In Hong Kong and Taiwan, and in Chinese communities overseas, the latter half of the 1950s saw an explosion in the popularity of *wuxia xiaoshuo*—“fiction of martial arts and chivalry,” or “martial arts fiction” for short. Well into the 1970s, martial arts novels were written, circulated, and read in quantities unseen since the prewar heyday of the so-called Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School. To distinguish it from its predecessors, the reemergent body of martial arts fiction was quickly dubbed the New School. The works published in this period, their imitators and successors, and their adaptations into film, television drama, comic books, video games, and other media continue to circulate to the present day, constituting an ubiquitous element in the popular culture of Chinese communities around the globe.

Most prominent of all New School works are the novels of Jin Yong, the pen name of Zha Liangyong or Louis Cha (1924– ), a native of Zhejiang province who relocated to Hong Kong in 1948 and began publishing fiction in the colony’s newspapers in 1955. Though advanced by publishers for promotional reasons, the slogan “Jin Yong’s martial arts fiction—the common language of Chinese the world over” is embraced by legions of fans as both the literal truth and an articulation of that which they value in Jin Yong’s work. Jin Yong is by most accounts the single most widely read of all twentieth-century writers in the Chinese language. Readers’ polls rank him second only to Lu Xun in importance and appeal, and his actual readership undoubtedly far surpasses that of the anointed father of modern Chinese literature. Jin Yong’s work is lauded for its panoramic and emotionally charged engagement with Chinese history; its seemingly inexhaustible inventiveness and the dazzling complexity of its plotting; its...
range of vivid, multifaceted characters and psychologically adventurous exploration of human relationships; its integration of a modern sensibility and Western literary techniques with the inherited material of the martial arts genre; its reinvention, through the rejection of Europeanized elements, of Chinese vernacular prose; its ability to wed a breadth of learning and profound insights on life with the most crowd-pleasing action and melodrama; and its effectiveness in accessibly introducing Chinese culture and values to a socially, geographically, and generationally diverse readership, including such “disadvantaged” elements as the younger generations of Chinese overseas. Various parties—some far from disinterested, as we shall see—claim with increasing vigor and assurance not merely that Jin Yong’s novels are the finest specimens of martial arts fiction but that they transcend the genre to stand as fiction pure and simple, or even as Literature. His works have been adopted for college curricula, and they are the subject of an ever-expanding body of commentarial and appreciative secondary literature; rumors persist of his being considered for the Nobel Prize. It is thus not merely the size of Jin Yong’s readership that demands the attention of students of Chinese literature, but, more significantly, the challenges presented to literary history and theory by the claims made for a body of work whose origins in China’s geographic periphery (Hong Kong) and in the often despised ghetto of popular genre fiction would seem to place it on the fringes of modern literature’s central tradition and outside the scope of serious consideration.

Just as Jin Yong’s novels seem to have outstripped the genre from which they were born, so likewise does the “Jin Yong phenomenon” extend well beyond the novels themselves. Jin Yong/Zha Liangyong is known not only as a writer of fiction but as a publisher and entrepreneur, whose establishment of the daily newspaper Ming Pao (Ming bao in Hanyu pinyin; English title Ming Pao Daily News) in 1959 laid the foundation for a lucrative and influential print empire; as an editorialist and political commentator, a voice for the people of Hong Kong, and an analyst of mainland politics through the tumultuous 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s; as a political player himself, a member of the draft committee responsible for engineering Hong Kong’s return to Chinese sovereignty; as a spokesman for and representative of “Chinese tradition,” whose learning and cultural status have been recognized in honors, including his 1999 appointment as dean of Humanities at Zhejiang University; and as a celebrity whose movements and pronouncements receive enthusiastic attention in the media of Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Chinese mainland, and beyond. The status of Jin
Yong’s martial arts fiction has become inextricably interwoven with the public personae of the author.2

Though not coterminous with the story of New School martial arts fiction, the story of Jin Yong begins with its emergence; and the story of New School martial arts fiction is often said to have begun with a match between two rival boxing masters that was fought in Macau on January 17, 1954. Within days of the match, hoping to capitalize on the excitement it had generated, the Hong Kong newspaper Xin wu bao began serializing Longhu dou jinghua (Dragon and tiger vie in the capital), a novel of martial adventure by Chen Wentong, writing under the pen name Liang Yusheng. This serial’s immediate success spawned numerous imitators, including, in the following year, Jin Yong’s maiden effort, Book and Sword, Gratitude and Revenge. With Jin Yong and Liang Yusheng in its vanguard, New School martial arts fiction rapidly conquered readerships in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Southeast Asia; and in the years that followed, it extended its domain to Taiwan, and ultimately to the Chinese mainland.

This oft-repeated account of the New School’s origins is clearly insufficient. The simple triumphalism of its narrative arc, which overrides the complexities and particularities of martial arts fiction’s circulation and reception, is matched by the naiveté of its vision of causality, which neglects the multilayered literary and cultural contexts of postwar Hong Kong. And yet to begin to understand these contexts, we could do worse than to consider the match fought in Macau in January of 1954; for in the circumstances of this event and the discourses constructed around it, we can discern many of the elements that contributed to the shape and role of the fiction whose appearance it helped, however adventitiously, to trigger.

Battle in Macau

On January 3, 1954, the Hong Kong media excitedly announced plans for a match between the local martial artists Wu Gongyi and Chen Kefu.3 Wu Gongyi, fifty-three at the time, was head of Hong Kong’s Jianquan Taiji Association (Jianquan taiji she), founded by his father, Wu Jianquan, a native of Hebei province in the north who had brought his family to the colony from Shanghai at the outbreak of the war with Japan in 1937. Wu Gongyi’s grandfather was Wu Quanyou (1834–1902), a prominent disciple of the founder of Yang-style taiji quan, Yang Luchan (1799–1872). Chen Kefu, thirty-five, was founder and head of the Taishan Fitness Academy (Taishan jianshen xueyuan) in Macau. Chen was known as an expo-
ponent of White Crane Boxing (Baihe quan), which he had studied with the eminent local master Wu Zhaozhong, but had trained in Western boxing and Japanese judo as well. Chen was a native of Taishan in Guangdong and spoke with the distinctive Taishan accent; his parents had emigrated to Australia.

A match between the two boxing masters had been anticipated for some time. In August of the previous year, Wu Gongyi had published an open letter declaring his willingness to meet practitioners of any other school “at any time and any place” for “mutual study” of the martial arts. The invitation drew a response from Chen Kefu, which developed into a simmering war of words; and the war of words was rumored to have nearly erupted into violence at a New Year’s Eve banquet at a Hong Kong hotel, attended by supporters of both parties. It was on the following day, New Year’s Day of 1954, that the principals signed the agreement to hold a match later that month.

The match’s sponsor, Macau’s Kangle Athletic Association (Kangle tiyu hui), presented it not as a duel but as a “joint exhibition of the martial arts” (guoshu heyan) staged for charitable purposes. Only a week earlier, on Christmas night of 1953, a fire had broken out in the Shek Kip Mei area of Kowloon. Fires were a chronic plague in Hong Kong’s squatter settlements, dense tracts of hastily built wooden buildings, often without electricity or running water, housing the hundreds of thousands of refugees who had thronged to the colony from the mainland in recent years. The Christmas night fire was, however, of unprecedented scope—in the words of the government’s Annual Report, “unquestionably the worst catastrophe the Colony had ever suffered.” By the time it had burned itself out on dawn of Boxing Day, some fifty-nine thousand people were left homeless and stripped of their possessions. In the long run, the Shek Kip Mei fire was to prove an impetus for a profound restructuring of relationships between the colonial government and the territory’s Chinese population. In the near term it drew an outpouring of relief efforts from the government; from the Chinese mainland, the United States of America, and the Vatican; and from numerous local charitable organizations. The Chen-Wu match was designed as a charitable endeavor, with proceeds to be divided between a fund for Hong Kong fire victims and a hospital and foundation in Macau. The contest between Chen and Wu was the centerpiece of a show that would also include solo and group exhibitions of martial arts by members of the principals’ respective schools, and vocal performances by a number of the most popular stars of the local opera stage.

