995. Tape T95NCL-14.

the Dragon Lodge, who is bent on exacting revenge for the death of her husband. Though neither are principal heroes, this excerpt from Mok's translation shows one of the ways female warriors redress inequality, at least temporarily:

Third [a skilled fighter with two knives], being a woman, could not withstand the battle any longer. Chieftain Ma seized this good opportunity to advance, and charged at her. She swung her left knife all of a sudden, rendering a sizable part of herself vulnerable to attack. Encouraged by this, he moved forward one step and showered blows [with twin maces] on her. Suddenly, the ground beneath his right foot gave way and he found himself right on top of the hollow which Prime ["Chief Escort of the Peking Overland Convoy"] and the others had been using as a hiding place not long before. Over half of the pit was still covered by snow, so he had not noticed it while the battle raged. Third had laid a trap for him. Unable to plant his foot on solid ground, he flung himself forward flat on the ground. It was not his day, admitted Chieftain Ma to himself. Just as he sprang up again, Third struck him a cruel stroke that bit deep and dislocated his left shoulder (1996, 22).

Although female defence does not always take the form of strategic combat, I think certain useful parallels can be drawn between certain types of Chinese heroines, or of Chinese heroines in certain genres, and Stewart's analysis of female characters in the Child ballads. In both narrative worlds, women risk personal and/or cultural failure, are under some degree of tacit or overt physical and/or sexual threat from their male counterparts, and their "control over situations is invariably due to their mental quickness, verbal or otherwise" (1993, 56-57). This understanding certainly colours the responses of women readers in their profiles of typical, or typically preferred, female characters, since several also mentioned that they did not always find what they were looking for in terms of character construction. However, women most frequently noted the qualities of intelligence, virtue, the capacity to experience and express emotions and abilities that allow them to deal resourcefully with situations (including agility rather than strength) as the features they most often look for in the women who inhabit the books they enjoy. Female readers cited beauty and gentleness as important attributes in heroines far less frequently

than men did. Even the characterizations of female kungfu novel fans as to the nature of appealing male characters made at best passing reference to the tripartite configuration of strength, martial prowess and righteousness. Instead, men should possess intelligence and an outlook which is open-minded and sensitive to the needs of others. The response of one thirty-five year old instructor presents an illustrative summary:

男性角色应该有多层的性格。宽厚的胸怀，聪颖的智慧，敢于负责的心。
女性角色应该是既聪颖娴慧，有爱心，又自强，自重，自爱。

A male character should have a multi-layered personality. He should be open-minded, clever, intelligent, wise, and behave responsibly and fairly.
A female character should be both clever and intelligent, modest and refined, loving, self-determined, self-confident.¹⁶⁶

By contrast, men's responses seem to reflect traditional narrative and social ideals more closely, however, it may be argued that with martial arts fiction, which is largely set "in ancient China" and often in the late Ming or early Qing periods, these ideals reciprocate and reproduce each other. By far, the most important properties of a female character were "talent, virtue and beauty" — a collective opinion which accords with the quintessentially traditional paradigm of ideal womanhood, reproduced (and not infrequently challenged or subverted) in custom, ritual and especially fiction since the late Ming (Ko 1994, 143-76; McMahon 1995, 99-125). For the most part, fitting qualities for male characters emphasize a heroic and noble temperament, strength and martial skill, a deep sense of loyalty and righteousness, all tempered with wisdom, in that order. Sometimes, male readers demonstrated an awareness of particular stereotypes and expressed their attempts to deal with them, to tweak the template of the *haohan* (好汉, "true, brave hero") here and there. As to "typical" male and female characters, one man stated:

¹⁶⁶QRH-20.

Perhaps I can say there is no stereotype therein. Yet I like female characters to be beautiful and caring and strong in personality and lucky in their life. As to male characters, I relate to those who may be termed “real man”, not that they must be a pile of muscles and some brains, but that they have to be able to control themselves come hell or high waters, never quaver about their responsibilities, always dare challenges of the severest type, and are ready to help the weak as well as to enjoy life and love.¹⁶⁷

Both men and women felt that characters of both sexes should be cultured or educated, though this was seen as a slightly more desirable priority for female characters. Interestingly, a few male and female readers thought that masculine characters should be “flawed,” that is, that they are more attractive and credible if they do not suffer from the “excessive perfection” that “A” noted earlier as a common condition among the gallant knights-errant. No similar recommendation was put forward for female protagonists, however, and men generally described feminine emotional capacity in negative terms. In the final section, I want to explore the story-world of martial arts fiction through the perceptions of women readers, in order to get some idea of the narrative boundaries of the genre, and how these constraints are traversed and renegotiated by female audiences.

¹⁶⁷QRH-05.

6.4 Impossibility and Potential in Women's "World Upside Down"

In her analysis of the topos of the unruly woman-on-top as a polysemic image of social and sexual inversion in early modern Europe, Natalie Zemon Davis suggests that this motif presented an especially strong and fertile symbolic space in which members of pre-industrial societies, whose lives were still largely influenced by feudalism, could engage in subversive celebration and play, and "that comic and festive inversion could *undermine* as well as reinforce" extant hierarchies (1978, 150, 152, 154-55). It strikes me that perhaps one of the more attractive elements of martial arts fiction for women readers lies in the multivalent readings that are possible, either from the vantage point of the fictional characters or the actual audiences themselves.

First, the figure of the martial heroine, like the unruly woman of European tradition, presents, as Davis suggests in her central thesis, both a challenge and a reaffirmation of the prevailing social system and separation of gendered identities and gendered spheres of action. In the inner dimension of domestic space, the heroine can, like the soldier and devoted daughter Hua Mulan (花木蘭)¹⁶⁸ of folk culture, or the tempestuous and deadly beauty Huang Rong (黄蓉) in Jin Yong's *Eagle-Shooting Heroes* (*Shediao yingxiong zhuan*, 《射雕英雄传》), engage her domestic talents as successfully as her fighting skill in order to achieve her own strategic ends or, like Mulan, discharge a debt of filial duty after her fighting days are over. Her ability to traverse the inner and outer domains, though

¹⁶⁸In traditional script, Mulan's name is rendered 花木蘭. Interestingly perhaps, her name is a partial inversion of words meaning "orchid" or "lily magnolia."

not *always* at moments of her own choosing,¹⁶⁹ inscribes a compelling, open-ended text in the minds of spectators of both sexes, real and narrated. Audiences wonder, like the astonished commander or company¹⁷⁰ who escorted her home after her honourable discharge and see her emerge after changing into feminine attire in preparation to serve her aged parents: “同性十二年、不知木兰是女郎！” “Twelve years we were of the same nature [i.e., sex], never knew Mulan was a maid!”¹⁷¹

Or, like the presumably male kungfu fiction fan commenting on the perils of an alliance with someone like Huang Rong in an online magazine, readers may ask how anyone could possess such daring—or foolishness—as to choose a more intelligent partner. In the novel, she marries the principal hero, Guo Jing (郭靖), a good, stalwart fellow described by most readers basically as “nice, but dumb.” The reader poses the question:

象这样聪明和漂亮都到绝顶的女孩，恐怕是没人敢娶的，敢娶她的一准是郭靖那样的傻瓜。这当然类似于吃不到葡萄的狐狸。说实话，就算你受不了黄蓉的性子，难道还受不了她那手妙绝天下的好菜？

¹⁶⁹In folk literature and dramatic performances, for example, Hua Mulan is described as serving in the Khan's army disguised as a man for twelve years before she returns to her parent's home as their daughter.

¹⁷⁰The exact composition of Mulan's homeward entourage has been the subject of long-standing study and debate. See Hung (1975) for further discussion.

¹⁷¹LIU Bin, interview. 13 February 1994. The text is transcribed from a taped recitation of the “Ballad of Hua Mulan.” Because I do not have an original copy of the text, it is possible that the phrase meaning “of the same sex/nature” could also be “of the same heart/united of purpose” (*tongxin*, 同心), though I think the first is more likely. Also, although I have collected a number of male and female interpretations of the Mulan story, all of them were what I would call heterosexual readings. The only point of contention seems to be the ambiguity as to whether Mulan was returned home by one or several members of her former battalion and whether, if escorted by one man only, he was romantically involved with her. However, as Greenhill (1995) makes clear, alternate readings are always possible.

...whether anyone would dare to marry such an extremely intelligent and pretty woman. I'm afraid no one would, no one except that fool Guo Jing. This is of course analogous to the fox who couldn't reach the grapes. To tell the truth, even if you couldn't stand Huang Rong's temper, might it be hard to know for sure if you also couldn't tolerate her wonderful cooking? ("Dong Xie" 1995).¹⁷²

The heroine of the kungfu novel also holds her own in the outer, public realm. Though physically weaker than most of her male compatriots and opponents, she can claim and hold her ground, and think fast if that ground shifts away or is pulled out from under her, in an overwhelmingly masculine arena. It should also be remembered, however, as I described in Chapter Three, that the women in this study did not always side with the heroine of their favourite genres: some chose heroes, villains and even minor characters with down-to-earth qualities and shortcomings as the objects of their narrative empathy.

This response strikes me as potentially different from either western romance readers' vicarious identification with a beloved, emotionally validated and sustained heroine (Radway 1987, 113-14), or the phenomenon of fan-written homoerotic fiction (Bacon-Smith 1992, 219, 247) because many readers seem to enjoy focusing on a character who resembles *them*, rather than someone that they would like to become, or someone that they would necessarily feel the need to rewrite into a more holistic or compassionate figure. Likewise, Klapp's concept of the "vicarious identity voyages" through which people identify with heroes and celebrities in order to reinforce socially acceptable goals, violate those rules and values, or completely transcend their previous social outlook (1969, 217-39) also differs in many important respects from the experiences described by readers in this study.

¹⁷²See the bibliography for the full citation of this article, and the URL of the electronic magazine. Because of its electronic format, pagination varies and therefore no page number is given here. The author's name is probably a pseudonym.

As I discussed in the last chapter, cultural connection and social networks seem to play a more important role in Chinese romance and detective fiction than what we might call the emerging identity of the independent but beloved heroine. Interpersonal relations are also of key importance in martial arts fiction, particularly as they are set within a world especially dedicated to their heightened expression. I never had the sense that Chinese women readers completely transcend either the real or fictional worlds, as both frequently present situations of ongoing personal negotiation. Within the inner space delineated by a book's covers, however, some women kungfu novel fans enter the "rivers and lakes" —itself a kind of "inner," though certainly hardly *domestic*, landscape— by deliberately assuming either the guise of a female character, or the undisguised persona and unmediated "outer worldly" agency of one of the martial *brotherhood's* finest, in order to challenge and just possibly upstage masculine champions at their own games:

CHY: I just found that, because everybody knows it's not true, it's not true story, and it's...because you can posit yourself as the main character, doesn't matter if the main character is a man or a woman. You can be a man in a story like that. You can be powerful. Even in the real world you are very weak and you <pause> you haven't got a strong mind and you are physically weak but you can posit yourself as one of the physically strong characters. And you can beat other people. And you can beat the target of the world, the men of the world, something like that. It's like it gives you a space, gives you room to be away from the real world. And I think that's quite, especially for women I think it's very important.¹⁷³

I developed a sense, however, that women readers of martial arts fiction had a profound, unspoken perception that as far as the *jianghu* was concerned, the bounty and shelter of the Chinese greenwood were not easily achieved. I began to wonder whether the genre was not in some respects bounded within and without, for female characters, consumers and potential producers, by reflections and vestiges of traditions and tacit social

¹⁷³CHUNG Huiyuan, interview. 4 September 1995. T95CHYb-17. Original segment in English.

conventions that were *not* completely transcended by the essentially masculine world upside down that the genre inscribes. Earlier in the same interview Huiyuan responded to my question as to whether kungfu novels could ever be successfully written by women and how they would differ from male authors' narratives with the following reflections:

CHY: *Gongfu* fiction is a very kind of *yanggang* [阳刚, masculine] very, very, you know, masculine. She [a prospective author] would also have to pretend and learn how to use that kind of way to talk, to speak, to write. It's got a certain kind of way I think. [SK: "They would have to be like the disguised hero themselves."] <pause, considering> A little bit. [SK: "Talk with a different voice."] CH: <laughs, voice lower> Yes, possibly I think. It's a bit not fair.

She went on to say that though romance was always present to some degree in a kungfu novel, it was qualitatively different from the largely woman-centred romantic themes of contemporary love stories. Furthermore, she added that she was not certain that a female martial arts novelist who had to either subvert the generic system as it stands, or else subject her own authorial voice to the filter of the genre's conventions—to speak as a woman through the register of masculinity—would be all that readily welcomed by female fans. Part of the pleasure of the genre for women seems to be gaining access to masculine realms as desired, as well as the ability to speak and act as male or female depending upon the reader's feelings or the exigencies of the narrative situation. Other women readers of this genre concurred with Huiyuan's perspective, and although this may not mean that there are none currently publishing, none of the female readers could name a woman writer of chivalric fiction. From their commentaries however, I surmised that while a woman kungfu author might be an impossible construction, the ongoing female production of women's talk about this masculine genre as a constantly changing and updating variorum object certainly was not. It was not only possible, but of critical importance to individual women and their informal fandom networks.

Before concluding, I want to consider women's readings of female potential in the genre. Although men and women alike asserted that the *jianghu* represented a subculture outside the normal constraints and expectations of traditional society, a "place where anything could happen," I wanted to try and understand whether this potential was still more easily translated into a discourse of male power. In taped interviews and follow up discussions, I asked a few women fans to predict the outcome or development of certain types of characters based on their reading experiences. I then introduced a selection of hypothetical character profiles, varying them on dimensions such as gender, class and age. Overall, men who were talented in some way had a better chance of success, regardless of whether they were promising youths or seasoned men. Also, men who were talented but who unfortunately possessed unsavoury dispositions had a greater chance of reform and continued or greater success than women who laboured under similarly deficient moral attitudes or personalities.