Tickets soon went on sale at various locations in Kowloon and Hong
Kong island, with prices ranging from five Hong Kong dollars for general admission to one hundred dollars for premium box seats. One of the vendors was a hotel travel agency prepared to arrange transit visas for those with out-of-territory papers. Arrangements were made for additional ferry service between Hong Kong and Macau to handle the expected crowds. Construction also began on the stage and on viewing stands for an audience of up to ten thousand. The match was to be fought on a platform erected in the center of the swimming pool outside the Xinhuayuan Night-club. Though variously referred to as a wutai, "(opera) stage," or leitai, the name for the platform on which challenge bouts between martial artists were fought during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the stage was constructed on the model of a Western boxing ring, twenty feet square, with ropes around the perimeter. Surrounding the raised ring was a platform at water level to accommodate the fighters' seconds, a panel of seven judges, selected dignitaries and members of the media, and, it was reported, two lifeguards, on hand in the event that one of the contestants was hurled into the pool. The rules drawn up for the conduct of the bout also reflected the conventions of Western boxing. There were to be six rounds of three minutes each, with a two-minute resting period between rounds. No gloves were to be worn, and the range of allowable techniques was broad, though eye gouges and strikes at the genitals were forbidden. Clinches would be broken up by the referees. Victory would be determined by the panel of judges on the basis of a detailed set of conditions—time against the ropes or on the ground, number of blows landed and sustained, ability to present oneself at the conclusion of the match, and so forth. Preparations were made for live radio broadcasting and for filming the event.

As the date drew nearer, speculation raged in Hong Kong’s offices, teahouses and restaurants, martial arts circles and athletic clubhouses. In interviews, the organizers and principals stressed that the aims of the exhibition were charitable relief—Wu noting that a fortune-teller had warned him of the need to build a positive karmic balance during a perilous period in his horoscope—and the promotion of the Chinese martial arts. Chen, in particular, voiced his hopes for the “demystification” of the tradition and for its systematization along the lines of its Western and Japanese analogues. But the organizers also found themselves denying rumors that the match was fixed by secret agreement, or alternately that it would be a duel to the death; that representatives of the two lineages had arrived from abroad to consult on strategy and provide reinforcements; that the fight would set off a blood feud between the schools, and perhaps erupt into a general melee outside the ring. Speculation also took the form of
enthusiastic betting. Early odds in Macau were said to be even, with Chen’s youthful vitality and varied and up-to-date training thought to balance Wu’s years of experience. But Hong Kong punters tended to favor Wu, noting that *taiji quan* relied on subtlety and depth of cultivation rather than speed or brute strength. Wu was rumored to have mastered the art of attacking vital points (*dianmai*) and rendering an opponent helpless with a single touch.

The principals and their entourages settled into Macau hotels several days before the match. Wu Gongyi then withdrew to a Buddhist monastery to rest and gather his spirits, while Chen Kefu devoted himself to a routine of early morning jogging and *qigong* exercises. Ferry traffic from Hong Kong to Macau broke all records in the two days preceding the event, and the streets of the Portuguese colony were filled with Hong Kongers hailing one another and animatedly discussing the upcoming contest. The visitors viewed with appreciation the martial arts classes that had sprung up in parks and alleys in response to the excitement surrounding the match. They swarmed into local restaurants and filled the hotels to capacity; latecomers unable to find a room on the eve of the main event whiled the night away in the Macau casinos.

Shortly after two in the afternoon of Sunday, January 17, the wife of the governor of Macau cut a red ribbon to open the Joint Exhibition of Martial Arts and Opera Star Benefit Recital. Vocal performances followed, and then the exhibitions by members of Wu’s and Chen’s schools. Wu Gongyi and Chen Kefu themselves took the stage shortly after four; Wu wearing a traditional gray scholar’s gown over his combat attire of shirt, loose trousers, and basketball sneakers, and Chen a white and blue Western-style boxer’s warm-up robe. After massages by their seconds and instructions from the chief referee, they doffed their outer garments. At the sound of the bell, the fighters advanced to the center of the ring, exchanged a salute, and began. Chen took the offensive and, after some inconclusive exchanges, landed a strike to Wu’s face that sent him stumbling onto the ropes. Wu immediately counterattacked and delivered a heavy blow to Chen’s nose. Blood gushed forth; the judges rang the bell to end the first round. The rest period was extended to allow Chen’s seconds to stanch the bleeding, and when he took to the center of the ring to begin the second round, his white shirt was spattered with crimson. The atmosphere on the platform and in the stands was tense. The second round began with more cautious sparring but quickly turned fierce: Chen drew blood from Wu’s mouth and landed a blow to his belly, Wu again struck Chen in the nose, and the two exchanged a flurry of kicks. The judges stopped the match.
After hurried consultations and a secret ballot, they declared the contest at an end, with no winner announced. The opera star Xin Mazai took the stage to regale the crowd with a rendition of the aria “Of all sins, lust is the chief” (“Wan e yin wei shou”); Fang Yanfen, slated to perform as well, had apparently been overcome by the sight of blood and was unable to appear; but the audience was already dispersing.

At a banquet attended by all parties some ten days after the event, the head of the organizing committee expressed his satisfaction with the outcome of the match: over one hundred thousand Hong Kong dollars had been raised for charity, and the audience had been afforded an admirable exhibition of the skills and spirit of the Chinese martial arts. In numerous interviews, Wu and Chen repeated the organizer’s assessment, coyly deferred questions about victory and defeat to the panel of judges, praised their opponent’s performance, and dismissed reports of grudges or injuries—Chen denying that his nose had been broken and explaining that a nose-bleed was nothing at all remarkable by the standards of Western boxing, and Wu going so far as to display his undamaged set of false teeth in order to lay to rest rumors that he had lost a tooth in the match. Some published comments also repeated the organizers’ praise of the match’s conduct; others criticized its curtailment or the level of skill displayed. However assessed, the match remained a central topic of conversation for weeks, and those whose attendance enabled them to provide firsthand accounts found themselves favored invitees for tea and dim sum. Most distressed by the outcome were reportedly the legions of gamblers, whom the lack of a winner or even a formally declared tie left with no clear standard for settling sometimes astronomical wagers.

“From the unfinished fiasco,” opined the English-language Hong Kong Standard, “there seem [sic] little chance the ancient form of Chinese sport might revive in popularity.” But reports and anecdotes in the Chinese press over the following year indicate an explosion of enthusiasm for the study of various forms of the Chinese martial arts. Even more dramatic and long lasting was the martial arts’ revival in the realm not so much of practice as of imagination. Two days after the match, Hong Kong’s Xin wan-bao, one of the newspapers that had offered the most detailed coverage of the affair, published the following first-page announcement:

Since the bout between Wu and Chen, everyone in Hong Kong and Macau has been discussing it with great enthusiasm, and the streets and alleys are filled with talk of the martial arts. Tomorrow, in order to add to our readers’ pleasure, this paper will begin serializing Mr. Liang Yusheng’s martial arts novel *Introduction*
Dragon and Tiger Vie in the Capital. The book narrates a taiji master’s struggles against the masters of rival schools, and involves a quest for vengeance by a master of the Martial Grove, a tale of love between young men and women of the Rivers and Lakes, and various other plots, ending with a great battle in the capital city. It is an extraordinarily exciting tale, and we respectfully commend it to our readers’ attention.

The following day’s first installment of the text opens with a poem in ci form written in response to verses composed by Chen’s master Wu Zhaozhong on the eve of the bout, and with direct references (omitted when the novel was republished in book form) to the enthusiasm generated by the event and the editor’s charge to the author to respond with a work of fiction. As promised, the tale that ensues features among its main characters a venerable master of the taiji quan lineage. It is undeniable that New School martial arts fiction, of which Liang Yusheng’s Dragon and Tiger would soon come to be hailed as the forerunner, drew much of its immediate inspiration from the match fought in Macau in January of 1954.

If we look beyond the simple fact of its occasioning the publication of Liang Yusheng’s novel, what points of entry does the Chen-Wu match offer for our understanding of the literary and social phenomenon of martial arts fiction? We might consider, first of all, the light it sheds on the nature and role of the martial arts in the social imagination of mid-century Hong Kong. The excitement generated by the contest exceeded in intensity and differed in kind from that inspired by other sporting events reported in the territory’s Chinese-language newspapers. Like other contests, the bout promised the drama of victory and defeat; like the horse races, it allowed spectators to literally invest their excitement in the form of gambling; like the football matches, it offered fans the opportunity for group identification and loyalty. A key difference, however, is that a primary focus for identification in this case was not so much one party or the other as the medium of the contest itself—the Chinese martial arts. Both the principals in the contest, as reported in the newspapers, and the newspapers in their own narratorial voices highlight an association between the physical skills employed and a Chinese national identity. The association is explicit in the term guoshu, literally “the national arts,” a term inherited from the Republican era and enshrining that period’s project of reinventing martial traditions in the service of nationalistic self-strengthening. Reporting on the match maps the association in more detail through the evocation of national history—tracing the contestants’ lineages back to the Yuan (1260–1368) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties—and through the presen-
tation of the martial arts’ affinity with such other distinctively “Chinese” cultural forms as the opera, medicine, and classical verse.