If several negative or difficult dimensions meet in the same character, such as youth, femininity and poverty, her chances may be almost as bleak as in real life. The one possible exception to such a character's dismal prospects rests in the fact that she is a fictional character, and more likely to escape her fate in a novel than in the real world. However, as Fang Jing observed, even in narratives the chances for a happy ending with such a character are rather slim, especially since even her possession of the other feminine attributes of virtue, talent and beauty are themselves likely to work against her, threatening her identity and turning her into a commodity that is ultimately consumed, save perhaps for the timely but chance intervention of some benefactor:

方晶：很穷的女孩子通常会很聪明。她的命运要看她的境遇，看她碰到的人。如果碰到不好的人，比如是这样说可能是父母实在没有办法，可能他们卖掉等等。那这个呢，看把她卖给什么人家，卖到什么样的地方，如果是没有被卖掉，只在家里的话，她可能是父母的很好的帮助。有照顾父母比如父母

有病，或是父母有—有生活能力方面有残疾等等。照顾弟妹的，也。... 通常我觉得很穷的女孩子是—非常穷的情况下。是这种样的被卖掉，是家里的最重要的劳动力。她们通常会遇到，来她们遇到的人大多是坏人，特别是男的，大多数是坏人。很少会遇到真正想帮她，帮她们的人。也很少有最后会很幸福，通常她们的生活一生都是比较好以后，必要辛苦，必要悲惨。可能有一个别的会最后遇到很好心的人，但是在小说呢种这样的比较少。

FJ: A very poor young girl is often very clever. Her future depends on her circumstances, on the people she meets, if she meets bad people. Perhaps her parents cannot look after her and perhaps they sell her and so on. Well, then it depends on what sort of family she is sold into, and what kind of place [she ends up in]. If she is not sold, but remains at home, she is probably a great help to her parents. She looks after her parents, they are ill or they have— some infirmity which hinders their lives, something like that. She looks after her parents and her younger siblings. Often, I think that poor young women have very poor conditions, it's these sorts of things that might allow her to be sold. The family is the most important force. They often meet, most of the people they tend to meet are not good. Especially men, most of the ones they encounter are bad. They very rarely meet someone who genuinely wants to help them. Rarely do they find great happiness in the end. Usually, after a childhood which was pretty much alright, they will inevitably meet with suffering and sorrow. Perhaps the occasional one may meet a very good-hearted person, but in novels, this is fairly rare.¹⁷⁴

By and large, the male kungfu readers I asked about these questions were noncommittal in their responses, and I found the exercise on the whole less successful, in part because men were at times openly resistant to this kind of speculation. Their “gossip” about the genre, it seems, was firmly embedded within the texts themselves, whether they took positions as fans or critics of what the narrative systems had to offer. Some were noticeably averse to the exercise. For example, I interviewed one young man in an unrecorded session and part of the way through he said suddenly: “This is hard, I can’t do this,” and requested that we change topics, which I quickly did.

However, that does not mean that I have come to the conclusion that men should not be asked to respond to these issues, but I am sensitive to the knowledge that I may have to

¹⁷⁴FANG Jing, interview. 8 September 1995. Tape T95FJb-21.

change my approach and that, as a female ethnographer, there are perhaps some questions that will never be answered fully in my presence. Still, I think that these questions are worth pursuing, and in future, I would also find ways of asking male romance enthusiasts whether part of their attraction with traditionally feminine themes and stories comes from the fact that they, like female readers of kungfu novels, gain momentary access to and lasting appreciation of the world of the gendered "Other." Conversely, I think I would have to also be prepared for the possibility that some male readers, though clearly active consumers of romances, might feel at times like some of the men in Gullestad's study of home decoration, "not completely at home" in this aspect of his own activities, shaped and centred as they are around women's spaces and decisions (1993, 141). Somehow, through these discussions, I would also try to find out whether, for these male readers, the seemingly different goals of romance and chivalry are reflected in a certain cultural balance that sees the actions and emotions of love and conquest as alternative but complementary enactments of essentially noble passions. At this point, my guess is that the two types of stories differ not so much in their fundamental concerns as the settings, props and roles through which they play out those preoccupations on their pages and in the minds of their audiences. And that, I think, helps to explain why their respective publics, despite all their apparent separation, have endured in essentially complementary juxtaposition for so long.

6.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have focused on a discussion of male and female readers' discursive strategies for talking about books, as well as outlined a comparison of some of the essential similarities and differences in their actual responses. I have argued that "chat," as it is understood in Chinese culture, is used by both men and women for the mutually

interrelated purposes of gossip and information, and I have described how some western theoretical viewpoints diverge in this regard as to the gendered social uses of these kinds of expressive behaviour. I have compared the descriptions readers of both sexes use to portray “typical” male and female characters, and I have explored female readings of martial arts fiction as to whether the subculture of the novel actually constitutes an “equal opportunity” landscape in the opinion of female fans, and whether such an environment would hold the same fascination.

I suspect that I end this chapter having raised more questions than I answered, but as Greenhill found in her analysis of cross-dressing ballads, such work “is a first step ...toward decentering these folksong texts from a single, unified, discoverable, authentic meaning” (1995, 162). Just as many women I spoke to resolve the twelve years of textual silence in the Mulan ballad by saying that Mulan kept her identity as a woman secret from her men because she shared that knowledge with one particular man, and then brought him home to meet the folks, so too I think it important to ask about and listen to the stories people tell between and beyond those they read, even if those texts are ostensibly written by and/or for a particular gender.

In the Conclusion, I summarize the major contributions and findings of this work, and identify areas —such as the foregoing— which would benefit from additional research. Finally, I reflect on some of the other stories I found between the lines of the one I have presented here.

Conclusion

But books are only words and the valuable part of words is the thought therein contained.

—Chuang Tzu —175

In the fuller context of this excerpt from Chuang Tzu, he expresses his disdain for the misguided perceptions of a world that values books as a means to grasping the Way or *Dao* (道), and generally dismisses whatever such a world could possibly deem valuable. I think, however, that this quote provides a frame of reference for both the scope and ultimate direction of this thesis, as well as my concluding thoughts on it— at least to the extent that any book, like any reading given form and fixity in writing, contains within it all of the unspoken stories and unvoiced deliberations that might have come through in other readings or for other readers. This thesis has examined deliberations both between and beyond the covers that literally and metaphorically bind particular texts to their specific places in either popular tradition or consumption. It has explored the tripartite process of reading, thought and inscription— which includes such ephemeral yet enduring traces as solitary memories of reading and the shared laughter of talking about it. Indeed, as I have tried to show, readers' thoughts and associations, their uses, aesthetics, gossip, insights and creativity are as much a part of the storied history of Chinese popular fiction as the novels themselves.

¹⁷⁵See Giles (1926, 170).

Contributions of the Present Study

Clearly, the most important ethnographic contribution that this thesis makes to current folklore and popular culture scholarship is the description of audiences and texts that may be little known to people from non-Chinese cultures who are not themselves fans of Asian popular media. Also, I have tried to demonstrate that some of our theoretical and methodological assumptions about the construct of “audience” or “readership” —such as evidence of active, ongoing consumption as a necessary (and sometimes almost sufficient) precondition for fandom, the nature of “identification” with aspects of the narrative and gendered reading patterns— must be re-evaluated when we move into another language and another cultural worldview. Finally, I think this work expresses a measure of the intricate weaving of history, language and resonance inherent in readers’ responses to Chinese fiction, whether “popular” or “classical.” And, within this interwoven multivocal and multifaceted totality, as with the creative reception of almost any aesthetic genre, whether a story inscribed in talk, on paper —or even on porcelain or silk— there is reflective deliberation, but —as many of the readers to whom I spoke and wrote were careful to point out— there is also joy.

In addition, I feel that there is room for a great deal more work in Chinese popular culture and folklore which combines contemporary ethnographic, as well as historical and/or textual research. It would be interesting, for example, to explore the audience responses to a genre or a text expressed through different media— to look in past and recent history at episodes from *Water Margin*, performed as plays, by live storytellers, and on radio broadcasts in both rural and urban settings.

Similarly, a detailed study of martial arts film audiences or children's comic book readership might help us to understand whether, and to what extent, images contribute to audience enjoyment, comprehension and elaboration of texts that are viewed or read—whether there is a strong “visual memory” for many members of Chinese popular audiences which is prompted or enhanced by accompanying pictures, regardless of age or education level. Conversely, such a study may also discover a correlation between such factors as readers' ages and the changing nature of their responses to visual representations and interpretations of well-loved works. As audience members become expert readers, some may experience growing discontent with the pictures on the screen or page and as compared with those in the mind's eye, leading them to alter their patterns of consumption to focus on popular forms which either leave more to the imagination, like books, or to turn to narrative genres whose “visual effects” are less striking. Such a situation might obtain in the case of a kungfu fiction fan dissatisfied with mainstream cinematic offerings whose preferences in *that* genre are restricted to novels, but who also likes mystery serials or romantic films.

Furthermore, I think that it is important to understand that Chinese folklore and popular culture are not only the property of, on the one hand, the peasantry, and on the other, the moderately educated working class.¹⁷⁶ In this study, I have tried to demonstrate that people who belong to intellectual or elite levels of society also practice oral traditions,¹⁷⁷ engage in

¹⁷⁶See Tuohy (1991) and Ting (1987) for a discussion of some of the trends, assumptions and practices which have shaped contemporary Chinese folklore scholarship.

¹⁷⁷And, it must be remembered that within any “class” of any society, including Chinese society, there are many gradations and shadings of class consciousness which may be expressed by people both within a particular grouping (technical versus semi-skilled factory workers, for example), and from different social strata. See Johnson (1985) and Brownell (1995, 155-209).

performances and develop repertoires that are integrally related to their own personal, as well as larger Chinese cultural patterns of worldview. If elite, folk and popular elements have enjoyed a long tradition of intermixing and borrowing within Chinese culture, then this must be partially attributed not only to the creators of texts, such as authors, and the official organs of production and dissemination, such as publishing houses and government departments, but also to the people who actually perform and receive these texts. Although the site of exchange between folk and literate culture cannot be assumed to be completely reciprocal or equally permeable on both sides, due to such factors as literacy, geography and their inevitable influence on class relations, I think that this thesis helps to show that narrative worlds may provide a certain common ground for people from a range of social backgrounds and —though their experiences will certainly yield different perceptual emphases— the landscape of popular stories is potentially comprehensible to a wide range of readers, seasoned and novice alike.

Concluding Thoughts on this Ethnography of Reading

Ethnography is the greatest unfinished book of all. To put down my final thoughts on this experience is difficult, as I do not think my impressions at the end of this process are fixed or conclusively decided. It will suffice, for now, if I present my reflections as they have changed up to this moment. I have written a book and in so doing I have read many others and, of these especially, the ephemeral works I have been privileged to examine have been rare indeed. Taken together, I have certainly learned something, and formulated some questions as to where I would next like to explore.

At the start of my research, I had no idea of what I would find. I did not even know whether I would find anyone who would be willing to talk to me. Perhaps Zhongning, his

older colleague the unabashed romance fan and “the secret women’s discussion group” were rarities in Chinese popular culture. Perhaps everyone else, confronting me in a different country, would dismiss me as an overly inquisitive stranger who liked nothing more than to pry into the spare time habits of other people. Perhaps, by telling me that fiction reading was an important activity all too infrequently indulged, Chinese readers would be afraid that my research would somehow tarnish the conception of many outsiders as to the unceasing industry of this group as a whole. That some were trading text books for novels in the wee hours, and furthermore, that they put them down with greater reluctance than their more scholarly tomes, was perhaps a dangerous bit of cultural description that should remain largely unknown.

My fears were certainly unfounded. Not only were readers willing and happy to participate, very often they suggested others I could contact. I did not expect Chinese reading habits to fit entirely within western analytical models, as indeed they do not. I did not expect to find such interesting interactions between gender and traditionally masculine or feminine fiction. I admire many male romance readers, for example, for the innovative ways in which they approached the typical range of generic options and made other choices, because now they could. I admire female readers of martial arts fiction for somewhat different, though equally important reasons. At the moment, I am writing a paper which puts some of these reasons together, and tells some of their stories.

I did not realize reading was such a cherished activity for these people. I am an adult second language learner who learned Chinese almost literally “on the streets” of Beijing. There were often times early in my first summer there when I was hungry and could not buy the kind of food I wanted, times when I was lost and could not find my way back to my dormitory. While it may be true that “for every household there is a road to Chang’An”

—all families can hope to attain honour (i.e., through the success of their sons in civil examinations)— I know from personal experience that if you ride your bicycle the wrong way down the Avenue of Everlasting Peace, you go even farther *and* it gets dark.

Still, each day held new opportunities for me to learn more characters, to get my bearings and to read. I could go to the Beijing Public Library more easily than ordinary citizens. I could read English language journals there, or go to the library at the British Embassy with no trouble. At one point, the cultural section of the Canadian Embassy gave me two boxes of Canadian novels from the National Library of Canada, which I ultimately gave to the college where I taught. If I could shift them, I was told, they were mine. Margaret Atwood, Mordecai Richler, Stephen Leacock and others got me through that hot summer, and helped me to forget that, though the occurrences were definitely on the decline, I was still hungry and lost sometimes, and that occasionally I still bought thousand year-old eggs by mistake.

As I have already said, I could read almost before I could walk properly and I do not know what I would do if reading ceased to be a part of my life. I think the pain and loneliness would be almost unimaginable, I would be bereft of one of my greatest sources of joy. This seems to have been largely the case for many of the Mainland Chinese readers in this study at some point in their lives. By the end of my research, I came to understand that the silences on my tapes, the abrupt shift of topic to particular books and their clusters of memories are as eloquent as the stream of excited talk which ensues after those transitions are made.

Chinese often speak of a “quiet heart” as important to the ability to weigh the significance of one’s actions and experiences, to deliberate on the choices and directions which shape the paths of one’s life. While in such a mood, I thought to myself: “What was

this like?" I remembered the outline of a story told to me once by a Chinese friend. He related it as a comment on an observation I had made regarding the distances Chinese families and friends had to endure. So far away, and sometimes for so many years, I marvelled, and yet they still stayed close. I cannot annotate this tale with any printed versions at this time, and I know that my outline will be but a pale replica of his tale, which was itself told as an aside. In the moment of my quiet heart, I knew that this tale summarized my place in this research, the significance of what I had learned, and the ethnographic commitment entailed by the questions I had asked:

There were two scholars, one a poet, the other a musician who played a traditional stringed instrument. They met by chance on their travels and struck up an acquaintance. They spent an enjoyable evening on the bank of a river, drinking wine in the moonlight and sharing poetry and music. By the end of the evening, both promised to meet at the same place in one year's time to pass the evening just as they had done. And so for many years they met in this way, and the friendship deepened. One year, the musician came to the bank early, and waited for his friend. Night fell, the moon rose and still there was no sign of the poet. The musician grew angry: "Surely he cannot throw away our friendship after so many years!" At that moment, a ferryman sailed past on his raft. He knew of the two distinguished friends and their loyalty to each other. He said: "Your friend died earlier in the year, and is buried on the opposite shore, almost immediately across from where you are now." The musician began to play.

Undoubtedly, some western scholars will not see how this story fits. The pair met over many years, and more importantly, the poet died. The connection, it seems, is immutably severed. I can only say that I have come to understand the Chinese conception of time as elastic and synchronous, not linear. Time continues because people have the patience and fortitude to wait and to remember. The nature of connections may change, but in some way, they endure. The musician played because his friend honoured the time and place of their rendezvous. Likewise, the readers in this study met me to share something that they thought was delightful and worthy of commemoration, though many may have reached the bank years ago. They did a multitude of other things while they waited for me to catch up,

and to understand. The point is, they kept the appointment. Now, to the best of my ability, so have I.

Directions for Future Research

As I have noted elsewhere throughout the preceding chapters, my research has focused on a small cross section of readership and my analysis has focused mainly on specific popular printed genres, even though many of these genres —perhaps most notably romance and martial arts fiction— are found (and avidly consumed) in a variety of other mass-mediated forms, such as film, television and comics. I think, therefore, that a more complete picture of each of the genres and their audiences should include a consideration of some of these other media, perhaps initially concentrating on particular genres and ultimately making cross-generic comparisons which take into account viewers and readers from different generations and different social backgrounds.

On a similar note, just as this thesis has explored the historical traditions which underlie particular contemporary genres, I also feel that more study into the influences brought to bear on Chinese popular culture through past and contemporary popular traditions from other cultures is required. For example, the reception of western translated detective fiction in relation to both traditional and western-inspired Chinese models, science fiction and the juxtaposition and points of convergence between fantasy and technology as seen from different cultural perspectives, and the influence of Japanese animation on the visual representation of martial arts fiction —which is perhaps of particular significance most immediately in Taiwan and Hong Kong— are all topics worthy of additional investigation. Generic traditions, as we have seen, not only have the capacity for significant exchange with other genres from the same culture, but also for cross-cultural borrowing as well.

Although a number of the readers I surveyed expressed an interest in western and/or Japanese fiction, I think that some of those stories and connections could be fruitfully explored in future studies.

Concerning the actual genres themselves, I found that my research raised several questions that could be explored in more detail. Given my enduring interest in the Chinese heroine in folklore, further study of heroines in martial arts fiction presents an obvious line of inquiry. Also, a greater understanding of the underlying premises of physical and metaphysical culture expressed in this genre, as well as the central place occupied by the student-mentor relationship in both martial arts culture and its fiction would add to a comprehensive ethnographic analysis, especially when looking at readers who may focus on the technical descriptions of moves, or the preparation leading up to combat, or to an impending conflict central to the protagonist's development or emergence as a master of some particular discipline.

Additionally, I think that the responses of male readers who read romances could potentially contribute a fascinating angle to the extant scholarly discourse surrounding the consumption of such traditionally feminine genres as western romance fiction and soap operas. Although I realize that there are a variety of reasons why it seems easier for me to find out why women read kungfu novels, I think that the stories that may be found within differently socially constructed groups and the reading they create and rework can teach us a great deal about our own stories and deliberations, what is contained within and beyond the covers of a text.

Moreover, I would like to explore the nuances and rules governing this and related forms of Chinese verbal art within the context of established communities of Chinese popular cultural consumers over longer periods of time: a group of roommates reading

through college, a group of factory workers meeting at lunch to chat about soaps or the current novel featured in a newspaper literary supplement. I realize that some of these questions may require that I return to China, or go to Hong Kong or Taiwan, but I believe that these issues have not been adequately explored within Chinese Canadian expatriate culture. I may need to learn Cantonese, but I am certain that cultural scenes of this kind unfold in markets, offices and living rooms across the country on a daily basis.

Finally, I am interested in martial arts role-playing games and particularly how chivalry is scripted and played out online. Specifically, despite the crossing and reworking of real-life gender identities that is not only possible, but *likely* in fantasy scenarios, I would like to know how male virtual *haohan* handle such challenges as romance and combat with martial heroines, and whether any of them ever play female characters themselves. Likewise, although I suspect that the numbers will be much fewer, I would like to talk to women gamers about their ethereal heroics as well. These directions signify the exciting possibilities of questions that I have yet to formulate and ask, and stories I have yet to hear. However, I think that, although some of these tales may be ephemeral or difficult to find, they are not impossibly —or even necessarily very deeply— hidden. And, the tellers, readers and players who create these stories may be initially surprised but ultimately pleased to find someone outside their immediate circles of fan culture interested in their narrative adventures. *This* project, as I have said, began when a book slipped out of a shopping bag and I heard the words of a reader's hurried explanation —and listened to the thoughts and profound delight behind it.

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Appendix A: Participatory Culture and the Internet

Introduction

This discussion is intended as not only a summary of the ethnographic research I have undertaken to date in the area of Chinese Internet communities and performances, but also as a kind of practical application of some of the directions for future research outlined in the Conclusion. As such, this Appendix remains very much a work in progress as well as an overview of the topics I have already explored, and is presented also in place of copies of published and forthcoming papers. The Chinese Internet is as varied as regional styles of cuisine. I intend here to provide a taste of some of the interesting and unusual delights that are out there, keeping in mind that, like regional cooking styles, there is a kind of overriding cultural philosophy which governs what is possible and “tasty” and what is not. Aside from that, I will provide a detailed, if somewhat technical, synopsis of the kinds of tools required to approach some of the kinds of Chinese texts available for online consumption.

Initially, I was drawn to an examination of electronic communities because it seemed to me that Chinese fans of popular fiction did not seem to participate in fan cultures to the extent that studies by western scholars (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992) had shown to be the case with other media fans from other cultural backgrounds. I am aware, however, of the existence of such things as fiction and animation fan clubs, especially among young people in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and even of a formalized academic discipline, “Jin Yong Studies” (*Jinxue*, 金學), devoted to the systematic study and interpretation of the writings, fiction and non-fiction, of the celebrated author of martial arts novels.

Nevertheless, none of the readers I surveyed seemed to extend their participation with favourite texts by these rather public means. Consequently, I was curious to find out the creative ways through which some of them, as well as other Chinese readers beyond those comprising my very limited sample, might choose to enhance their experiences of narrative pleasure, either individually or collectively, beyond the original discovery of a particular text. Pertaining to the subject of this discussion specifically, some readers told me about anonymous ftp (File Transfer Protocol) sites where excerpts of Chinese popular and classical novels could be downloaded, while others mentioned the prevalence of humorous performances on newsgroups, such as users nicknaming themselves after well-known fictional characters from literature and folklore. At first, it was difficult for me to identify clearly genuine examples of the kinds of creative acts people were describing. While I located the various sites and resources with little difficulty, I initially failed to understand the importance of certain publicly accessible texts to an anonymous audience whose “readings” generally left little or no discernible trace of personal involvement.

At the outset, I accept the basic premise that reading is, by and large, an activity pursued in solitude, and therefore the formation of distinctive, informal group networks whose aim is the playful reworking of a set of cultural products is probably facilitated by media that adapt more readily to communal reception, such as a videotaped television series. However, as Brown observes, even very socially constructed fanships manifest differing degrees of network presence and interaction (1994, 82). Moreover, as with many of the genres, character-types, settings and aesthetic patterns I explore throughout this work, I recognize that these expressions of elaborated textual interactions could also be culturally-specific. That is, just because I could not find demonstrations of fan participation

in the forms that my own cultural and scholarly background had equipped me to recognize, did not mean that such performances were nonexistent.

I think that this challenge that I faced in my research is, in some ways, an epitome of the larger challenges now faced by folklore's practice and epistemology. According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, folklorists need to turn themselves to: "fundamentally rethinking what we have long defended as our disciplinary subject by discovering the topic in the tool," and that a simple shift of the analytic methodologies we traditionally applied to the study of oral materials is insufficient as it would: "reinstate folklore's canonical subject, not challenge it, which requires taking seriously the condition of disembodied presence and immateriality of place, fluid membership and ephemeral existence" (1995, 73). Indeed, the very texts with which these electronic communities are concerned often proved to be "topics in the tool," acts of collective inscription and communal distribution that were "hiding in plain sight" until I learned a different way of seeing (Bacon-Smith 1992, 224-26).

In the first section, I discuss the concept of "rhetorical communities" as understood in the context of Chinese Internet communication. Also, I recap some of the particulars of the Chinese language and the technicalities of its online display which were introduced in Chapter Two. In addition, I provide a sample encoded text in order to emulate the appearance on the screen before and after interpretation by decoding software, as well as a translation of the humorous piece — a brief joke that was part of a collection posted to a Chinese language newsgroup. In the second section, I look at websites and other resources which are specifically concerned with martial arts fiction, while in the final segment of the present discussion I explore more general Chinese online resources, including some of the various kinds of creative and humorous performances that can be found on newsgroups

and the content and scope of electronic magazines, with particular emphasis on publications based in Canada.

Rhetorical Characters: Communities and Texts

Of Rhetorical Communities and Folk Groups

For ethnographers of computerized communication, and particularly of online exchanges that take place in another cultural milieu, the question of whether an electronic community constitutes a folk group can prove a contentious and challenging issue. In her analysis of the communicative traditions and performance genres of a soap opera newsgroup, Baym presented compelling reasoning to suggest that a mutual frame of reference, as well as a shared grasp of the requisite technology and the discourse styles favoured by the group to deconstruct the content of the original televised medium: "are enough to create distinct ways of speaking, and hence distinctive folk groups and folkloric traditions" (1993, 144). For reasons which I suggest are similar, at least in spirit if not political connotation, to researchers who prefer to speak of *vernacular* rather than *folk* song traditions, I have chosen to refrain from describing networks of Chinese users who post their creative performances on the Net in these terms. Instead, I have adopted the idea of "rhetorical communities" to describe such phenomena as newsgroup contributors who use jokes and nicknames to shape and traditionalize speech play.¹⁷⁸ In this work, I suggest that one of the features of electronic rhetorical communities is an interactive *co-prescience*, which I define essentially as: "an understanding of the potentialities of a shared cultural

¹⁷⁸"Performances in Character: Humor and Nicknaming on the Chinese Net" (Kozar, in press).

repertoire— which helps to establish a rhetorical community where *co-presence* is not only impossible, but also ultimately unnecessary.”

The concept of rhetorical communities, developed by Narváez in his study of the influence of a popular Newfoundland radio broadcast, aptly describes how people who are widely dispersed over a considerable geographic area form: “groups united by sensory perceptions rather than by contiguity in physical space,” which are given coherence and identity through a skilled performer’s careful fusion of public and private information that would normally be available as cues in different social contexts (1991a, 192). Furthermore, Narváez maintains that the establishment of mass-mediated rhetorical communities such as the one he describes which evolved in response to the broadcasting genius of the late Ted Russell —the originator of the fictitious outport of “Pigeon Inlet” and its characters, including his signature persona, the well-informed but somewhat lovelorn “Uncle Mose” — can help individuals deal with rapid technological and social change by providing vital information and humour in a way that reinforces existing cultural values (192-93, 198-204).

Similarly, I suggest that individuals who participate in ongoing, topical, electronic interchange constitute communities according to this definition. This includes regular participation through media spaces (December 1996, 26) which allow simultaneous dialogue, such as IRC (Internet Relay Chat) channels, or which can be conceived of as falling along a continuum of dialogic potential that is inversely proportional to the temporal discontinuity inherent in their respective formats. For example, consider the differences between a newsgroup and a high traffic, frequently updated martial arts fiction website. The one is most often used as a forum for the exchange of ideas, the other as a resource for texts which may in turn provide ideas and performances for newsgroup postings.

As with the rhetorical community engendered through the radio broadcast, Internet users may also have access to both private, small group knowledge as well as cultural information of a more wide-ranging nature. As a case in point, former classmates may initiate an ongoing debate on a newsgroup around a particular topic. While it is not unlikely that at least some of the content of the arguments will refer to their mutual histories as friends —specific background information which most outside readers will be unable to comprehend completely— the content of these postings will probably describe experiences recognizable to most Chinese readers because of a more universal shared experience of student life in their homeland. By locating and accessing resources, forming opinions and then making their opinions and ideas available to others, users create a means of confronting some of the difficult issues which affect their lives both at home and abroad. Besides dealing with the profound changes they may have to face everyday, my research suggests that participation in rhetorical electronic communities may help people maintain existing ties that might otherwise become attenuated through geographical distance, as well as make new connections. As Parks and Floyd point out, despite the supposed contextual poverty of the text-based social environment which characterizes much of computer-mediated communication, a condition that is becoming less and less restrictive thanks to rapid changes in technology which make possible the transmission of still pictures, animations and sound along with text, people use the Net as a place to meet and, in some cases, to form lasting relationships that continue “offline” as well (1996, 93-94).

At this point, I want to return briefly to a consideration of the appropriateness of the term “folk group” as a descriptor for Chinese users who are connected by computer-mediated communication. In the first place, separations between urban life and “the countryside” and the different spheres of experience they connote, have always existed in

China. Of equal —or perhaps even greater— significance, are the separations between traditional and modern worldviews and the fact that these boundaries have often been the site of the creation of works of powerful literary and folkloric importance and widespread popularity.¹⁷⁹

In contemporary Chinese political history, however, the ideological practice of marking and unmarking “authentic” categories of people in order to distinguish between members of desirable and “dangerous” classes and the actions which invariably accompanied the public declaration of such designations, have also become deeply etched in people’s memories. If they did not themselves spend, as many of the people I interviewed about heroine stories put it: “wasted years in the countryside” —an aphorism that glosses over ten years of cultural upheaval— many of the readers in my study were probably separated from close family members, as well as denied access to certain kinds of experiences that I took for granted: the right to fall in love, the right to read as much and as widely as I could.

As a folklorist interested in cross-cultural research, I have established certain guidelines which inform my practice. The first of these is that I do not change the names of people I interview. If a person does not want to be quoted by name, I request that they supply a pseudonym in writing. If they do not wish to do this, or cannot come up with a suitable alias, then I quote them anonymously, providing that they have permitted me to use their interview material. Although some of the traditions associated with name giving may have fallen into disuse, careful consideration is often given to the choice of a child’s name. Characters are chosen which combine to total an auspicious number of strokes, or which are thought to augur well for the individual’s future happiness (Eberhard 1986, 204). With

¹⁷⁹See for example Link’s (1984) discussion of revolutionary cross-talk (*xiangsheng*, 相声) performances.

this knowledge, I have never felt comfortable changing names because I do not think that a simple act of substitution can suffice for words that are chosen because of their combined architectonic of sound, form and significance.