The “Chineseness” of the Chinese martial arts finds its definition not only through reference to a native tradition but also through a complex relationship with a Western “other,” a relationship of both distinction and emulation. From one perspective, Chen in his white and blue boxer’s warm-up robe plays the young and vigorous West to the venerable China of Wu in his gray scholar’s gown. From another, though, his proclaimed desire to systematize and demystify the martial arts, and indeed the whole staging of the match in accord with the protocols of Western boxing, represent the ambition to adapt the perceived strengths of Western modernity and so realize China’s potential to stand as an equal. The interlocking imperatives of self-confidence and inferiority implicit in this ambition are a familiar pattern in Chinese encounters with Western modernity as a whole; their manifestation in the particular cultural field of the martial arts can again be traced to the Republican era, as we are reminded by the Hong Kong Standard’s note that the Chen-Wu match was “the first since the Chinese Nationalist Republic banned that form of fighting.”

This remark in the English-language Standard foregrounds the role of the Chinese Nationalist modernization project in shaping the fate of the martial arts and making the Chen-Wu match an unprecedented occurrence but conveniently ignores the presence of another agent: the British colonial government of Hong Kong. Although contemporary newspaper accounts are silent on the question of why Macau was chosen as the venue for the match, and though we must note that the organizing body and one of the principals were based in the Portuguese colony, reports circulating in Hong Kong to the present day aver that the British colonial government would not permit a public contest of the Chinese martial arts to be staged in its own territory. Whatever the truth of this claim or its concrete basis in Hong Kong law, it is illuminating to note that a Western-style boxing tournament organized for the charitable relief of fire victims was held in Hong Kong only days before the Chen-Wu match in Macau, and that the English-language press’s detailed and enthusiastic reporting of the former stands in marked contrast to its dismissive, even mocking coverage of the latter. For Hong Kong’s Chinese inhabitants, the institutions of colonial rule made the paradoxes of the relationship between China and the West extraordinarily immediate and complex. The colonial presence unquestionably played a role in the fact that a contest in the Chinese martial arts, held for the benefit of Chinese refugees in Hong Kong, was staged in a boxing ring in the middle of a swimming pool outside a nightclub across the water, in
the adjacent colony of Macau. And it made itself felt as well, as we shall see, in the changing contexts and contents of martial arts fiction.

To read the Chen-Wu match simply as a result of tensions between East and West or of the peculiar contours of colonialism in Hong Kong would be to overlook yet another phenomenon it serves to dramatize: the internal complexities of Chinese identities. Any temptation to imagine “the Chinese” or even “the Hong Kong (and Macau) Chinese” as a homogeneous community is quickly dispelled by consideration of the match’s two principals, who are distinguished by generation, by native place and dialect, and by experiences of history and patterns of migration in which both native place and generation play a part. Wu Gongyi was born in the last decade of the Qing dynasty to a northern family that relocated to the metropolis of Shanghai during the Republican era and then to the British colony of Hong Kong with the outbreak of war with Japan; Chen Kefu and his family exemplify the back-and-forth movements between China proper, the immediately adjacent colonial territories, and the Chinese communities abroad in which the natives of the southeastern littoral have historically played so major a role. This work seeks to understand twentieth-century martial arts fiction, and Jin Yong’s work in particular, in the context of its reading communities, and a key to that understanding is consideration of these communities’ synchronic and diachronic variations.

A further aspect of the contexts of New School martial arts fiction to which the Chen-Wu match can alert us is the role of the press in articulating community and creating public discourse. Hong Kong’s Chinese newspapers have been mentioned as sources for information on the match and as the medium for the publication of Liang’s novel, but their function is not merely that of neutral vehicles for the transmission of data and texts. Beyond reporting the contest, they publicize it, fan the excitement surrounding it, and articulate a range of responses and interpretations. They also concretize both our and their contemporary readership’s perception of this particular event’s embedding in its social and historical contexts, through the coexistence on the newspapers’ pages of coverage of the match, reports on the daily trials, dramas, and amusements of Hong Kong’s Chinese communities, and tidings from the broader stage of the Cold War world. Benedict Anderson has outlined the role of the daily newspaper in facilitating the imagining of national communities; Prasenjit Duara offers support for the possibility, previously intimated, that the imagining of communities may not be the prerogative of the totalizing and essentializing nation-state alone. One of my strategies for tracing relationships between Jin Yong’s work and its readership communities is
to consider the historically specific character and scope of the newspapers and other media through which martial arts fiction has been circulated.

The relationship between the “fictional” and “factual” aspects of the newspapers’ coverage is particularly germane to our concerns here. To characterize Liang Yusheng’s *Dragon and Tiger* as a work of fiction or imagination inspired by the real-world events of the Chen-Wu match is less accurate than to acknowledge it as simply an extension of the processes of fantasy and mythmaking operant in the match throughout its planning, conduct, and representation. In *Xin wanbao*’s coverage of the match, matter-of-fact reports of the membership of the organizing committee and arrangements for ticket sales coexist with the melodramatic rhetoric of “fight to the finish” (*juezhan*) and “battle of dragon and tiger” (*longhu dou*). While the telescopic scale and attention-getting aims of headlines make them especially prone to such dramatic flourishes, the news articles proper are hardly immune; the first report on the upcoming match slips easily into the vocabulary, rhythms, and reported dialogue of martial arts fiction in relating the supposed confrontation between Chen’s and Wu’s parties at the New Year’s Eve banquet. A pre-match article by Liang Yusheng himself, “A Page from the Secret History of *taiji quan*,” cites “unofficial histories and martial arts fiction” (*baiguan yeshi, wuxia xiaoshuo*) as the sources of its information. If the practice of the Chinese martial arts inspired fictional treatment, the tradition of martial arts fiction at least equally shaped the perception of actual practice, as shown through the following brief sketch of the fictional traditions antedating and informing the appearance of the so-called New School in Hong Kong in the mid-1950s.

**The Tradition of Martial Arts Fiction**

The term *wuxia xiaoshuo* made its appearance in China only in the first decade of the twentieth century, adapted from Japanese usage. But literary production on the topic of *xia*—altruistic and independent individuals and the values they practice—dates at least to China’s Warring States period (403–221 BC), and since its earliest recorded appearances, the term *xia* has been frequently though not invariably associated with the energies of *wu*, the “martial” or “military.” Among the most prominent early uses of the term is in the “Wu du” (*Five vermins*) chapter of the writings attributed to the third century BC philosopher Hanfeizi:

> The Confucians [Rú] with their learning [wén] bring confusion to the law; the knights [xià] with their military prowess [wù] violate the prohibitions. Yet the
ruler treats both groups with respect, and so we have disorder. People who deviate from the law should be treated as criminals, and yet the scholars actually attain posts in the government because of their literary accomplishments. People who violate the prohibitions ought to be punished, and yet the bands of knights are able to make a living by wielding their swords in a private cause.\textsuperscript{15}

Xia here denotes a class of people whose behavior is characterized by the private and extralegal use of \textit{wu}. It is the disruptive nature of their activities (relative to an ideal of unassailable state control over society), together with the neat complementarity of their “military prowess” with the Confucians’ “learning,” that leads the philosopher to posit them as a category both equivalent to and distinct from that of the scholars—there is no implication that the \textit{xia} resembled the Confucians in the sense of constituting a formal school or tradition of thought.

China’s first and greatest historian Sima Qian (145\textsuperscript{?}–86\textsuperscript{?} BC) cites Hanfeizi’s dictum at the opening of the “Youxia lie zhuan” (Biographies of the wandering knights) in his \textit{Shi ji} (Records of the historian). Rather than merely gnomic pronouncements, however, he offers extended accounts of the lives and activities of individuals exemplifying the category; and instead of simply condemning the \textit{youxia} for their lawlessness, he articulates and expresses admiration for the principles to which they devote themselves. Sima Qian’s narrative material and conceptual framework serve as a foundation for subsequent treatments of \textit{xia} in the Chinese literary tradition.

As Ping-ti Ho has pointed out, while the phrase “wandering knights” more or less accurately renders the literal meaning of the Chinese \textit{youxia}, in terms of the behavior imputed to them, the subjects of Sima Qian’s chapter might better be described as “underworld stalwarts.”\textsuperscript{16} They are local strongmen, exercising power outside the purview or at times in direct defiance of established government authority, rendering private justice and offering protection to those who seek their aid. Sima Qian singles out for praise the “knights of the common people,” who neither base their power on wealth and connections nor abuse their authority by oppressing the populace to gratify personal desires. While admitting their potentially negative influence on society, he argues that

though their actions may not conform to perfect righteousness, yet they are always true to their word. What they undertake they invariably fulfill; what they have promised they invariably carry out. Without thinking of themselves...
they hasten to the side of those who are in trouble, whether it means survival or destruction, life or death. Yet they never boast of their accomplishments but rather consider it a disgrace to brag of what they have done for others. So there is much about them which is worthy of admiration, particularly when trouble is something that comes to almost everyone some time.17

Sima Qian’s admiring treatment of the “wandering knights” reflects the personal indignation against officially countenanced injustice and the desire to immortalize the unsung, which motivate his history as a whole. While the subjects of Sima Qian’s “Wandering Knights” chapter are in some cases acknowledged to be directly or indirectly involved in murders and other acts of violence, these acts are not highlighted in the narrative, which centers instead on their reputations and acts of magnanimity. Deeds of physical courage and prowess are central, however, to the accounts contained in the same work’s “Cike lie zhuan” (Biographies of the assassin-retainers), from Cao Mei’s winning back his lord’s lands through a brazen hostage-taking at a peace ceremony to Jing Ke’s failed attempt to assassinate the king of Qin on behalf of Prince Dan of Yan. As these examples suggest, the role of “retainer” is no less important to these characters’ identities than are their deeds as “assassins.” Their biographies join the celebration of valor and personal integrity with that of loyalty, specifically loyalty to a zhi ji, one who recognizes and gives employment to an individual’s unique talents. “A man will die for one who understands him (shi wei zhi ji zhe si), as a woman will make herself beautiful for one who delights in her,” declares another of the assassins, Yu Rang.18 The importance accorded to understanding and recognition by Sima Qian’s subjects resonates with the author’s own memorialization of them through his writings. “Some succeeded in carrying out their duty and some did not,” he remarks in his closing evaluation. “But it is perfectly clear that they had all determined upon the deed. They were not false to their intentions. Is it not right then, then, that their names should be handed down to later ages?”19

The xia as a social phenomenon were deliberately repressed by the emperors of the Former Han period (206 BC–AD 23). Official historians subsequent to Sima Qian severely critiqued such unorthodox agents as the “wandering knights” and “assassins” or simply declined to grant them formal recognition in their records.20 Behaviors and attitudes associated with the original xia have nonetheless been woven into Chinese history up through the present day, influencing spheres of life ranging from personal conduct through informal associations and secret societies to military affairs and society-state relationships. The protean social and political his-

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ory of the xia lies beyond the scope of this study. Of more immediate interest is the continued production of literary material on xia-related themes. This material increasingly takes on the character of a self-sustaining tradition of narrative and thematic elements, even as it maintains a reciprocal relationship with social realities, influencing and feeling the influence of historical developments from a sometimes more and sometimes less attenuated remove. The evolving literary and symbolic system of the xia blurs the distinctions Sima Qian seems to make between the acts, social roles, and motivations of the “wandering knight” on the one hand and the “assassin-retainer” on the other. The magnanimity, sense of public justice, and disdain for governmental authority of the former mingle with the latter’s valor, prowess, idiosyncratic bearing, fierce personal loyalty, dedication to repaying debt and avenging injury, and thirst for a zhi ji’s recognition, if not for fame. The crucial role of Sima Qian’s “assassins” within the wuxia tradition manifests in fictional elaborations of their deeds as early as the Six Dynasties (?) tale “Yan Danzi” (Prince Dan of Yan) and as recent as the cinematic epics of Chen Kaige (Jing Ke ci Qin wang [The emperor and the assassin], 1998) and Zhang Yimou (Yingxiong [Hero], 2002).

Through the Six Dynasties (AD 222–589), Sui (581–618), and Tang (618–906) periods, literary inventions on xia themes, inspired by the historical records and such other works as the allegorical “Shuo jian” (Discoursing on swords) attributed to the philosopher Zhuangzi, take both poetic and prose forms. The verse presents the xia in a range of rather diverse guises. Some consists of straightforward versifications of historical material; much of it however elaborates more abstract and idealized images that contribute greatly to the romanticization of the xia. At times the subjects are sword-bearing, free-spending, and pleasure-loving rakes. While such figures occasionally evoke a note of disapproval, more often (as in the poems of Li Bo (701–762), who himself indulged a similar lifestyle) they are admired for their dashing style, joie de vivre, and rejection of convention. In other poems the xia becomes a figure for high principles, lofty ambitions, and the (usually frustrated) desire for recognition and service worthy of one’s talents. One of the best-known crystallizations of this complex of themes can be found in Jia Dao’s (779–843) “Jianke” (The swordsman):

For ten years I have been polishing this sword;
Its frosty edge has never been put to the test.
Now I am holding it and showing it to you, sir: Is there anyone suffering from injustice?  

In prose, the importance of this period for the development of wuxia fiction is twofold. First, the evolution of the Six Dynasties zhiguai into the late Tang chuanqi marks the emergence of China’s first distinct and self-conscious genre of fictional narrative from its cradle of anecdotes, fables, biography, and unofficial history. Second, the Tang chuanqi tales expand the body of imagery and narrative material associated with the xia, introducing and consolidating elements crucial to the subsequent history of martial arts fiction. Foremost among these newly prominent elements are the magical and the feminine. Both are shared by the chivalric tale with other chuanqi subgenres such as the love story and the encounter with the supernatural; both reflect that fascination with the extraordinary and the inexplicable, enshrined in the name given to the genre as a whole (“tales of the fabulous”). Within chivalric chuanqi, the female and the supernatural frequently combine in the recurrent figure of the “swordswoman” or “female xia” (xianü, niuxia). While the roots of this figure go back at least to the story of the “Yue Maiden” (Yue nü) in the Wu Yue chunqiu (Spring and autumn annals of Wu and Yue), a text purportedly from the first century AD, it is in the ninth-century Tang tale that she achieves sudden prominence. Two examples are the tales of “Nie Yinniang,” attributed to Pei Xing (825–880), and of “Hongxian,” attributed to Yuan Jiao (late ninth century). In the former, the daughter of a general is kidnapped by a nun and trained in the arts of magic and assassination; entering the service of a military governor, she employs miraculous transformations in defending him against the equally magical assassins sent by a rival, then rides off on a white donkey to an unknown destination. In the latter, the maidservant of another military governor travels hundreds of miles in a single night and penetrates the heavily guarded bedchamber of her master’s rival to steal the horoscope from his bedside and so reveal his vulnerability; having rendered this service, she reveals the karmic roots of her situation and then disappears. These bald summaries convey nothing of the texts’ elegance and masterful evocation of mystery but give at least some idea of how these and similar tales inject the otherworldly and the erotic into material partly inspired by Sima Qian’s assassins. The swordswomen can be seen as effecting a fictional fusion of the figures of devoted knight and beautiful woman that Sima Qian’s Yu Rang associates by mere analogy.

By welcoming fantastic material and bringing to maturation alter-
natives to the form and aesthetics of historiographic narrative models, *chuanqi* open the door to variant treatments of some of the historians’ central concerns. This is the possibility exploited in one of the most famous of the Tang tales, Du Guangting’s (850–933) “Qiuran ke zhuan” (The curly-bearded stranger). One Li Jing calls on an arrogant official of the Sui dynasty and attracts the notice of a beautiful serving girl in attendance upon the grandee. The girl later presents herself to Li at his inn, demanding that he elope with her and explaining that she has seen in him the promise of greatness her master lacks. At another inn, later in their travels, the pair encounters a bold-mannered stranger with a curly red beard, who, learning of Li’s acquaintance with a man named Li Shimin, demands an introduction. Having met Li Shimin, the stranger announces that he has recognized a future emperor and must abandon his ambition of winning the empire for himself. He turns his wealth over to Li Jing, that he might support the fated sovereign in his rise to power, and departs the realm. Ten years later Li Jing, now a high minister under the newly established Tang dynasty, hears tidings of a coup in a kingdom in the southeastern seas, and knows that the stranger has achieved his ambitions in another land. The tale thus employs Li Jing as the focus for a series of recognition scenes that indirectly narrate two parallel tales of dynastic founding. The flamboyant *xia* simultaneously validates the mandate of the orthodox Son of Heaven and realizes its mirror image in a fantastic, geographically distant realm.