Secondly, I have had to rethink my use of the word “folk” to modify the group or groups whose traditions I have been privileged to explore for the last several years. Modify means both “to specify or describe” and “to alter.” Far from a way of more securely establishing the identity of a referent, I fear that “folk” applied in this context would tend to change the essence of the group I was trying to name. I am not arguing here that the use of the term “folk group” be dropped from the discipline, however, I find that the concept of “rhetorical communities” is more specifically suited to the description of the kinds of interactions with which my research is concerned, primarily because it locates individuals in shared cultural spaces that are not necessarily bounded by time or geography. Also, as I discuss above, while “folk” is not a taboo word in Chinese language and culture, it carries political and historical connotations of which folklorists unfamiliar with China or Chinese intellectuals may be unaware. Much like arbitrarily renaming respondents, I have to take care that my choice of words, influenced by the naming conventions with which I am culturally and professionally most familiar, do not acquire unintended shades of meaning in translation.

Textual Palimpsests: ASCII, Chinese-Style

In Chapter Two, I gave an overview of some of the major points of interaction between the present-day written Chinese language and the electronic presentation of Chinese text. Briefly restated, Chinese characters refer to words or ideas rather than to an “alphabet” as we know it, and though there are over 50,000 characters, only a few thousand are used to

meet everyday requirements. Also, though there are many Chinese dialects, the written language is common to all, with the possible exception of certain characters which may be used more frequently in one dialect than in another, as happens occasionally, for example, in written adaptations of the Cantonese dialect, or in the representation of the Taiwanese language (*taiyu*, 台語) which sometimes occurs in romance novels.

A female postgraduate from Taiwan who reads serialized romantic fiction and short stories, explained this literary convention to me. She said that she enjoyed such code-switching in books because the inclusion of Taiwanese dialogue made her feel very close or “warmly disposed” (*qinjie*, 親切) toward the characters in the story. A Mandarin speaker, she knows a little Taiwanese, and so finds this kind of device amusing. Renderings in the Taiwanese language use the same characters as standard Chinese, but the meaning is different because the words are transliterations of another language. She asserted that, despite the different meanings which are temporarily attached to the familiar characters that have been syntactically reordered into *taiyu* phrases, the meaning is revealed in the phonic similitude: “You can guess the sound — the pronunciation is similar to Taiwanese.”¹⁸⁰

Moreover, although a Mandarin-only speaker from Beijing might be hard pressed to understand a monolingual person from Guangzhou (Canton), especially if that person’s preferred tongue was Cantonese rather than the official Mandarin, they *could* still communicate in writing. However, it should be noted that a person born in southern China after 1949, would probably speak Cantonese or a close variation in most daily situations.

I also pointed out an important distinction with respect to the different *scripts* of the written language that are used, as these have a direct bearing on the conversion and display of Chinese electronic text. As I stated earlier, after Liberation on the Chinese Mainland and

¹⁸⁰LIN, Mei-hsing, interview. 23 August 1995. Tape T95LMH-08.

the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, literacy reforms were introduced which simplified the form of many —but certainly not all— Chinese characters. Most commonly, there was a reduction in the number of strokes comprising certain characters. For example, *bian*, meaning “to change or transform” underwent considerable streamlining, from (變) to (变). The “cut-down,” simplified version is comprised of approximately two-thirds fewer strokes compared to its full-form counterpart. However, some simplifications were based on shorthand adaptations already extant within the full-form script system. Also, many characters did not undergo any process of simplification or other alteration. The simplified system is used in Mainland China, Singapore and, increasingly, Hong Kong, while the traditional, full-form script is used in Taiwan and in many Overseas Chinese communities whose earliest inhabitants settled in cities and towns in the west prior to the literacy reforms.

In order to accommodate the different scripts, there are different decoding systems which interpret either simplified or full-form Chinese characters, though some shareware packages handle both, as long as the user selects the appropriate decoding environment for a given text. As mentioned in the second chapter, simplified Chinese uses either hZ/zW or GB encoding, and full-form characters require the “BIG-5” protocol. Each system works in a similar fashion, though their environments are defined slightly differently. For example, hZ/zW encoding transforms fixed, two-bit units of ASCII code into Chinese characters providing that they are delimited by fixed notation at the beginning and end of each line, (~{) and (~}) respectively.

Except in cases where files may have to be encrypted for cross-platform transmission, for example, for transmissions between a DOS and a Unix machine, these systems enable users to send and receive, upload and download Chinese materials as ordinary text files.

Most of these encoding and decoding programs are available as shareware or freeware from Chinese ftp sites such as *cnd.org*, whose public software directories are further subdivided by platform operating system —Macintosh, DOS, Windows, X-Windows and so on— and software function. Users can search for viewers, editors, news readers, specialized fonts and conversion utilities, as well as other Chinese text-compatible applications. While the simplest programs only display, or display and print, more sophisticated applications also allow text editing.

Several input methods are available for editing programs. Perhaps the most common requires that the user enter the *pinyin*, or phonemic spelling, and tone value of a word. In some cases, the tone, represented as a number from one to four, is optional. Without the delimiting variable, the software will simply come up with more possibilities. The program then generates a set of characters with the same pronunciation, and the correct one is selected by means of a specified keystroke or sequence.

When understood as an interpreting environment which looks for particular delimiting or defining sequences, the transformations necessary to display the ASCII codes as Chinese text become quite straightforward. As with now more or less obsolete DOS-based word processing programs, the software looks for a particular sequence of control or function codes which indicate the beginning and ending of an action or attribute that the software is designed to apply. However, instead of creating a paragraph indent, or underlining a heading, the only action that these Chinese shareware packages perform is the interpretation of correctly defined lines of code into recognizable Chinese characters.

It follows then, that if an individual does not have a decoding program installed on his or her terminal, or if it is inactive when the user is logged on to an encoded newsgroup or other site, the postings are displayed in code only. As I have said, the various encoding

protocols are ASCII-based, but—as the example in hZ/zW which follows clearly shows—it is not particularly “legible” as a script in itself. If the decoding software is running, the encoded message is presented on screen in Chinese. Also, just like the hazards of DOS word processing when an attribute is mistakenly left “on” —resulting in a paragraph of unwanted boldface text in the hard copy, for example— if a line of Chinese text is missing the required delimiting notation, whether at the beginning or at the end, the line may not be interpreted correctly. The resulting ideographs may be nonsense characters, or characters interspersed with untransformed ASCII. In this respect, the actual display of characters, as a technological event, may be thought of as an electronic palimpsest overlaying the ASCII code, but a palimpsest whose comprehensible meaning is only contained in its top layer.

The following example, from a collection posted by “*Bai mao nǚ*” (白毛女, “White-Haired Girl,” the main character in a well-known Revolutionary opera) on 5 March 1996, is shown below in correctly defined hZ encoding, as can be seen from the (~{) and (~}) delimiters at the beginning and end of each line:

```
~{!!!!P!K5!!~}
~{!!>+!q2!T:@o#.SPA=N;TZ=:L8#!0NR5DP!K5TuC4Qy#?!1~}
~{!02;4m#>MJG3v3!HKJ}L+6'!#!1~}
~{!!4KJ1;SJ?3eK{CGHB5@#;!0:Y#.DcCGA)?!0Q5g;02>7E;XH%#!#!1~}
```

This joke, along with the others in the collection, would have been displayed in Chinese on the screen during input because the respondent who posted it to the Net would have been operating a Chinese decoding program which could interpret this type of code. To readers running similarly compatible decoding systems, the joke would have appeared in simplified Chinese:

小说
精神病院里，有两位在交谈：“我的小说怎么样？”
“不错，就是出场人数太多。”
此时护士冲他们嚷道：“嘿，你们俩快把电话簿放回去。”

The GB and Big-5 protocols work in a similar fashion, however, they use different parameters to define their interpretive environments. Since the decoding programs do not render texts into other languages, I have provided a translation:

The Novel

In a psychiatric clinic, two people were engaged in conversation: "What do you think of my novel?"

"Not bad, though there are too many characters."

Just then, a nurse came upon them and yelled: "Hey, you two, quick! Put the phone book back!"

Next, I explore sites that are specifically concerned with martial arts fiction, including webpages, gopher sites, and role-playing games that draw on classical and contemporary aspects of the genre. Unfortunately, I have not found any electronic resources pertaining specifically to Chinese romance and detective fiction fandom to date, however, I expect that if I am able to follow-up with future investigations into related areas, such as Japanese animation and comics, I will be able to identify some pertinent material. Perhaps the generic predominance of kungfu fiction in this context is at least partly accounted for by a prevailing male gender bias. Although I am not certain that this holds for online gaming, since as Turkle notes, both male and female players can script their identities as opposite or alternatively gendered personas (1995, 212-13), I would wager that a greater number of male kungfu fiction fans would tend to see the necessity of making texts available for distribution, and that many of these same fans would have the computer facilities to do so at their disposal on a daily basis, as part of their ongoing study and/or work.

Also, I sensed that male readers were somewhat more likely to use the computers they worked on for relaxation. By contrast, female readers, perhaps because of family

responsibilities which required them to divide their time between different locales depending on their roles as researchers, wives and mothers, seemed more inclined to make a more distinct separation between the environments associated with work versus those identified with play. One electronic questionnaire respondent stated that he was an avid reader of online texts, especially historical materials. A thirty-four year old electrical engineer studying at Leeds and a frequent visitor to the "sunrise" gopher site, which I discuss in greater detail shortly, he replied that he read "anytime, ONLINE," and that his preferred place for reading was "in front of computer."¹⁸¹ For others, the computer is not only a source of texts, but also a site of playful reading and spectacle which can transfer readily into other participatory contexts, such as role-playing. Although my research in this area is only in its initial stages, the next section describes some of these interactive online resources.

Sites of Chivalry: Texts, Webpages and Games

There are numerous references to Chinese popular culture on the Internet, especially to martial arts fiction and films. My intent here is not to provide an exhaustive guide to these materials and, as I have already stated, a thorough study of cinematic interpretations of the Chinese chivalric genre is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, I want to present a representative sample of electronic texts and displays of fan culture. To this end, I examine sources and applications of narratives, that is, I provide the locations of some important collections of Chinese popular and classical texts, and I explore a number of sites which provide materials for face-to-face interactive Role-Playing Games (RPGs or FRP, Fantasy Role-Playing) and online MUD (Multi-User Domains/Dungeons). Although I do not know

¹⁸¹QRE-15.

of any kungfu fiction campaigns being conducted in this way at the moment, I also briefly mention alternative strategies of electronic gaming format and delivery, such as Playing By (E-) Mail (PBEM and PBM), and indicate some detailed sites which I think are good starting points for further ethnographic study of these types of interaction. To avoid overuse of unwieldy site addresses, only certain URLs will be listed within the text. A more complete listing is provided in the Appendix.

Textual Performances and Performative Texts I: Intertextuality on the Web

According to Ong, the conceptual possibility that not only oral, but also print cultures could be influenced by intertextuality—that “new” texts referred back to and were shaped by preceding ones, such that “newness” itself referred perhaps as much to novel methods of packaging and selective arrangement as genuine invention—presented a radical challenge to received notions of authorial creation and originality (1982, 133-34). Although I agree with Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s caution that electronic culture cannot be compared adequately with either oral or literate analogues (1995, 73), there is considerable intertextual borrowing and reworking on the Chinese Internet. Indeed, although in some cases large Chinese documents can be scanned and converted into electronic text—which in effect locates the act of inscription as the optional by-product of an almost purely technological event—many articles and excerpts are typed in manually using either the input methods I described in the preceding section, or similar techniques. In many respects, therefore, these performances that are at once essentially anonymous and yet communal in a very real sense for other readers recall earlier, unofficial distribution networks such as the hand-copied fiction prevalent during the Cultural Revolution (Link, 1989).

Perhaps the most important ftp site for reading and downloading all kinds of Chinese texts, from popular fiction to classical works, poetry, short stories, and even children's literature, is "Sunrise," a gopher site located at McGill University (<gopher://sunrise.cc.mcgill.ca>). This site is also one of the easiest to access in Chinese: all that is needed is a very basic encoding and decoding program and a text-capable browser. Over the course of my research, I found that a number of other webpages appear to incorporate links and pages with text files that were originally posted to the Sunrise site. Aside from any implications this may have for issues of electronic copyright and reproduction, such practices mean that texts are distributed across a range of locations, which also facilitates readers' access. Also, many Chinese students provide links to favourite texts through their personal webpages, which creates a myriad "variorum" testament to kungfu fiction fandom in itself.

Some good places to begin a search for electronic texts of Chinese martial arts fiction—or, indeed, for Chinese cultural and literary resources more generally—include the following comprehensive list of "Good Resources Related to Jin Yong's Novels," (http://cs.nyu.edu/phd_students/yingxu/jinyong), and the "China the Beautiful" site (www.chinapage.com). This latter site includes information and links dealing with Chinese language, history, geography, religion, art and many other topics.

Returning specifically to the martial arts fiction of Jin Yong, I discovered an online fan club and other resources (<http://www.agen.com/shendiao.htm>) based around the novel *Shen diao xia lu* (*The Giant Eagle and Its Companion*, 《神雕侠侣》), as well as a trivia page with graphics.¹⁸² This site, "The Novels of Gum Yung," though demonstrating the fan's profound knowledge and familiarity with the author's works, both major and minor,

¹⁸²See the Appendix for a complete reference of this page.

may be somewhat confusing for western readers familiar with standard Mandarin *pinyin* as the compiler uses Cantonese phonetics.

Although certainly not as plentiful as Chinese texts, “webbed” translations of works and commentaries are becoming more prevalent. Among these are “Book and Sword” (<http://village.ios.com/~earnshaw/B&S.htm>), a translation of Jin Yong’s *Shujian enchou lu*, 《書劍恩仇錄》. This work is further listed as background material for the development of one of the role-playing sites I discuss in a moment, Eric Yin’s world of *Riverlake* from “Once Upon a Time in China.” Additionally, a translation of Jin Yong’s short story, “The Maiden of Yueh” (<http://www2.best.com/~zhuge/yueh.html>) is also available. Together, these works may be seen as electronic complements to the translated chivalric fiction currently extant in print (Chard 1991; Minton 1993; Mok 1993).

Textual Performances and Performative Texts II: Role-playing Worlds

Recent critical scholarship on the socio-cultural effects and implications of “cyberculture” have emphasized a turning away from the attribution of utopian prospects or ideals to the medium in favour of a critical apparatus grounded, as it must be, in a real world discourse that considers issues of difference, differential access and the significance of individuals’ everyday uses of the technology (Robins 1996; Parks and Floyd 1996, 93-94; Morris and Ogan 1996, 43-44, 47). I suggest that folklorists are in a unique position to show that, constraints of so-called “lean-bandwidth” aside, the Internet is an ideal meeting place for the richness of tradition in the creation of artistic works that are at once text and spectacle, communication and performance. We must develop an understanding of what we are looking for that keeps pace, as much as possible, with both technological innovation and the processes of adaptation, and we must develop a vocabulary that reflects the social,

cultural and historical implications of our findings (Morris and Ogan 40; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 72-73).

Perhaps some of the most fertile domains for the study of the interaction between tradition, popular narrative and creative play both on- and offline are found in role-playing games.¹⁸³ As Moody observes, interactive media is: “a consumer durable which is understood through its representation rather than its actuality” in that any interaction must follow established paths preprogrammed by the game developer (1996, 59). Furthermore, she cites the importance of the medieval forest allegorical setting to many role-playing games, regardless of the specific medium or platform, and the enduring power of allegory to take familiar objects and settings and render them neutral or detached from their normal symbolic connotations, which in turn makes them strange or potentially threatening— a challenge to be confronted, interpreted and finally overcome (Moody 60-64). The metaphor of the forest and its importance to role-playing games is especially relevant to a discussion of martial arts fiction, where the world of the “rivers and lakes” can be compared to the “greenwood” of ballads and stories in the western outlaw tradition.¹⁸⁴

In the remainder of this section, I concentrate primarily on four sites which fall on a multi-dimensional continuum ranging from spontaneously engendered, text-based “worlds” intended for online play, to sites which provide resources intended for use in face-to-face scenarios. Between these, there are also other, intermediate forms of delivery and feedback, such as play-by-mail campaigns, newsgroups devoted to discussion or the actual creation of interwoven storylines, as well as mailing lists. Furthermore, these sites vary

¹⁸³See also Fine (1983).

¹⁸⁴Compare, for example Minford (1993, 9-10) and Keen (1987, 1-8).

from ones supporting an almost entirely Chinese language-centred interactive style to others that incorporate and adapt western playing conventions and parameters to oriental content.

In addition to a general introduction of these four main sites, I also briefly summarize some more general role-playing resources on the Web, especially given the complex, creative interchange between eastern and western cultures that seems active in this area of contemporary popular culture. Specifically, I think that these more general sites and collections of links may pertain to the study of future martial arts-oriented games which are either electronically delivered and monitored, or which have important online supplemental components intended for use in live gaming sessions. Again, an Appendix of URLs provides a more complete guide to specific sites of interest and potential ethnographic research tools.

1) *Xiake xing* (侠客行) *The Way of Chivalry MUD*

According to Turkle, there are two forms of text-based MUDs: adventure and “open” or social MUDs. Built around virtual physical spaces, such as a room, an inn or a forest clearing, for example, each is concerned primarily with the social relationships that develop between characters, and each may contain scripted “objects” that are sensible to player-characters’ perceptions and available for their use (1995, 181-82). However, as with many other aspects of electronic communication, the boundaries between fiction-based adventure and “purely” social MUDs are shifting and unstable. While many adventure MUDs may centre on fighting, as many face-to-face role-playing games do —depending on the rapport of the characters and the parameters of the campaign— newer sites are not necessarily completely focused on a “hack and slash” gaming aesthetic (Davis 1994, 42-43). Still, the text-based structure of most MUDs tend to foster a dual sense of anonymity within

community through which participants can subvert normally fixed ideas of what processes and content constitute identity and literature, and how these concepts can be viewed as mutual fictions constructed and reworked through play (Turtle 12).

The Way of Chivalry site (<http://www.networm.ml.org/xkx/>) is a graphical “front-end” for a martial arts MUD which, according to the introductory webpage, is influenced or inspired by characters and events from Jin Yong’s *wuxia xiaoshuo*, but makes no direct links with any particular plots and does not seek to recreate specific narratives. The homepage features a large character image of the site’s Chinese name and the frequently cited parallel couplet comprised of characters from each of Jin Yong’s major novels. With the exception of the images themselves, the site is scripted in simplified (GB code) Chinese. This page contains links to an introduction as mentioned, as well as an outline of rules and netiquette, a description of the various schools of martial philosophy and technique, a help directory for “newbies,” subdirectories of characters and a “wizlist” of top scores, a guest book for visitors to the site and a page with the MUD address and telnet settings.

I should explain that, according to the “rules of engagement” established for this online community, it appears that —other than system commands that cannot be translated— all communication occurs in Chinese. I am aware of IRC and telnet clients that are available for use in conjunction with the Chinese language encoding technology described above. Based on earlier ethnographic research, for example Zhongning told me that he enjoyed participating in Chinese IRC exchanges, often assuming the electronic nickname “Lao Da” (老大), or “Number One,”¹⁸⁵ I suggest that the knights-errant who contend within the

¹⁸⁵This nickname also carries connotations of a venerable elder, or the eldest child in a family.

“rivers and lakes” of this Chinese MUD communicate by similar means. In the future, I hope to observe some actual playing sessions, and to document some of the patterns of impromptu speech play found in player-characters’ performances. If my Chinese, modern connection and virtual kungfu are up to speed, I may even play.

2) Paul Mason’s “*Outlaws of the Water Margin*”

This site (<http://www.tcp-ip.or.jp/~panurge/outlaws.htm>), borrows from films such as “*A Chinese Ghost Story*” and television series like the joint BBC/NTV adaptation of the vernacular classic *Shuihu zhuan*. The original production, “*Water Margin*,” was first broadcast in Britain (dubbed) and in Japan (in Japanese) in the 1970s. The electronic version of the *Outlaws* RPG, as well as the printed materials from which the HTML edition was taken, represents a long-term project undertaken by game author and publisher Paul Mason, and is designed for use in face-to-face role-playing games.

Although still described as “under construction,” the various chapters of explanatory text are detailed and interspersed with Chinese line drawings and sketches. As with the next two sites I outline, all of the various systems of character generation, possible actions, magic objects, spells, special abilities and their separate and combined effects are integrated. One of the main, but certainly understandable, differences in many oriental RPGs appears to involve the modification of scoring indices to fit Chinese and/or Japanese-style weaponry, fighting methods, character classes and so on. Additionally, the opening pages contain a background timeline and a pronunciation key, as well as a conversion table of weights and measures used in ancient China. Also, the introduction provides an explanation of the “core rule” whereby the success or failure of a character’s actions is determined by rolling dice and calculating the total relative to the character’s personal

Although his system, like *Outlaws*, is designed for offline play, Eric incorporated ideas gleaned from online descriptions of the efforts and opinions of like-minded gamers:

In any event, I had been a big fan of the Pendragon RPG system for a long time, and decided to use this as a skeleton for my own game, and created the first version of my rules. Pretty soon after this, the Dragons of the East mailing list [Dragon@monosys.com] came into existence. This list was for people interested in Far Eastern RPGs, although it was (and still is) primarily dedicated to feudal Japanese RPG games. Within a year, I saw the first posts by Leonard Hung about his Cathay Arts of Role Playing system, and took a look at them. I liked them so much, that I asked him if I could graft some of the rules onto my own system. This led to the development of my system as it is now.... it is my opinion that many people turn to Far Eastern role playing because they are bored with the conventional Medieval European flavor of most RPGs. The Far East is exotic, so this is one area where people can try something new.

Eric's system also contains numerous charts to assist prospective players with character development, including legends outlining the possibilities for a given character's home region, cultural group and religion. A "Table of Father's Class" helps to determine characters' personal and occupational attributes and social standing. In addition, there are discussions on such topics as Chinese cosmology, naming traditions, as well as comparative charts detailing religious creeds and astrological signs. Statistics related to personal attributes are further divided into soft/*yin* and hard/*yang* categories, and there are systematically correlated tables associating the relative offensive and defensive potential of various martial techniques and weapons and the severity of any wounds resulting from their successful strategic use, depending on which way the dice roll.

4) Leonard Hung's *The Magic Theatre: Cathay Arts of Role Playing*

In his description of the formative influences that shaped his own system, Eric mentioned the importance of Leonard Hung's innovative oriental game-world designs. His

worlds¹⁸⁹ are not only the most detailed in terms of the scope and content of the role-playing systems described, they are also the most diverse in terms of the cultural, literary and historical background they contain, as well as the modes of transmission and delivery potentially available for play. In addition to the specifically Chinese live-action "Cathay Arts of Role Playing," rules and guidelines, he also developed several western-style games, including a play-by-e-mail game that is currently suspended. Another work in progress is an online adventure called "Seven Heroes and Five Righteous." So far, this hyperlinked game features a navigable map which, in response to the selection of certain locations with the aid of the mouse, reveals clues pointing to sinister intrigues and plots hatching at the city gates and within the inner precincts of the Imperial capital.

At first glance, the Cathay Arts system resembles in many ways the other RPG designs I have already described. The site developer has incorporated information about martial disciplines, character classes, cosmology and belief systems, weapons and techniques into charts and keys to assist game masters and prospective player-characters with persona development and event sequencing. However, there is also a discernibly different quality, a sweeping, multi-layered complexity of literally epic proportions combined with clearly defined domains of public and private information. His storylines borrow from such varied classical and popular sources as the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Journey to the West* (*Xi you ji*, 《西游記》), and tales relating to Judge Bao, an ancient magistrate whose sense of justice and acumen for solving crimes were celebrated in popular works of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, and whose wider influence on Chinese detective fiction forms one of the central subjects of Chapter Five.

¹⁸⁹See the Appendix for the complete site address.

Furthermore, Leonard Hung's conception of martial chronology and tradition is an extensive vision that extends from a consideration of the arts of legendary times to the techniques of more contemporary practitioners, such as the late Bruce Lee. Users who belong, by means of a special username and password, to the secured Members' Quarter also have access to a list of the e-mail addresses of other players, as well as other information relating to character types, kungfu styles and so on. Leonard's site is also distinguished by several examples of his original artwork depicting a gallery of characters of his own creation. Recently, I joined the Cathay Arts membership and wrote to most of the active members in order to gather information from regular players about their experiences and particularly memorable gaming narratives. I hope to present my findings in a future paper dealing with the influence of martial arts fiction on the narrative traditions and conventions of electronic and face-to-face gaming communities.

Before closing, I will briefly detail some other RPG-related resources on the Internet, even though not all of these are specifically concerned with kungfu fiction or other popular genres. As the preceding discussion shows, there is considerable exchange between East and West in this area of participatory popular culture. Therefore, I suggest that the following resources may prove useful points of comparison and reference for future ethnographic investigation, especially since some —like the RPG Library and the PBEM Newsletter¹⁹⁰— not only provide lists of current games across a wide range of categories, but also often state which games are looking for new players and which permit “lurkers” to observe before deciding whether they would like to join or not. These and similar pages

¹⁹⁰These sites can be accessed at: <http://www.webrpg.com/?link=rpglib/index.html> and <http://www.pbem.com> respectively. See the Appendix for the Riverworld URL.

can provide researchers with the site addresses of active games and prospective contacts, an online resource which has potentially significant benefits for fieldwork.

In addition to the Library and Newsletter, which also provide many links to other sites for people interested in online RPGs and PBEMs, there is also a comprehensive page of play-by-e-mail resources available from a site in Manitoba, as well as the "Play by Mail Homepage." It should be understood that these resources refer to two different gaming modalities, one uses electronic mail, while the other normally relies on the conventional post.¹⁹¹ For fans of the *Riverworld* series, there is a Riverworld PBEM which, though closed to new members at present, provides an interesting counterpoint to other similarly-constructed games, such as Leonard's now disbanded PBEM described in the "Magic Theatre." Aside from advising players to send mail only to the players in their group — a copy of which is generally forwarded to the "Dungeon Master" to aid in controlling the direction of the game — and thereby avoid exposing secrets to opposing teams, Leonard's scenario lists the *dramatis personae* and bears the following opening instruction and darkly humorous caveat:

Players reply messages every week on a specified weekday decided by themselves. DM may control any character who responds late, or even send anyone who does not reply over a month to the Hungry Dragon. Reasonable complaints are welcome.

Finally, on a more general subject of fantasy role-playing and participatory writing, I cite two textual sources which differ in target audience and intent, but which nonetheless may provide additional electronic "objects to think with" (Turtle 1995, 259-60) that would prove valuable to an ethnographer. The first is the *Fantasy Realms Journal*

¹⁹¹Besides the different methods of delivery and distribution, the genres of play by mail games I have encountered tend to include more conventional games of strategy, such as chess, and military-type campaigns.

(<http://www.tiac.net/users/frj/fr.htm>), an Amateur Press Association publication. In addition to articles, the Journal contains many links to other useful RPG sites and materials, including fanzines, new campaigns and a recently developed Internet gamers' network directory.

Secondly, although it means —perhaps fittingly— a return to the setting of the medieval forest where the foregoing explorations largely began, the “Dragon’s Inn” (<http://dragon.io.com>) presents a graphical introduction to the basic narrative premises, core characters and the boundaries of poetic licence underlying the newsgroup *alt.dragons-inn*, an interactive fiction group where participants create characters and post to continuing story “threads.” These threads, much like the various classes of soap opera discourse identified by Baym (1993, 151-57), are designated by single-word descriptors enclosed in square brackets ([,]) in the Subject header, followed by a brief synopsis of the narrative events described in the body of the posting. Often, several “threads” are both mini-stories in themselves, and part of a larger, interwoven narrative universe. According to Jenkins (1994, 466) and Bacon-Smith (1992, 57-58, 66-67), such interconnectedness is one of the hallmarks of fan writing.

Although there do not appear to be any particularly Chinese chivalric threads spinning at the moment, I think that the episodic nature of kungfu fiction could lend itself to this sort of interaction as well, if not specifically on this newsgroup, then certainly on one dedicated to the purpose. It should be understood, however, that the “Dragon’s Inn” newsgroup and website are different from the “Dragons of the East” mailing list, (Dragon@monosys.com). As Eric stated, this list *is* devoted to ongoing discussions of topics related to oriental RPGs, although the primary emphasis at the moment does appear to lean more toward Japanese-based games and issues. I have also contacted many of the people who subscribe

to that list. To date, several have responded with character descriptions and narrative scenarios which will contribute to the research project outlined earlier in this section. Next, I conclude with a look at some additional sources of Chinese electronic inscription in a variety of contexts, such as seasonal greetings, newsgroups and serial publications.