Classical-language verse and prose on *xia* themes continued to be produced in the periods after the Tang; chivalric poetry enjoyed a patriotically tinged revival during the Ming, and stories of *xia* and swordswomen appear among the gems of such later *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* collections as Pu Songling’s (1640–1715) *Liaozhai zhiyi* (Strange stories from the leisure studio). But the most significant post-Tang contributions to *wuxia* literature were made within the various vernacular genres that developed during the Song (960–1279), Yuan (1260–1368), and Ming. Records of the Song capitals make clear that heroic martial and military themes were a specialty of some of the entertainment districts’ professional storytellers. Similar material can be found in the surviving texts of Yuan dramas and appears in abundance in the short stories (*huaben*) and full-length chaptered novels (*zhanghui xiaoshuo*) of Ming vernacular fiction. The vernacular linguistic register of these genres is accompanied by a prolix, exhaustive narrative approach quite different from the concision and allusiveness of their classical-language predecessors, and also by an expanded interest in “lower” mimetic modes, ranging from the melodramatic to the mock-heroic and
burlesque. The intersection of these new narrative possibilities with the xia tradition can be seen in a number of the huaben: “Zhao Taizu qian li song Jingniang” (Zhao Taizu escorts Jingniang for a thousand li), for instance, depicts the future founder of the Song dynasty as a quick-tempered brawler whose zeal in defending a country maid from bandits drives the unfortunate object of his chivalry to suicide; “Cheng Yuanyu diansi dai shang qian, Shiyi niang Yungang zong tan xia” (Cheng Yuanyu pays the bill at an inn, Lady Eleven discourses on chivalry at Cloud Peak) puts a swordswoman, explicitly modeled on her Tang predecessors, at the service of a merchant who pays her tab at a roadside tavern, and allows her to deliver Chinese fiction’s first extended exposition of the history and principles of the xia.26

But the definitive expression of the vernacular transformation of the xia is to be found in the novel Shuihu zhuàn (The water margin), whose extant sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts, variously attributed to Shi Naian or Luo Guanzhong, draw heavily on preexisting materials and possibly earlier recensions.27

In its language, narrative rhetoric, structure, and distinctive elaboration of the themes of martiality and chivalry, The Water Margin is both an immediate inspiration for a large number of Qing (1644–1912) vernacular novels and a proximate ancestor of much of the wuxia fiction of the twentieth century. Its protagonists are not the solitary and mysterious paladins of the Tang tales, who step forth to perform some astonishing deed and then vanish simultaneously from the narrative and from human ken, but hot-blooded “goodfellows” (hao han) who, driven from ordinary society by injustice or by their own passions, forge bonds with fellow practitioners of the martial arts and create an alternate society of their own. This alternate society finds concrete form in the bandit stronghold at the Marshes of Mount Liang (Liangshan po), and more generalized expression in the landscape of the “Rivers and Lakes” (jianghu)—the complex of inns, highways and waterways, deserted temples, bandits’ lairs, and stretches of wilderness at the geographic and moral margins of settled society. As Chen Pingyuan has pointed out, the world of the Rivers and Lakes constitutes an activist alternative to the “hills and woods” (shanlin) of the traditional Daoist or Confucian recluse, equally removed from the seats of power but not content with quiet self-cultivation.28 The marginal terrain of the Rivers and Lakes, the creation of an alternate sociopolitical system, and the bandits’ chivalric imperative to “carry out the Way on Heaven’s behalf” (ti tian xing dao) all harbor a potential threat to the established order, traditionally conceptualized as comprehensive, hierarchic, and exclusively sanctioned by divine authority. The tension between the orthodox order and the ban-
dits’ shadow society shapes the novel’s overall plot, which moves from the picaresque, interlocking adventures of individual heroes, through the formation and rise to power of the Mount Liang band, to the band’s capitulation to imperial sovereignty and eventual destruction in campaigns against other bandits, rebels, and foreign invaders. On the level of characterization, this same tension informs the symbiotic relationship between the leader Song Jiang, ever anxious to return to the imperial fold, and his anarchic henchman and alter ego Li Kui.29

The ideological ambiguities lurking within the text have been played out in the tortuous history of its reception and circulation. The novel has been both cherished and reviled by readers, and several times banned by the authorities. In a truncated commentarial edition that ends with a nightmare vision of the fellowship’s execution prior to its surrender to the court, Jin Shengtan (1610–1661) expressed his reverence for the novel’s artistry, his love for the individual bandits’ spirits, and his scorn for the ideology represented by the bandit leader Song Jiang. Direct sequels to the work range from Chen Chen’s *Shuihu houzhuan* (Sequel to the Water Margin, 1664), which is inspired by “The Curly-Bearded Stranger” to allow the band’s survivors to establish a utopian kingdom in the southern seas, to Yu Wanchun’s *Dangkou zhi* (Quelling the bandits, 1853), which surpasses Jin Shengtan in the ruthlessness with which it extirpates the goodfellows of Mount Liang. These varied readings and rewritings reflect the continual reassessment of the problems of outlawry and orthodoxy in the light of contemporary politics. Chen Chen, a Ming loyalist opponent to Qing rule, found in the novel an expression of Song resistance to the Mongol Yuan, while the civic-minded Yu Wanchun saw it as an incitement to the banditry and rebellion that threatened the survival of the state in which he lived. To the hermeneutics of social order and dynastic struggle, the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries added those of class and political factionalism. Late Qing and Republican reformers read *The Water Margin* variously as a work of nationalistic patriotism, as an early expression of democratic aspirations, and as an exemplar of the linguistic and literary genius of the common man. After 1949 the novel was lauded on the mainland as an expression of revolutionary consciousness and largely ignored on Taiwan on the strength of the mainland’s favor. In the mid-1970s it served as a tool in the internecine struggles of the Cultural Revolution; pointed attacks on Song Jiang’s “capitulationalism” were supported by the issuing of an appropriately revised edition of the text. The vicissitudes of *The Water Margin*’s circulation and interpretation testify to the emotional power and political
volatility of its portrayals of xia and haohan and of the landscape and counter-society of the Rivers and Lakes. 30

Martial arts fiction proliferated during the Qing dynasty, particularly its final century. Most prominent were the vernacular novels modern critics have labeled xiyi gongan xiaoshuo, “chivalric court-case fiction,” in which xia characters and narrative elements merge with those from another popular narrative tradition, that of stories of crime and punishment. This mingling of thematic subgenres involves what the same critics have viewed as a betrayal of the xia’s essential independence and the rebel-

lious ethos of The Water Margin, as it portrays paladins and outlaws who recognize the orthodox authority invested in a righteous official and who devote their prowess to hunting down bandits and insurgents. The best-

known example of the category is San xia wu yi (Three heroes and five gall-

lants), whose successive and variously titled recensions spring from the work of the mid-nineteenth-century Beijing storyteller Shi Yukun. The narrative techniques and basic ideological stance of this and other “chival-

ric court-case” novels are shared with other works of the period, such as Shengchao ding sheng wannian qing (The sacred dynasty’s tripods flourish, verdant for ten thousand years), which centers its swashbuckling tales on the figure of the Qianlong emperor, and Jigong zhuang (The tale of Jigong), which draws on the more fabulous reaches of the xia tradition in relating the escapades and magical combats of a righteous monk.31 All the named works’ links with professional storytelling, the opera stage, and commercial publishing, no less than their sometimes unpolished prose and formulaic plotting, testify to circulation below the most elite levels of society. But the late Qing literati’s interest in xia is evident in the continuing production and circulation of classical-language chivalric fiction, and in the use of xia characters and themes in “literary” vernacular novels such as Wenkang’s Ernü yingxiong zhuang (A tale of lovers and heroes, 1878).

Martial Arts Fiction in the Twentieth Century

The varieties of xia literature noted above maintained their popularity through and beyond the 1911 revolution that abolished the imperial sys-

tem and established the Republic of China. They were joined by new cur-

rents as well, as certain progressive writers and thinkers looked to China’s martial traditions as a possible source of national strength in the face of the imminent disaster threatened by internal weakness and foreign encroachment. Thus Liang Qichao’s Zhongguo zhi wushi dao (The way of
the warrior in China, 1904) simultaneously drew inspiration from Japan’s veneration of *bushido* and sought a similar heritage of heroism and self-sacrifice in the records of China’s Warring States period. In a more expressly fictional mode, the revolutionary activist and later Guomindang official Ye Xiaofeng’s (Ye Chucang, 1887–1946) novel *Gushu hanguo ji* (The ancient garrison’s record of the winter eggplant, 1914) spins a tale of Ming loyalist resistance to the Qing that implicitly assails the new Republic’s president and would-be emperor Yuan Shikai. In its interweaving of romance and martial adventure, its fictional improvisations on historical settings and characters, and its use of history as a critical mirror of the present, it both draws inspiration from the *Water Margin* sequels and adumbrates some of the possibilities for modern martial arts fiction that were to be later exploited by Jin Yong and others.

Xu Sinian and Liu Xiang’an see these and other politically progressive deployments of *xia* material as characterizing the initial stage in the history of martial arts fiction during the first half of the twentieth century.32 The second stage was initiated by the explosive commercial and popular success of the works of Buxiaosheng (Xiang Kairan, 1890–1957). In 1923 this author, who had established his career as a novelist through a scandalous exposé of Chinese students and sojourners in Japan, began serializing martial arts novels in two popular Shanghai fiction magazines. *Jianghu qixia zhuans* (Marvelous gallants of the rivers and lakes) narrates the struggles between rival schools of the martial arts in an earthy yet fantastic marginal world of vagabonds and immortals. *Jindai xiayi yingxiong zhuans* (Chivalrous heroes of modern times) assembles the purportedly factual adventures of righteous and patriotic stalwarts from recent history. Among the most prominent authors of the unprecedented boom that followed these works’ success were Gu Mingdao (1897–1944) and Zhao Huanting (1877–1951); another of its effects was the inauguration of Chinese martial arts film with the 1928 adaptation of *Marvelous Gallants* as *Huoshao Honglans* (The burning of Red Lotus Temple).

The third stage of Republican-era martial arts fiction, during the 1930s and 1940s, was in many respects a direct continuation of the second. It was differentiated by an overall decrease in the number of works produced and by the forfeiture of the virtual hegemony over the world of popular fiction the genre had enjoyed during the heyday of the 1920s. The center of production shifted from beleaguered Shanghai to Beijing and Tianjin, relatively stable under Japanese occupation. And authors in the now well-established genre exhibited increasing maturity and diversity in their fictional technique and treatment of received themes and narrative materials.
Huanzhu Louzhu (Li Shoumin, 1902–1961) dominated the period with his elegantly written and inexhaustibly imaginative epics of flying swordsmen, magical monsters, and Buddhist and Daoist adepts. Bai Yu (Gong Zhuxin, 1899–1966) portrayed a world of martial artists that was both tied to ordinary society and cannily reflective of its struggles and pitfalls. And Wang Dulu (Wang Baoxiang, 1909–1977) achieved fame through the exploration of the emotional and psychological facets of his characters' vicissitudes; one of his tragic martial romances was the basis for Ang Lee’s recent film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (*Wohu canglong*, 2000).

Implicit in Republican-era martial arts fiction is a certain nostalgia for the (imagined) values and social forms of the Chinese past. “It was just at the time when ‘wandering knights’ and ‘precious swords’ essentially became antiques that martial arts fiction came into vogue throughout the nation.” Nostalgia by definition represents not a seamless continuity with the past but an evocation of the past from a position fundamentally altered in some respect. Recent scholarship on the martial arts fiction of the 1920s–1940s, and on Republican-era popular fiction in general, has addressed its grounding in the evolving institutions of literary production, its reflection of authors’ and readers’ encounters with rapid and sometimes catastrophic social and political change, and its exploitation of new literary techniques. Such studies represent in part an attempt to reclaim a “modernity” denied to popular Republican fiction first by contemporary critics and later by an orthodox literary historiography that took these critics’ polemics as gospel. Claims for a link between the *xia* tradition and the project of national restoration recur in prefaces to martial arts novels of the 1920s and beyond; but the aura of progressivism that may have accompanied such claims in the first decade of the century quickly dissipated in the face of the Literary Revolution’s vehement assertion of a very different model for a forward-looking culture and its relegation of contemporary popular literature to the category of the “old.”

The intellectuals of the May Fourth generation demanded that literature be politically committed, defined correct commitment as the demolition of the moribund forms and values of inherited Chinese culture, and articulated their iconoclastic project in terms of its distinction from the paired specters of the ancient literary tradition and those forms of contemporary literature not dedicated to their own cause. They denigrated a broad swath of offending contemporary literature as “Old School” (*jiu-pai*), “Saturday School” (*Libailiu pai*, from the name of a prominent periodical), or “Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School” (*yuanyang hudie pai*, from its romantic imagery), and represented its sins as both ideological
and formal. Ideological error lay in its content, which purportedly bolstered “feudal” attitudes, and in the motivations of its authors and publishers, who were charged with frivolity and money worship. Formal criticisms in many cases reduce to similar ideological objections. In an influential critique of contemporary fiction published in 1922, for instance, Mao Dun dismisses the use of the vernacular and imitation of Western rhetorical devices as superficial window-dressing, and savages a “ledgerlike” (jizhang shi) narrative technique devoid of the careful observation and thoughtful analysis of experience that alone can produce living literature.

During the heyday of the May Fourth movement, in the late 1910s and early 1920s, attacks on “Old School” fiction focused on love stories and social melodramas, genres seen as touching on issues central to the May Fourth project but doing so from erroneous artistic and conceptual perspectives. By the 1930s, martial arts fiction received more sustained attention. A sense of national crisis fanned by Japanese imperialism joined with a growing interest in Marxist visions of social revolution to produce a call for “mass literature” that would mobilize the population at large. As intellectuals addressed the problem of the gap between their ideals and the cultural forms the masses actually enjoyed, the wuxia genre stood out as egregiously offensive by reason both of its “escapist” content and of its widespread dissemination through the media of film and comic books (the craze initiated by The Burning of Red Lotus Temple was at its height) as well as fiction. Mao Dun’s 1933 essay “Fengjian de xiao shimin wenyi” (The feudalistic literature and arts of the urban petty bourgeois) characterizes the genre’s pernicious effects on its audience as follows:

The more passive among them achieve a kind of vicarious satisfaction from the page and the screen, while the more hot-blooded determine to leave their homes and go off to the mountains to seek a master with whom they can study the Way. These scenes of “abandoning the home to study the Way” may throw a certain number of households into confusion, but society as a whole is stabilized through the elimination of disruptive elements.

The accusation that wuxia fiction drives impressionable youth to run off to the wilderness in the hope of studying the martial arts with immortal masters has dogged the genre throughout the twentieth century. Whatever its basis in actual incidents, the charge epitomizes the objections held by the May Fourth camp and its descendants. (Proper) literature is held to be both mimetic of contemporary social reality and a catalyst for individual agency and social change. Martial arts fiction’s sin is to combine affective
power with a misrepresentation of the world and hence an asocial and quixotic misdirection of the energies literature engenders.

Discussions of “revolutionary,” “mass,” and “proletarian” literature during the 1930s were the direct progenitors of the principles laid down by Mao Zedong in his 1942 “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” and these talks in turn became the blueprint for artistic policy in the People’s Republic of China after 1949. Certain aspects of the new orthodoxy—most notably its predilection for “national forms” and the idealized heroes and formulaic plots of “revolutionary romanticism”—brought some of the literature of the new People’s Republic far closer to the discursive norms of martial arts fiction than the determinedly progressive writings of the May Fourth era had been. But the restrictions on setting and content and the demands that literature both hew to overarching ideological dicta and serve the immediate needs of particular political campaigns relegated martial arts fiction proper to the category of “poisonous weeds” banned from the gardens of culture. The writing and publication of fiction in the genre ceased, and copies of preliberation works gradually disappeared from the bookstalls of the mainland’s cities.