Electronic Ephemera: Greetings, Jokes, Naming and Serials

The final section comprises a discussion of other types of Chinese-language resources, texts and performances on the Internet, however, these are not specifically concerned with popular fiction. Basically, I summarize my recent research into such phenomena as computer-mediated Chinese New Year greetings, humorous performances and nicknames on a Chinese newsgroup, and Chinese electronic magazines, with particular emphasis on Canadian-based publications. Because these topics refer to articles that are either published, forthcoming or in progress, my intent is to provide a review of some of the main points of my findings, rather than discuss the principal content in detail.

Spring Festival Meets the Simpsons: Electronic Greetings

My earliest encounter with Chinese computerized texts took the form of electronic New Year or Spring Festival (*chunjie*, 春節) ASCII art greetings sent to me by ESL students who attended my tutorials at Memorial. I received my first “cards” over the winter of 1991-92. I began keeping a collection of all of the greetings students sent. In that first year, of twelve distinct images, only four manifested influence from western holidays and popular culture. These included a snow scene which featured a row of houses bedecked in Christmas wreaths, a flower, and a family portrait of the Simpsons followed by “Happy Chinese New Year” in English. The other eight motifs were all traditional Chinese images

associated with the New Year celebration, including large-character “calligraphy” expressing good wishes for the future, as well as lanterns and other festive symbols. This depiction of three lanterns is a fairly representative example:



Fig. 1. New Year lanterns from 1992 greetings collection.

At first glance, it is evident that these images are created using ASCII text and carefully placed spacing. Chinese ASCII art, and indeed, ASCII art in general, can contain surprisingly intricate motifs despite the apparent limitation of the “brush strokes” which are pre-determined by the possible input sequences available through the medium of the average keyboard. Although there are arguably far more ASCII characters than there are individual types of strokes which comprise written Chinese characters, however, unlike painted calligraphy or cursive writing, ASCII symbols cannot join, overlay, or otherwise combine in the same linear space. As the lanterns demonstrate, it is not possible to join a vertical and horizontal line in an ASCII-generated ideograph, even though the lines may have to touch according to the definitions of correct form applied to the handwritten Chinese word. In ASCII art, cohesion is achieved through the precise juxtaposition of

filled and empty space, and the effect is one of at least an elementary visual unity. The above characters are in simplified script, and render a legible declaration of “Happy Spring Festival”—even though the English words at the top of each lantern do not correspond to the characters beneath.¹⁹²

After subsequent research, I discerned from Chinese “ASCII artists” that this initial composition was by far the most challenging aspect of making a New Year’s greeting. Indeed, it was a facet of this creative process that many *senders* of holiday texts never bothered with. Copies of different pictorial greetings proliferate on anonymous ftp and gopher sites. Also, some creative experts make their work available as links to their personal homepages. Sometimes, New Year greetings appear on Chinese language newsgroups, providing that they are seasonally appropriate. In these cases, the subject header usually identifies the file as a graphic rather than a Chinese text article. Senders can simply cut and paste the image or images they prefer, affix personalized salutations and closings if they choose, and post electronic greetings to receivers far and wide. In addition, popular images are often recycled from year to year. In the greetings I received personally, —as well as many that were forwarded to me by other recipients who were interested in my research— the following motif, a cursive representation of the character *fu* (福) meaning “fortune,” recurred regularly, either alone or in combination with other designs:

¹⁹²The syntax of the greetings differs, as might be expected. With the ideographs, the word for “happy” (*hao*, 好) is in the final position. This greeting is read from left to right.

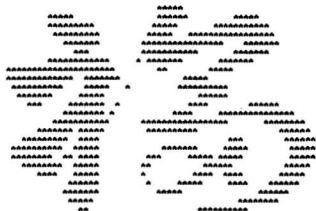


Fig.2. Cursive rendition of character meaning “fortune.”

It is certainly true that just as users who create composite Spring Festival greetings can pick and choose from seasonal designs that are traditionally Chinese, they can also select holiday motifs from other cultures as well. The most obvious sources for such borrowings are Christmas and western New Year. Also, as the initial design of the images is the most technically challenging aspect, it is also possible to borrow from collections and motifs that have been modified to appear as something more than a set of still frames. That is, users can sometimes find and distribute “animated cards”— a series of motifs which have been compiled together with simple commands, such as American National Standards Institute (ANSI) tools installed as an ANSI.SYS file into the standard PC CONFIG.SYS startup file. This command file, which includes ESC (Escape Sequences Code) commands can be used to control the console display. ESC commands can even incorporate motion and sound into the display output. Other platforms, such as VAX/VMS, have similar tools. Consequently, the “animation” users see when they run a file containing these codes,

usually by means of the *type* command followed by the filename, is actually produced as a result of the automatically controlled cursor movement reading over the file of discrete, sequential, text-based images. This is not entirely unlike “flip book” animation, except that the control codes handle the “flipping” and the user does not perform any operations on the file through keyboard input while the “movie” is playing.

The following year I received an animated Chinese New Year card which employed the control code sequences described above. Comparing the content of greetings received in each of the two years, I noticed a marked increase in the incorporation of western motifs. With the animated card, this change was striking: of the card's sixteen animated scenes, fourteen dealt with western material, while the remaining two embodied traditional Chinese sentiments and designs. This compares with the still images received the previous year, which contained eight Chinese images and four designs of western influence or origin. The non-Chinese motifs in the animated greeting included a toy train, Christmas trees, a card with Santa on it, a roaring fire in a hearth complete with stockings hung from the mantel, the lyrics to the first verse of a well-known carol, a champagne glass and even a glowing menorah. However, with this greeting, as with all the others I received that year, at least one traditional Chinese design appeared, most commonly in the form of large characters somewhere near the end, intended as an expression of good wishes and prosperity in the coming year.

The next year, 1994, I saw a separation between Christmas and Chinese New Year in terms of the transmission of electronic greetings. Where previously Chinese students had used Christmas as a convenient, fixed winter holiday with which to play and —literally— import traditionally Chinese holiday symbols in the creation of collages of good will to send to distant friends, some students also began sending greetings whose themes were

entirely concerned with the Yuletide season, even though many of these people did not celebrate Christmas themselves. For example, I received one card comprised of four designs, "Merry Christmas" in large letters, a tree constituted from Christmas greetings in a variety of languages, a hearth scene which contained the senders' names, and this representation of Santa in his sleigh:



Fig.3. Design from 1994 electronic Christmas card.

One of the most striking features of traditional Chinese greetings is the multi-layering of symbolism which is made possible by the exploitation and, it may be argued, playful subversion of the expressive space occupied by the visual and phonic signifiers and their signified referents. The abstract concepts of goodwill, luck, prosperity, longevity, and a harmonious household are made concrete in the repetition and reinforcement of a lexicon of signs which have become commonplaces in Chinese tradition. Commonplaces in traditional culture and performance, according to Renwick, deserve more serious scholarly

consideration beyond dismissal as evidence of limited memory and a general "lack of artistic sophistication on the folk's part" (1980, 37). Furthermore, he cautions that:

... if these commonplaces also have symbolic qualities, then a further explanation can be added to the somewhat mechanistic ones we customarily offer, since symbols are among the most value-laden, culturally important, expressively marked, and conceptually abstract representations of a culture's knowledge and ethic, they possess a high degree of longevity, of semantic load, of mnemonic strength, perhaps even of "ritualistic" significance (Renwick 37).

Consider the following New Year "banner" commonly found as domestic decorations in homes around that time of year. The motifs which decorate the border around the main message are similar to those that would be found on paper greeting cards, except that cards would also likely feature a representation of the zodiac animal for the coming year, and the other symbols would appear selectively, rather than in the visual profusion shown here. The central message expresses a wish for success and prosperity, and is read from top to bottom. The original banner from which I made this image had a red background, itself certainly a symbolically weighted colour. Similarly, the characters were originally a metallic gold. Briefly, the pronunciations of many of the images shown are homophonic with the words expressing the blessings which they represent. For example, the word for "bat" is very similar in sound to "fortune," "deer" sounds like "salary" (signifying a wish for a successful career) and the word for "fish" resembles that for "riches."¹⁹³

Reading some of the other symbols around the border, it is clear that this is a wish for conjugal harmony, prosperity and longevity. Images connoting domestic contentment include a (female) phoenix matched on the opposite side by a (male) dragon, plums, paired

¹⁹³A full-colour rendition of the banner, as well as a more detailed discussion of the issues summarized here can be found in my article: "Enduring Traditions, Ethereal Transmissions: Recreating Chinese New Year Celebrations on the Internet" (Kozar, 1995b). See the bibliography for the complete citation and URL.

birds, and several happily playing children. Prosperity and good fortune are represented by such objects as a bat atop two coins which have the inscription *fa cai*, (發財) or "strike it rich," paired fish, oranges, roses in full bloom, and a ship in full sail with an inscription that basically means: "Smooth sailing." Though somewhat less conspicuous, a wish for long life is expressed by the presence of the God of Longevity, peaches and herons:

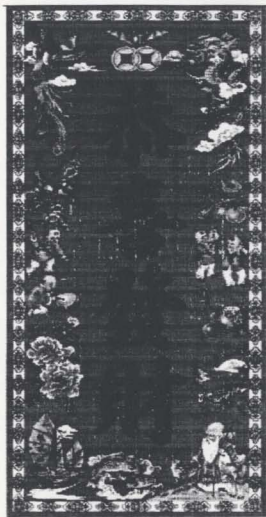


Fig. 4. New Year banner.

Of course, this kind of multiple stratification of meaning through colour, imagery and text is not easily achieved in electronic greetings, at least on those platforms that are not designed to handle complex, full-colour image files. Although ornate Chinese New Year pictorial greetings are available to Web users, the senders and receivers I profiled were most often students with access to the Internet only or primarily through VAX/VMS or Unix accounts. However, the traditional wish for prosperity persists, even in this ephemeral, and often text-bound, monochromatic context, as can be seen from the following large character design. Note the character chosen to inscribe the text, and the additional “pecuniary” modifications made to the form of the character *fa* (發), meaning “to send out, utter or become/achieve.” This greeting reads, from left to right, “Hope your Spring Festival is all you could wish for/Wish you prosperity”:



Fig.5. Large character electronic greeting.

I should perhaps mention before moving on to consider newsgroups and electronic serials that, since I published the article upon which the preceding discussion is based, many other western motifs have found their way into this form of seasonal play on the Chinese Internet. While it is relatively easy to see why the Simpsons might appear — Bart is, after all, the quintessential lively, firstborn son, providing that his talent for “underachievement” is politely overlooked— or Simba the Lion Prince for that matter, I can not quite figure out the rationale behind, for example, inclusions of motifs from The X-Files. However, I’m certain that, with concentrated ethnographic effort, I will undoubtedly find that some reasonable and intriguing explanation, if not “the Truth” — “...Is Out There.”

Newsgroups: A World of “Face” and Identity Turned Upside-down

In my forthcoming article, “Performances in Character,”¹⁹⁴ I explore humorous performances on the hZ/zW encoded Chinese language newsgroup, *alt.chinese.text*, with particular emphasis on joking strategies, patterns of nicknaming, use of emoticons or “smilies,” and the dialogic nature of some of the humour that appears in its postings. I argue that participants in this electronic context intentionally subvert traditional notions of “face” (*mian*, 面 and *lian*, 臉) in order to create new sites for play and reinforce interpersonal connections within the larger rhetorical community of the newsgroup.

According to Eberhard: “The Chinese word *mian* means not only ‘face’ but also ‘persona’: *lian* covers in addition ‘character,’ ‘reputation.’ Both words subsume, therefore, the behaviour expected of a person in keeping with his or her social standing” (1986, 98). The preservation of *face*, furthermore, is a reciprocal obligation. In daily

¹⁹⁴See the bibliography for a full citation.

encounters between people of like position who are unfamiliar with each other—or who are of unequal status, such as would be the case, for example, when a speaker makes a request of a respected elder—as much care should be taken to safeguard the integrity of a listener's *face* as the speaker normally devotes to the maintenance of his or her own. A loss of *face* is, to a large extent, felt on both sides, as it represents the disruption and temporary suspension of the accepted rules of politeness which govern social communication.

In this article, I look at a selection of jokes and examine the various ways their sometimes culturally “unspeakable” themes are playfully expressed, for example, jokes dealing with topics of sex and marital discord with English punch lines, or a piece written by an author who deliberately exploits the formal structure and balance of classical, fixed-form poetry in order to talk about nonsense. In addition, I examine the role of tradition and worldview in the contemporary inscription of three types of performances, the culturally-specific use of the typographic signifier “:-)” commonly called the *smiley*, the choice of nicknames by newsgroup participants, and the practice of single user “quotation,” or the insertion of humorous or ironic commentary between the lines of a previous posting in order to create a comic dialogue. Many of these texts are, I feel, reminiscent in both structure and content of a long-standing popular entertainment known as *xiangsheng* (相声), or “cross-talk” in English (Link 1984), a form with which the majority of readers frequenting *alt.chinese.text* would have almost certainly been well acquainted.

First, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out with regard to the prevalence of emoticon collections on the Internet, users often create and distribute, or are at least aware of, a much wider range of designs than they actually employ in regular discourse (1995, 74-76). Based on my observations of postings on *alt.chinese.text*, I found that the only types of

emoticons extensively used were the rather “straight-faced” prototype “:-)” and its facially foreshortened cousin, the “gleep.” This smiley came in two variations, “:~)” and “:~:]” respectively, although the first style appeared with greater frequency.

Interestingly, two variations commonly used in western contexts, the “winking smiley” and the “devil” (represented usually by “;-)” or “’-)” and “:->” or sometimes more rakishly as “;->”), were absent from participants’ texts. I tentatively posited some culturally and historically grounded reasons which might account for this scarcity. Simply stated, a representation of winking might be avoided because the gesture is perhaps itself less familiar and, more importantly, may not carry the same kinaesthetic significance in Chinese culture—at least not within an audience comprised primarily of men. Additionally, malevolent spirits, whether devils, ghosts or other apparitions, occupy an important but hardly cherished place in Chinese folklore. In contemporary ideology, belief in such “feudal superstitions” is soundly dismissed. Depending on the ages and backgrounds of individual users, either reason might help explain the emoticon’s general disuse, not to mention the fact that, as with winking, the physiognomy of the devil as presented in this western typographic convention may make no cultural sense.