Geopolitics, Colonialism, and Cultural Identity

Enthusiasts of the martial arts fiction produced in Hong Kong and Taiwan beginning in the 1950s soon dubbed these works New School martial arts fiction (xinpai wuxia xiaoshuo), distinguishing them from Old School (jiu-pai) works of the preliberation writers.37 As several recent critics have pointed out, in content, themes, structure, and narrative technique, the so-called New School works demonstrate continuous development from their predecessors rather than any revolutionary break.38 The material and economic conditions of the New School fiction’s production and distribution—through the commercial press of urban industrial societies—likewise mirror those of prewar martial arts fiction. “I suspect,” says Chen Pingyuan, “that those who originally articulated the distinction between New and Old martial arts fiction proceeded primarily from geographic and political considerations, and not from the requirements of artistic comprehension.”39

Chen unfortunately declines to detail what he sees as the ramifications of these “geographic and political considerations” for postliberation martial arts fiction. Numerous other mainland commentators, however, have offered accounts of the rise of the New School in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Chen Mo, for instance, identifies the primary factors in the appear-
ance and success of the New School works as the irrepressible vitality of the ancient tradition of martial arts fiction; the economic prosperity of the postwar world, with the attendant triumph of commodification and the entertainment ethos in the realm of culture; and the genre’s expression, through the concepts of *wu* and *xia*, of “the unique cultural psychology of the Chinese people (*Zhonghua minzu*)”:

The appearance of “New School martial arts fiction” overseas [i.e. in Hong Kong and Taiwan] did not come about solely as a profound yearning for the psychological heritage of *wu* and *xia*, for the mountains and rivers, the history and geography of the ancestral homeland; it came about also as a kind of temporary escape from modern commercial civilization, from cruel economic struggles and the struggle for existence—as a unique form of revolt and a profound feeling of unease.40

Although Chen Mo is writing for a popular rather than an academic audience, the essentials of his account do not differ from those found in other mainland histories of martial arts fiction.41 Inherent in these accounts are certain simplifications that call for further examination. To say that “Hong Kong and Taiwan, situated far across the seas, both preserve the native cultural traditions of the mainland and feel the influence of the great tides of global economy and culture,”42 omits certain salient features of the geopolitical context of the New School martial arts fiction. The nostalgia for the homeland undeniably felt by many postwar immigrants to Hong Kong and Taiwan was complicated by the fact that many of them, unlike the economic migrants of earlier decades, were unwilling refugees, driven from the mainland by their opposition to or fear of the regime that assumed power in 1949. Some overseas commentators have in fact alluded to this aspect of New School fiction.43 Until recently, though, they, like their mainland peers, have largely declined to address the corollary to the avoidance of Communist rule; the fact that postwar martial arts fiction appeared, on the one hand, under the iron rule of the U.S.-backed Nationalist government on Taiwan and, on the other, under the more laissez-faire supervision of the British colonial government of Hong Kong.

Ma Kwok-ming is one of the first scholars to have undertaken a critical analysis of Jin Yong’s work in the context of its genesis in colonial Hong Kong. He notes that almost all of the novels are set against the historical background of Han Chinese oppression by the threat or reality of foreign (non-Han) rule, and proceeds to read Jin Yong’s fiction as a site for the negotiation of the problems of Hong Kong’s colonial identity. Pointing out
that the red-blooded patriotism of such early classics as *The Eagle-Shooting Heroes* is questioned, compromised, and ultimately subverted in later novels, and positing an equivalence between the practice of the martial arts and the discourse of traditional elite culture, he argues that the corpus of Jin Yong’s works manifests the educated elite’s attempts to negotiate a strategy for maintaining power in the face of the twin threats of Western imperialist incursion and the newly mobilized energies of the lower classes. The Hong Kong compromise is incarnate in the figure of Wei Xiaobao, protagonist of Jin Yong’s final novel, *The Deer and the Cauldron*, who embraces the “bastardy” of colonialism in return for continued enjoyment of the privileges of the patriarchal order.44 *The Deer and the Cauldron*’s refraction of the Hong Kong experience is likewise the focus of an article by Lin Linghan, who argues that the work both portrays and exemplifies the complex negotiations between the political forces of colonialism and the economic and ideological imperatives of commercial culture.45

Portions of Song Weijie’s analysis of Jin Yong’s work proceed from a similar interest in the problems of colonialism, nationalism, and identity, and from an assumption that history functions in the novels most fundamentally as an expression of contemporary concerns. He maintains however that “we cannot simply reduce Jin Yong’s fiction to a ‘national allegory’ of Hong Kong’s situation.” Exploring the novels’ representations of nationalism, of the problem of personal identity, and of the formation of cultural and historical memory, and the evolution of these representations through the corpus of Jin Yong’s fiction, he finds that these texts “call into question and partially subvert any sort of narrow nationalist prejudice, and reflect the problems encountered by colonial society and by the weak nation-state in a broader sense.”46

My work follows the forenamed scholars in acknowledging the prominence of scenarios of national crisis and themes of cultural identity in Jin Yong’s fiction, and in believing that the prominence of this material affords fruitful opportunities for considering the relationships between Jin Yong’s work and the geographical, cultural, and political circumstances of its circulation. It differs somewhat, however, in the parameters of its geographic and historical referents. Where Ma and Lin read Jin Yong as a specific figuration of postwar Hong Kong society, and Song reads him as illuminating the twentieth-century Chinese condition more broadly (or even as exploring questions of identity common to “colonial societies and weak nation-states” generally), this study seeks to ground its readings of Jin Yong’s works in the shifting and expanding contexts of its production and circulation. The shifts in the treatment of nationalism that Ma, Lin, and
Song have noted can be correlated not merely with successive attempts to resolve the more or less static problem of Hong Kong’s colonial identity, nor merely with the intrinsic complexity and protean nature of the general problems of colonialism and national identity, but more precisely with changes in the aspect of these problems as they are viewed from changing historical and geographic perspectives. Jin Yong written and read in mid-century Hong Kong may be quite different from Jin Yong read in the mainland at century’s close.

Chapters 2 and 3 of this book therefore consider Jin Yong’s earliest novels, *Book and Sword* and *The Sword Stained with Royal Blood*, against the context of Hong Kong’s geopolitical situation in the years preceding and following 1949 and against a form of martial arts fiction popular in Hong Kong and neighboring areas during these years—Guangdong School martial arts fiction. While echoing certain aspects of Guangdong School fiction, Jin Yong’s work rejects its provincial allegiances in favor of a nationalist ideal organized around an imagined convergence of Han ethnic chauvinism, state sovereignty, and Chinese historical and cultural traditions. The choice of the Manchu conquest of the Han Ming dynasty as the novels’ setting and central theme guarantees that the realization of this nationalist ideal is doomed to failure; and in the resultant narratives of political catastrophe and exile, we find that Jin Yong’s early work resonates not only with the Hong Kong experience of life under colonial rule but also, and perhaps more seminally, with the dislocation from the mainland experienced by the colony’s refugee population.

*The Eagle-Shooting Heroes* and *The Giant Eagle and Its Companion*, the novels that cemented Jin Yong’s authorial reputation and helped launch his own publishing enterprises, present patriotic nationalism in its most triumphal mode, as the protagonists achieve full realization of their status as heroes through defense of the Han Song dynasty against the invading Mongols. But the discrepancy between these heroes’ fictional victories and the historical fact of the eventual Mongol conquest of the Song betrays a certain speciousness to the patriotic apotheosis; and, as I demonstrate in chapter 4, even these novels contain the emergent forms of elements that in Jin Yong’s later work challenge the nationalist narrative. Song Weijie identifies *The Heaven Sword and the Dragon Sabre*, with its weakening of the presumed identity between ethnicity and national loyalty and its elevation of romantic gratification over political mission, as a milestone in the rejection of the earlier novels’ patriotic vision.47 Taking a cue from Wu Aiyi’s sketch of the development of Jin Yong’s protagonists,48 I focus on the thread of “romantic reclusion” that ties *The Giant Eagle and Its Com-
panion (discussed in the latter part of chapter 4) to the author’s penultimate novel, *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer* (discussed in chapter 6). I also stress the thematic ties established between personal fulfillment and the romantic vision, on the one hand, and the imagining of the Chinese cultural tradition, on the other. As already suggested, the imagining of this cultural tradition plays a role in even the earliest of Jin Yong’s novels. With *Eagle-Shooting Heroes*, however, the culturalist imaginary begins to pull away from the narrative of the nation-state; in this novel, the practice of the martial arts and a discourse of textuality begin to merge with a mythical geography parallel to but distinct from the political geography of state nationalism. *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer* presents a fully realized vision of apolitical culturalism, disjunct from geography and politics and distancing itself from the martial arts as well, while bearing away intact the dream of romantic fulfillment.

The evolution within Jin Yong’s novels from a central concern with the political vicissitudes of the Han Chinese and the Chinese nation to a vision of Chineseness centered on cultural traditions inverts the “culturalism to nationalism” shift that an earlier generation of Western sinologists posited as a central trend in twentieth-century Chinese thought. The classic articulation of the “culturalism to nationalism” thesis in the works of Joseph Levenson and others has been qualified and nuanced by recent scholars, who have emphasized the coexistence and simultaneous availability of both the culturalist and the nationalist paradigms, and the inability of a single teleological model to account for a process whereby a multiplicity of subjects and shifting subject-groupings constantly renegotiate their affiliations, “national” and otherwise.\(^49\) The gravitation toward a culturalist vision of Chinese identity in the developing body of Jin Yong’s fiction echoes currents widely dispersed through the thought and self-imaginings of twentieth-century Chinese populations. The displacement of the locus of authority for this culturalist imaginary away from the geographic center of the Chinese mainland resonates not merely with the geopolitical circumstances of Jin Yong and his readers but more broadly with positions enunciated by diasporic intellectuals such as Tu Wei-ming, who argues for the “transformative potential of the periphery.”\(^50\) In chapters 5 and 7 herein, which analyze aspects of the circulation of Jin Yong’s fiction through the author’s expanding publishing enterprises, I suggest parallels between the culturalist vision expressed in the novels and the specific contexts of the novels’ changing audiences, the transnationalization of the newspaper *Ming Pao* and its affiliates, and the explicit invocation of a global Chinese culture in *Ming Pao Monthly*.
The culturalist vision of such late novels as *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer* finds expression in a setting imagined not only as removed from the political geography but also as disjunct from history and beyond the sullying influence of realpolitik. With his final novel, *The Deer and the Cauldron*, Jin Yong returns to a definite historical context and revisits the dynastic and nationalist problems so prominent in his earliest work; the now dominant culturalist perspective, however, facilitates a radically altered response to the familiar political dilemmas. *The Deer and the Cauldron*’s antiheroic protagonist, Wei Xiaobao, has been widely interpreted as a figure of Hong Kong identity. The scholars mentioned above have read this identity as a hybridized response to the tension between (pan-ethnic) Chineseness and British colonial domination. Without rejecting the possibility of such interpretations, I take inspiration from Rey Chow’s understanding of Hong Kong as poised “between [the] colonizers” of Great Britain and mainland China itself, and her reminder of the repressions inherent in a monopo- listic nativist response to foreign domination.51 Chapter 8 thus reads *The Deer and the Cauldron* against the history of Jin Yong’s relations with the mainland regime and the introduction of his works into the Chinese mainland in the 1980s and 1990s, and explores the possibility of Wei Xiaobao’s serving as a figure for the experience not only of British colonialism but also of retrocession (*huigui*) to Chinese sovereignty.

**Strategies of Reading and the Economy of Literature**

The readings of Jin Yong’s novels proposed here so far are contextual in the sense that they seek some part of the meaning of these works in the historical and social circumstances of their production and circulation.52 They are broadly informed by Benedict Anderson’s remarks on the crucial role that fiction can play in a community’s enunciating and confirming its own existence. Fiction’s relationship to society, according to this understanding, is not merely reflexive but potentially creative as well; beyond mirroring (often through transformation and displacement) social phenomena and the structural relationships obtaining in a given time and place, fiction can also play a role in conceiving and focusing still-emergent possibilities. The guiding and predictive potential of a fictional vision emerges with progressive strength in successive portions of this book. Early sections consider Jin Yong’s novels’ expression of a Hong Kong identity shaped by the events of the postwar decades. The central chapters explore the contributory role of the novels, and of the journalistic and media com-
plex through which they circulated, in articulating a culturalist and diasporic vision of Chinese identity. The chapter 8 reading of *The Deer and the Cauldron* as (in part) a story of return to the geographic and political realities of the Chinese mainland seems to impute to a text composed at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s a foreknowledge of events not set in motion in the political sphere until the signing of the Joint Declaration by Britain and China in 1984. The point here is not to impute to Jin Yong the prescience of a Nostradamus (or a Zhuge Liang) but merely to suggest that the novel’s exploration of the themes of cultural and political allegiance sketches out possibilities, some of which were in fact soon to be realized. Given the widespread audience for Jin Yong’s work and the author’s personal involvement in the negotiation of Hong Kong’s return to mainland sovereignty, the question of how and to what extent the vision expressed in the novel may have informed the discourse governing the unfolding of the political process is both evident and intriguing; but addressing the question lies beyond this book’s scope.

Tracing links between the contents of Jin Yong’s novels and the political and social circumstances of their times, this study seeks to contextualize its readings in another fashion as well: by keeping in focus the materiality of reading, the changing physical forms and commercial and institutional environments through which Jin Yong’s martial arts fiction has circulated among its audiences. In part, this emphasis on the concrete circumstances of publication and circulation serves to underpin the socio-political readings discussed here. Interpreting Jin Yong’s early work as a literature of war and exile is much more convincing, even obvious, when the original serialized texts are seen printed side by side with reports from refugee camps and accounts of skirmishes across the Taiwan Straits. As Anderson makes clear, moreover, it is only through the networks of publication and distribution that fiction can reach its audiences and allow them to join in its imagining of a community. But the uses for a close attention to the circumstances of the circulation of Jin Yong’s work are not limited to a greater understanding of the novels’ political (in the narrow sense) referents. Study of the material forms in which Jin Yong’s fiction has been distributed, and an “intertextual” approach focused not on texts cited within the novels but on texts in the company of which they circulated, and which directly or implicitly shaped their reception, also sheds light on the changing cultural status of Jin Yong’s work. The migration of Jin Yong’s novels has been not only from Hong Kong to the Chinese diaspora and back to the Chinese mainland but also from commercial success.
in a popular but little respected “sub”-literary genre to consideration as one of the most accomplished and influential bodies of work in Chinese of the latter half of the twentieth century.

My analysis of the shifting status of Jin Yong’s fiction is inspired in part by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who offers a model of the processes by which authors and texts negotiate their positions within a field generated by the constant rebalancing of the tension between values understood as uniquely and properly “artistic” and those political and economic principles holding more widespread sway throughout the structure of society.53 Chapter 5 begins an exploration of the production of the meaning and value of Jin Yong’s work by analyzing the early history of his newspaper, Ming Pao. The association between Jin Yong’s fiction and his journalistic enterprise was, in the first place, one of mutual commercial support, with the fiction contributing to the paper’s financial viability and the paper providing a primary medium for the distribution of the fiction to its audience. From the early days of Ming Pao’s existence, however, Jin Yong can also be seen to deploy the paper as a forum for actively constructing an aesthetic and a practice of reading for martial arts fiction. Chapter 7 continues the story of how the synergetic relationship between the content of Jin Yong’s fiction, the growing power and expanse of his publishing enterprises, the social and cultural status of the author/publisher himself, and his enunciation of a discourse concerning the novels’ nature and function, carries these works from the pages of the daily newspaper’s fiction supplement to the thirty-six volumes of the Collected Works of Jin Yong.

An oeuvre’s attainment of status within a given society’s cultural field is not the result of individual agency, no matter how powerful the individual (the question one must ask, in any case, is how society confers this power) or how many different roles (author, publisher, critic) combine in his or her person. Chapter 9 reviews the role played in the elevation of Jin Yong’s fiction by the academy, an institution that Bourdieu identifies as instrumental in arbitrating the middle reaches of the cultural and literary fields—the domain of “bourgeois consecration.”54 The chapter further examines the impact on the status of Jin Yong’s fiction of the migration, both of the works themselves and of the discourse on their nature and meaning, to a new cultural terrain. Entering the Chinese mainland in the 1980s, Jin Yong’s work played both a contributory and an emblematic role in the profound reconfiguration of the arts and their relationship to economic and political life during the era of Deng Xiaoping’s reforms. It is in this milieu—amidst the marketization of cultural life, the avant-garde’s rejection of this process, and the political and cultural establishments’
search for new validations of their authority—that Jin Yong’s fiction received its most unqualified consecration. It is here too that an intersection becomes evident between Jin Yong’s articulation of a culturalist response to the political problems of Chinese identity and the fortunes of his work within the field of cultural production. The (cultural) Chineseness transcending ethnic and political divisions, elaborated over the course of the oeuvre’s development and enacted in its permeation of the Chinese-literate world, is interwoven and at times seemingly identified with the (Chinese) culture that bestows the aura of authenticity and purpose upon a body of work confidently rooted in its mastery of the literary marketplace. But both the terms and the results of these negotiations remain in flux. The final chapter, by way of a coda, presents a snapshot of a revealing moment in the recent history of the assessment and reception of Jin Yong’s work.