Besides the quantitative differences in emoticon selection, there were also qualitative differences in use. It is generally accepted by most people I know, for example, who regularly use electronic mail or post to newsgroups and who are English speakers from a western cultural milieu, that smilies can be used to mark as non-serious observations or assertions that might otherwise be taken as offensive or inflammatory. Used in place of gestures and vocal inflections, the smiley is supposed to signify the playful spirit in which the transmission was originally intended, or, if the message was composed as a deliberately provocative statement, that it was not directed at the receiver personally. On the

earlier, is the long-suffering female protagonist in a well-known opera officially sanctioned as suitable popular entertainment during the Cultural Revolution.

I refer to a third category of nicknames as those: "...which invoke a sense of collective- or self-referentiality." By this, I mean nicknames which not only recall or summon a sense of "Everyman," but which play with the processes involved in traditional Chinese onomastics, so that a person's identity may seem familiar among strangers through, for example, the manipulation of familial diminutives such as "Little" or "Young" (*xiao*, 小), or informal honorifics such as "Old" or "Elder" (*lao*, 老).¹⁹⁵ Conversely, some users may select a nickname which is so commonly used in other contexts as to efface or comment ironically upon any identifying function that the nickname might serve. To illustrate, one user signs messages "A Certain Person Named Wang." This user, whom I surmise is probably male and whose surname, according to the address header, is also Wang, has based his electronic name on his real one, changing the characters that would normally express his given name. As "Wang Somebody," he has established an ethereal identity such that he is himself, but is also potentially anyone with that common surname.

Finally, I was struck by the dialogic nature of many postings. It seemed that, even in an ongoing debate, contributors either posted a single reply under the same header, or replied individually either to the original message, or to one of the more recent responses it evoked. In this way, messages on the same topic were comprised of usually not more than two or three respondents presenting their respective positions to the larger reading audience at any one time, and each response formed a distinctive "turn."

There are some practical reasons which might account for a general lack of "cascades" on this newsgroup— the embedded replies denoted by characters such as ">" added

¹⁹⁵To some extent, this kind of play cuts across the other naming categories as well.

successively to the left-hand side of any new insertion in a cumulative “quotation” of all preceding messages on the same topic. For one thing, it is possible that a string of insertion characters would force a line of Chinese encoded text to wrap, which would in turn cause the delimiting protocols in the following line to shift, thereby rendering part of the line as unreadable code, as I have already explained. Also, in my research into Chinese folklore generally, I have found that, with respect to oral materials, the storyteller’s originality is highly valued. Although electronically generated texts are admittedly transitional in many respects, occupying a communicative position “*between* speech and writing” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 73), newsgroup respondents may perceive that a certain fluidity of style is a more fitting aesthetic to apply to Chinese online communication, as opposed to a scholarly, classical mode that relies heavily on quotation— except, of course, in cases where users choose deliberately to parody those formal styles and registers.

Structurally and substantially, I found that many quoted replies resembled scripts of “cross-talk” performances. According to Link, traditional *xiangsheng* format requires minimally a “joke-setter” and a straight-man. Humour obtains in one of two modes, depending on whether the audience develops any omniscient sense of the conversation as it unfolds. Sometimes, the audience is made aware of the dual nature of a *misapprehension* between the setter and his foil. Not infrequently, however, a deliberately staged *misconception* is played out upon the unsuspecting spectators until the final punch line reveals all (1984, 87-88, 92). Underlying the enduring popularity of this entertainment form is its ability to fuse, as with popular cultural forms in general, aspects of the oral and literate worlds, and therefore combine facets of the worldviews inherent to both elite and folk cultures. In so doing, cross-talk simultaneously juxtaposes and critically comments upon traditional and modern ideologies, often with sufficient ambiguity as to create

unofficial political and social satire that is both powerful and largely beyond the normal scope of official censorship and control (Link, Genie 100-01, 110). Similarly, I found examples of replies in which a later poster used the comments made by an earlier contributor as material for comic refutation, often turning the tables on the apparently progressive humour expressed by the first respondent.

One such example, in which the initial poster lamented the overly direct approach of modern women with an anecdote about a wife who reported to her husband, upon conferring with the doctor, that he was not long for this world, was refuted by a second respondent who made the argument that men may not only be scared off by women who follow “the (obviously male) doctor’s orders” regarding forthright disclosure, but by women exhibiting more traditional deportment and manners as well. At the closing, the second speaker adds a further twist in this debate about traditional values by saying:

洁冰——坚决反击黑鲤鱼的反倾翻案风：）。

A basic translation of this, which I clarify in a moment, would be:

Spotless ice— a solid refutation of “Black Carp’s” [one of the nicknames of the previous contributor] rightist-deviational style of overturning a verdict：)

Interestingly, the second speaker frames the comments made by the initial respondent in terms that might have once been used to decry either position, depending on the prevailing direction of the political winds, a device widely exploited by cross-talk performers (Link, Genie 85-87, 104-08). In the final part of this section, I want to look at another medium through which often contentious political and social views may be expressed, electronic magazines.

Leaves from the “Web in Heaven”: Electronic Magazines

In the foregoing discussion, I outlined some of the main formats used to transmit Chinese text electronically. These text conversion protocols, along with other file types, such as PostScript and Graphic Interchange Format (GIF), constitute the basic range of options for uploading and downloading computer-mediated Chinese texts. For many senders and receivers however, the text-based conversions are preferred over GIF and PS files due to the much greater size and occasional difficulties associated with either display and/or printing of graphic and PostScript files. For online display, most sites make use of either *guo biao* (GB) or BIG-5 encoding,¹⁹⁶ and many have links to GIF conversions of individual files. Occasionally, these links point to complete archives. Accordingly, this final segment presents a synopsis of some current work in progress which looks mainly at Chinese electronic magazines, or e-zines, at websites in Canada.¹⁹⁷ These publications can either be read online or by downloaded display in the form of e-mailed subscriptions.

Before I address specific publications, I want to briefly explain certain references in the subheading which prefaces this section. Although “leaves” can be understood in Chinese as *ye* (葉) in much the same way as it can in English or French, as both a leaf and a page—especially in light of the electronic surface of inscription which is also a metaphor of hyperlinked space, the webpage—the “Web in Heaven” may require a little more explication.

¹⁹⁶See the Appendix for more detailed information on the different types of Chinese encoding software configurations required for various platforms.

¹⁹⁷The full working title of this study is: “Leaves Gleaned from the Ten-Thousand-Dimensional Web in Heaven: Chinese On-line Publications at Websites in Canada.”

Basically, one of the names for the World Wide Web in Chinese is: 万维天罗地网. The rather grand-sounding translation obtains as: "Ten-Thousand-Dimensional Web in Heaven and Net on Earth," which in abbreviated form, 万维网, contains phonemes that all begin with "W." This condensation more or less maintains —especially given the difficulties inherent in the translation of technical terms— the accepted shortened form of WWW. This definition appears in the opening statement of the CND Web server (<http://www.cnd.org:8001>) and was chosen, according to the preamble, to reflect the global nature of the Internet and the satellite and terrestrial communications networks needed to make it work.

Realities of infrastructure aside, however, I suggest that this way of naming this technology accomplishes another very important function from the perspective of the folklore and worldview of this culture. Initially, Internet users from western backgrounds might find the decidedly Chinese cosmological tones in this label for the Web quite striking. In short, Chinese cosmological myths, like those in many other traditions, posit an ordered relationship between the heavenly and mortal realms (Eberhard 1986, 89-90; 141-42; Meletinskij 1973, 251, 257-59), while folktales often tell of the transgression of boundaries and the disruption of order through excess or weakness. It is interesting to note that a Chinese label for a resource that has been both lauded and decried for its unstructured, anarchic existence and potential should recall a traditional correspondence reflecting order, hierarchy and customs of deportment within a larger belief system.

Whether this aspect of Chinese tradition is acknowledged or rejected by contemporary "Net-surfers" from the many diverse Chinese cultural backgrounds is less important. I think, than the fact that, as with the telling of jokes, some Chinese users are actively engaged in mapping out paths on the Net through naming and narratives, that is, through

the creation and elaboration of operational metaphors that, on some level, make cultural sense to the rhetorical and real communities of which they are a part.¹⁹⁸

Probably the most well-known and widely distributed Chinese e-zines are *Hua Xia Wen Zhai* 《华夏文摘》 and *New Threads* (*Xin Yu Si*, 《新语丝》) which, for the sake of brevity, are hereafter shortened to HXWZ and XYS respectively. HXWZ is a news and literature digest published under the auspices of the China News Digest (CND).¹⁹⁹ XYS is a later publication, and regular readers have described it as a publication with a more specialized literary nature than its established predecessor. Some of the regular contributors to HXWZ also submit pieces to XYS. One reader, a male student of engineering at the University of Ottawa whose tastes and available texts encompassed an eclectic mix of English and Chinese classics, other foreign fiction in translation and Chinese e-zines, stated that he now prefers XYS. On the whole, he wrote:

This magazine is more difficult than HXWZ. I like it very much. Actually, it is of higher quality than HXWZ. Tuya is my favourite among some much liked authors. There are many other on-line Chinese magazines, sometimes you can find good articles in them.²⁰⁰

However, despite its large circulation for a publication of its kind, and its place as a formative influence on the format and content of later publications, HXWZ was not the first Chinese electronic magazine to receive formal ISSN classification. According to Ji Zhang, a former founding editor and technical consultant who maintains the websites for a number

¹⁹⁸See Glassie (1982, 69-71) and Nicolaisen (1973, 307-12) for further discussion on the possible cultural functions of naming in different narrative genres.

¹⁹⁹HXWZ can be obtained from a variety of sources, including ftp from cnd.org. The e-zine's URL is: <http://www.cnd.org:8029/HXWZ/>, and links to XYS, as well as many other Chinese e-zines published in the United States, Canada, Europe and elsewhere, are contained in a comprehensive listing at: <http://uwalpha.uwinnipeg.ca:8001/e-mags.html>.

²⁰⁰QRE-14i.

of Canadian-based Chinese e-zines, that distinction belongs to *Lian Yi Tong Xun* 《联宜通讯》 (LYTX), an electronic magazine originally established before 1993 by the Ottawa Chinese Students and Scholars Association.²⁰¹ LYTX recently amalgamated with another Canadian e-zine, *Chinese Maple Garden*, which is more commonly known as *Feng Hua Yuan* 《枫华园》 (FHY). FHY's inaugural issue appeared on the Web on 20 September 1993 and it is published thrice monthly. Its website contains an extensive archive of back issues in several formats, as well as a variety of other links, both related to the magazine and Chinese culture generally. Recently, the homepage featured a retrospective on the late Deng Xiaoping.²⁰²

In addition to these two magazines, I also examine the electronic counterpart to *The Canada-China News*, or *Zhong Hua Dao Bao* 《中华导报》 (ZHDB)—a bi-monthly news magazine which is also published in Ottawa.²⁰³ Essentially, the three magazines reflect different emphases and audiences. ZHDB most closely resembles an electronic newspaper, however, in addition to news, there are often articles dealing with issues of health and family. Pieces that are geared especially for a younger audience, either as readers or listeners, appear in all three e-zines. According to Ji Zhang, LYTX, unlike HXWZ, was

²⁰¹Electronic mail correspondence. 13 November 1996. Because LYTX's monthly publication schedule does not appear to have standardized before 1993, when FHY first appeared, it was difficult to determine the exact age of the publication, and Ji Zhang did not provide a firm date. Based on available back issues, I can reasonably surmise that LYTX was probably first published between late 1991 and early 1992. This suggestion is further supported by Ji Zhang's assertion that an entry for LYTX appeared in *The Internet Directory* published by Fawcett/Random in 1993, which would have likely necessitated its prior establishment through continuous publication over a period of time.

²⁰²FHY's URL is: <http://uwalpha.uwinnipeg.ca:8001/fhy/>.

²⁰³ZHDB's homepage is located at: <http://www.china-news-zhdb.com>.

inscriptions, information and everyday concerns which reflect a certain comprehensible order, at least in their style of presentation. If Parks and Floyd are correct in their assertion that: "The ultimate social impact of cyberspace will not flow from its exotic capabilities, but rather from the fact that people are putting it to ordinary, even mundane, social uses" (1996, 94), then perhaps for many Chinese users the main purpose of the "Web in Heaven" —like the cosmological covariation suggested by the metaphor— is to reflect and strengthen the intricate connections of real-world social networks.

Conclusion

In this investigation, I have attempted to provide a detailed picture of certain technical and social aspects of the Chinese Internet. My analysis has explored and widened the concept of rhetorical communities in the electronic medium, and I have provided several examples of resource sites and performance texts, both related directly to Chinese vernacular —and especially martial arts— fiction, as well as inscriptions that reflect other aspects of Chinese culture and popular traditions. Even though the majority of the readers who participated in my study did not necessarily participate regularly in all of the electronic and face-to-face cultural scenes discussed here, many of them alerted me to the humorous and imaginative ways that Chinese fiction could be extended beyond the printed page.

As a closing thought, it seems clear that participatory fan cultures on the Chinese Internet and, more generally, Internet communities influenced by Chinese history, literature and philosophy, present a continuous deliberation between tradition and innovation that cannot be contained within discrete covers— or on websites, for that matter. Unquestionably, their real arenas move beyond fixed texts or specific site addresses —and the often unstable or transitory technological artifacts they generate— into the shifting

landscapes of imagination. Sometimes, the lines marking the processes of borrowing, reworking and reinvention become blurred: it is difficult to always remember what shaping influences came from where. As with a role-playing narrative however, fans who have learned how to identify and read a good story continually negotiate a path between invention and convention. Their particular choice of landmarks and individual perceptions of what is familiar and what is strange is less important than the many and different adventures had along the way.

Appendix B-1: Chinese Computing Resources

A Note on Compatibility and Encoding Protocols

While graphic browsers such as Netscape (version 2.0 or higher) support GB or BIG-5 document encoding, hZ/zW is apparently not as well supported. Consequently, I have found that relatively few sites use this encoding protocol, the main exceptions are newsgroups like *alt.chinese.text* and the “sunrise” gopher site. These sites can be viewed by other means, for example through an application such as *TurboGopher* on a Macintosh running the *Chinese Language Kit*, or on a PC using a gopher utility or LYNX through a Unix connection with an application such as *zw-DOS* in “Terminate Stay Resident” (TSR) mode. Several MS Windows-based applications are also available. Similarly, any hZ/zW encoded site can be viewed on a Unix machine with X-Windows using an application such as the latest version of *CX-TERM* which includes an interpreter for hZ/zW code. These applications are widely available for anonymous ftp at sites such as *ifcss.org*, *cnd.org* and several mirrors. A FAQ detailing the different programs and their functions and compatibilities can be obtained from a variety of sources, including posting to the newsgroup *alt.chinese.text*.

A useful site which covers many topics related to Chinese computing, including WWW display and how to configure different platforms to work with Chinese text applications is:

http://infoweb.magi.com/~chinese/complsys_oth.html ²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵All URLs given in Appendices were correct and active at the time of final preparation of this work. If a site has moved and the update links are outdated, I suggest that interested users try a multiple search engine tool such as “SavvySearch” (<http://guaraldi.cs.colostate.edu:2000/form>).

Appendix B-2: Chinese Text Resources

A Note Concerning the Electronic Excerpts of *The Deer and the Cauldron*, and *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer* (Chapter Four):

While I am unable to determine the identity of the original contributor, the text at the Sunrise site appears to be identical to the one I excerpted, and was posted to the newsgroup *alt.chinese.text* on 13 Aug 1996. Although somewhat less likely, it is also possible that it may have existed as a kind of “electronic flying book,” sent from e-mail account to e-mail account before someone decided to post it for wider distribution. I recognize that there are several contentious issues surrounding the electronic conversion and posting of previously published material, however, I wanted to examine a Chinese comparison text of Minford’s translation, and to provide a few excerpts to give an idea of the hero’s character and context in *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer* as a comparison with the trickster, Wei Xiaobao.

As I did not have a printed copy at my disposal, I felt that it was important to mention that I consulted electronic sources. For the Minford texts, this was merely for my own personal interest in the “colour” and style of the selected passages in the original. In the case of my own translations from *Wanderer*, it is possible that there are some “typos” in the Chinese electronic texts which may have either originated as human error during input, or may exist in the actual printed copy that the contributor used. These in turn may have influenced my own translations, though I tried to render my interpretation as accurately as possible. For translations of martial techniques and moves, I have taken examples exclusively from Olivia Mok’s (1993) translation of *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain*.

Chinese Fiction Links

"Good Resources Related to Jin Yong's Novels":

http://cs.nyu.edu/phd_students/yingxu/jinyong/

"China the Beautiful"

<http://www.chinapage.com>

Shendiao Xialu 《神雕侠侣》Homepage (With Fan Club)

<http://www.agen.com/shendiao.htm>

"The Novels of Gum Yung" Page

<http://www.phy.cuhk.edu.hk/~kmlee/gy/gy.html>

English translation of "Book And Sword" (*Shujian enchou lu*, 《書劍恩仇錄》)

<http://village.ios.com/~earnshaw/B&S.htm>

English translation of "The Maiden of Yueh":

<http://www2.best.com/~zhuge/yueh.html>

Chinese E-zines

Hua Xia Wen Zhai 《华夏文摘》

<http://www.cnd.org:8029/HXWZ/>

Lian Yi Tong Xun 《联宜通讯》

(see Feng Hua Yuan site)

Zhong Hua Dao Bao (*The Canada-China News*, 《中华导报》)

<http://www.china-news-zhdb.com>

Feng Hua Yuan 《枫华园》

<http://uwalpha.uwinnipeg.ca:8001/fhy/>

Comprehensive Chinese E-Zine Links Page:

<http://uwalpha.uwinnipeg.ca:8001/e-mags.html>

Appendix B-3: Role-Playing Resources

Chinese MUD and Related Sites

Xia Ke Xing (Way of Chivalry, 侠客行)
<http://www.networm.ml.org/xkt/>

Outlaws of the Water Margin (Paul Mason)
<http://www.tcp-ip.or.jp/~panurge/outlaws.htm>

Imazine (Role-Playing E-zine, Paul Mason)
<http://www.tcp-ip.or.jp/~panurge/ima2.htm>

Magic Theatre/Cathay Arts of Role-Playing (Leonard Hung)
<http://www-zeus.desy.de/~hungbhy/rpg.html>

Riverlake: Once Upon a Time in China (Eric Yin)
<http://www-hsc.usc.edu/~eyin/ouatic.html>

Other RPG Resources

RPG Library:
<http://www.webrpg.com/?link=rpglib/index.html>

PBeM Newsletter:
<http://www.pbem.com>

Fantasy Realm Journal (APA)
<http://www.tiac.net/users/frj/fr.htm>

Dragon's Inn:
<http://dragon.io.com>

Riverworld PBeM
<http://penmush.tinymush.org/~alansz/rw-pbem/index.html>

4. 你想這些小說有中國民俗或是古典小說的影子嗎？
5. 現代小說中有幾個種類是專為男性讀者或女性讀者而寫的嗎？
6. 你認為男性讀者和女性讀者可以欣賞同樣一類的小說嗎？
7. 在你最喜歡的小說中，請告訴我男人的典型是什麼？女人的典型是什麼？
8. 請儘可能告訴我，如果是英雄、女英雄、壞人和其他的角色有沒有很清楚的區別。
9. 如果你是武俠小說的讀者，你認為作者對武功的應用在小說中是否重要？
11. 作家：
 1. 你最喜歡的作家是誰？
 2. 請儘可能描述你所知道這位作家的生平。

III. 選擇小說：

1. 當你選讀一本小說時，什麼特點影響你的決定？

(a) 朋友們的推薦？

(b) 作家的名氣？

(c) 書的標題？

(d) 封面的設計？

IV. 閱讀習慣：

1. 你喜歡選擇一個特定的時間讀小說嗎？什麼時候？

2. 你喜歡選擇一個特定的地方讀小說嗎？在哪裡？

3. 每個星期，你平均花了幾個小時讀小說？

4. 當你正在讀一本很有趣的小說時，你會一口氣把它讀完？或者可以先將它放下，等待有空的時候繼續讀完？

5. 當你沒有時間看書或手邊沒有未看過的書時，你會感覺像失去些什麼嗎？你會覺得生活中缺少快樂嗎？

---請你也告訴我你的相關資料：年齡、性別、職業、你的學校或工作的地方，和一些有關的消息。假使你住在Edinburgh-Lothian區或是較近的地方，可以考慮接受我的訪問，請告訴我怎麼和你聯絡和適合訪問的時間。

Appendix C-2: Translation of Pilot Questionnaire

Notes:

At the time of distribution of the pilot questionnaire, I had reliable Chinese character display and print capability on my home computer only, and therefore I had to save Chinese encoded files to disk if received on campus and take them home. By the time the revised questionnaire was ready for electronic circulation, I could perform these operations from any machine at Edinburgh University that I had access to, whether Mac, PC or UNIX. It should be noted, however, that all responses to the pilot questionnaire were handwritten and no reader requested an electronic rather than printed copy.

Do you like to read kungfu novels, romances, or other kinds of popular fiction?

I am a Ph.D. research student hoping to find out about readers' preferences. If you have some spare time, I would be very grateful if you would complete my questionnaire.

You could post a reply on the newsgroup, or send it to my electronic mail address (please use either seana@festival.ed.ac.uk OR EASSKP@srv0.arts.ed.ac.uk).

Because the system I have at hand doesn't handle Chinese all that readily, you can also reply (electronically) in English.

Your questionnaire replies will be anonymous, but if you agree, I would be happy to keep your responses in my research archive. THANK YOU!

Seana Kozar
c/o East Asian Studies, University of Edinburgh
8 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh, SCOTLAND
EH8 9LW

I. Novels:

1. What is your favourite type of novel?
2. A *good* novel contains what characteristics?
3. Is there a particular novel which is your favourite? Please describe the main features of this story in as much detail as possible.
4. Do you think that these novels have influences [or, "shades/shadows"] from folklore or classical literature?
5. Do you think that some genres are written for male and some for female readers?
6. Do you think that male and female readers can enjoy the same genres?
7. In your favourite novel, what is a typical male character like? A typical female character?

8. Please tell me, using as much detail as possible, whether the heroes, heroines, villains and other characters in these novels have clearly defined characteristics.

9. If you are a kungfu novel fan, how important is the author's treatment of aspects of martial arts (*wugong*) to your enjoyment of the story?

II. Authors:

1. Who is your favourite author?

2. Please describe what you know about the writing career of this person.

III. Choosing a Novel:

When you choose a novel, what sorts of things influence your decision?

(a) your friends' recommendation?

(b) the author's reputation, his/her name or pen-name?

(c) the title of the book?

(d) the cover design?

IV. Reading Habits:

1. Do you have a particular time that you like to read? When?

2. Do you have a particular place that you like to read? Where?

3. On average, how many hours per week do you spend reading?

4. When you are reading a really interesting book, do you read it straight through, or pick it up only in your spare time?

5. If you don't have time to read, or if you've read all of the books that you have on hand, do you feel that something is "missing" and your everyday life is less enjoyable?

* Please also tell me your age, sex, current occupation, where you are presently working/studying and any other information that you feel is relevant. If you live in the Edinburgh-Lothian or some other reasonably close area and you would like to be interviewed in order to discuss this topic further, please tell me how best to get in touch with you so that we can arrange a convenient time.

Appendix C-3: Revised Questionnaire

你喜欢武侠小说，言情小说或其他种类的通俗小说吗？

我是一个博士班学生，希望能发现更多人的阅读习惯。如果你有空，我很高兴你有趣回答我的问卷。

你的问卷是以不计名方式存档，如果可以的话，我很高兴能将你的名字列入我的档案中。

如果你的问卷能将中文字写大一些和清楚些，这对来自加拿大的我将是一个极大的励。谢谢！

Seana Kozar, c/o Department of East Asian Studies
(University of Edinburgh, 8 Buccleuch Pl., Edinburgh, SCOTLAND EH8 9LW)

I.小说:

1.哪一种通俗小说是你最喜欢的？

- | | |
|-----------|---------------|
| (a)武侠 | (d)志怪(鬼怪, 志异) |
| (b)言情(文艺) | (e)科幻 |
| (c)侦探 | (f)其他_____ |

2.一本好小说，应该具备什么特性？

3.你最喜欢的小说是那一本？请尽可能详述这本小说主要的特性。

4.你认为这些小说中是否有那方面，譬如个别角色，受到中国民俗或古典文学的影响？

- (a)你能找出一个现代的角色和古典或民俗角色在行动、言语或个性上相类似的吗？
- (b)现代小说中是否常见从诗、民歌或谚语(俚语)节录出来的文字？如果你能够想出来请举例。
- (c)这些小说是否用了引言(如“上一章，我们...”)或悬吊结尾的方式(如“欲知详情，请见下文分晓...”)
- (d)还有其他你可以想到的传统特质吗？

5.现代小说中有几个种类是专为男性读者或女性读者而写的吗？或你会说:

(a) 武侠、志怪、科幻、侦探小说通常属于男性读者。

(b) 言情(文艺爱情)小说属于女性读者。

6. 你认为小说的读者有年龄的区别吗? 依你的经验是:

(a) 男性, 15-20岁左右, 可能喜欢哪一类的小说?

女性, 15-20岁左右, 可能喜欢哪一类的小说?

(b) 男性, 20-30岁左右, 可能喜欢哪一类的小说?

女性, 20-30岁左右, 可能喜欢哪一类的小说?

(c) 男性, 30 岁以上, 可能喜欢哪一类的小说?

女性, 30 岁以上, 可能喜欢哪一类的小说?

7. 在你最喜欢的小说中, 请列举典型的男性角色为何? 典型的女性角色为何?

8. 请尽可能说明, 在这些小说中英雄、女英雄、坏人和其他的角色有没有很清楚的
区别。

9. 如果你是武侠小说的读者, 你认为作者对武功招式和打斗场面的处理在小说中是
否重要?

(a) 很重要——我很注意作者对此处的描述。

(b) 十分重要——我觉得作者对武功的处理方式和其他情节的描述一样
重要。

(c) 不很重要——我通常略去武功招式和打斗场面的部分。

10. 你会把小说一口气读完, 先了解故事情节, 再细读一遍, 以便了解这本小说更
深层的意义吗?

II. 作家:

1. 你最喜欢的作家是谁?

2. 请尽可能描述你所知道这位作家的生平。

III. 选择小说:

1. 当你选读一本小说时, 什么特点影响你的决定?

- (a)朋友们的推荐? (b)作家的名气?
(c)书的标题? (d)封面的设计?

IV. 阅读习惯:

1. 你喜欢在那个的时间读小说? 什么时候?

- (a)大清早 (d)下午
(b)午饭时 (e)睡前
(c)下课后 (f)其他_____

2. 你喜欢在那个的地方读小说? 在哪里?

- (a)房间 (d)床上
(b)书房 (e)公园
(c)图书馆 (f)咖啡厅
(g)其他_____

3. 每个星期, 你平均花了几个小时读小说?

- (a)10小时或10小时以上 (c)4-7小时
(b)7-10小时 (d)4小时或更少

4. 当你正在读一本很有趣的小说时, 你会一口气把它读完? 或者可以先将它放下, 等待有空的时候继续读完?

- (a)一口气读完, 不吃也不睡。
(b)只在吃饭时稍微休息一下。
(c)有空才读。

5. 当你没有时间看书或手边没有未看过的书时, 你会感觉像失去些什么吗? 你会觉得生活中因此缺少快乐吗?

- (a)会的, 尽量找时间读书, 不然会觉得_____
(b)有时候我喜欢看书, 如果身边有好书却不能看,

会让我觉得_____.

(c)不会。我常常很忙，但是年轻时，我会觉得_____.

***请你也告诉我你的相关资料：年龄、性别、职业、你的学校或工作的地方，和一些有关的消息。假使你住在Edinburgh-Lothian区或是较近的地方，可以考虑接受的访问，请告诉我怎么和你联络和适合访问的时间。

(c) not very important— I usually ignore the descriptions of martial arts skill and skim over the fight scenes.

10. Do you sometimes read a novel the first time “for the story,” and a second time “for the deeper meaning,” that is, to learn something about Chinese philosophy or ancient thought?

II. Authors:

1. Who is your favourite author?
2. Please describe what you know about the writing career of this person.

III. Choosing a Novel:

When you choose a novel, what sorts of things influence your decision?

- (a) your friends' recommendation?
- (b) the author's reputation, his/her name or pen-name?
- (c) the title of the book?
- (d) the cover design?

IV. Reading Habits:

1. Do you have a particular time that you like to read? When?

- (a) early morning
- (b) during your lunch break
- (c) after work/classes
- (d) in the evenings
- (e) before bed
- (f) other (please specify): _____

2. Do you have a particular place that you like to read? Where?

- (a) in your room
- (b) reading room/den
- (c) in the library
- (d) in bed



