


Why Jin's (金庸) Martial Arts Novels Are Adored Only by the Chinese

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**Henry Yiheng Zhao,**

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**Abstract:** In his article "Why Jin's Martial Arts Novels Are Adored Only by the Chinese" Henry Yiheng Zhao posits that while the martial arts novel has a long history in China and that its modern school boasts of a number of authors of extraordinary popularity. Yong Jin (金庸) is the best known among them and his novels are read by Chinese wherever they are. Yet, English translations of his works have failed to impress. Zhao attempts to find out what is uniquely Chinese in Jin's novels and that makes his literary achievements ignored in the rest of the world. Zhao posits that Jin's novels are based on specific Chinese traditional ethical codes, although Jin often subverts them in favor of spiritual values shared in Chinese culture.

## Henry Yiheng ZHAO

### Why Jin's Martial Arts Novels Are Adored Only by the Chinese

Yong Jin (金庸; Liangyong Zha 查良镛 1929-) is a journalist and novelist based in Hong Kong. He is best known for his martial arts novels, a genre that enjoys popularity in China thanks to a number of talented authors. Starting his writing career in the 1950s, Jin soon became the most popular novelist in modern China, although his popularity did not win him unanimous acclaim among Chinese literati until the 1990s when he began to be widely esteemed as an important of Chinese writers next only to Lu Xun (鲁迅). There appear, occasionally, disagreement. For example, Shuo Wang—a novelist and screenplay writer—made the remark that the characters in Jin's novels are just too ready "to draw sword and kill in praise of morality" (5; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). Whereas fighting and killing is part of the genre's requirement, Wang's remark leads us to think why the "morality" behind the killing is unavoidable for Jin, and more significantly, why his kind of "moral codes" appeal to Chinese readers.

For more than half a century since their publication from mid-1950s to the early 1970s, Jin's fourteen martial arts novels have been enjoying sustained popularity among Chinese readers wherever they are and of whichever age, class, or social group and it was estimated in 2004 that Jin's novels sold 300 million copies around the world (see Anonymous <<http://www.chinanews.com/news/2004/2004-12-10/26/515454.shtml>>; on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Chinese martial arts novels see, e.g., Keulemans). There have been almost 120 television drama and film adaptations of his novels, averaging eight adaptations of each novel, thus making Jin possibly the world record holder as the most filmed living novelist. The names of the heroes in his novels have entered everyday Chinese vernacular for computer games, toys, comics, songs, software, or even typhoons. What deserves scholarly attention is the fact that the translations of those novels into Western languages have failed, without a single exception. Up to the present day, only three out of Jin's texts have been translated to English: *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain* (Trans. Olivia Mok, 1996), *The Book and the Sword* (Trans. Graham Earnshaw, 2001), and *The Deer and the Cauldron* (Trans. John Minford, 1997-2002). The problem with regard to the lack of the translation of Jin's novels does not rest on language or narrative style because their style could be domesticated in the target language and culture. Further, Jin's novels are read also by diaspora Chinese who cannot read Chinese fluently, but who share the same aesthetic and ethical expectations as native Mainland Chinese. Similar to the situation of translation, it is little surprise that there have been scant scholarly attention on Jin's work in the West. The only substantial scholarship on Jin's work is John Christopher Hamm's 2005 book *Paper Swordsmen* and the 2007 volume *The Jin Yong Phenomenon*, a collection of studies by Chinese diaspora scholars translated to or written in English (see Huss and Liu). There have been also a few doctoral dissertations on Jin's work, but all by Chinese students abroad (see, e.g., Lai; Li). At the same time, there is a rich corpus of both scholarship in English and other Western languages on martial arts (Kungfu) and martial arts enjoys popular appeal because of actors such as Bruce Lee, Jet Li, Jacky Chan, and the like. Films in particular made Kungfu popular, for example by *The Matrix Trilogy* or by *Hidden Dragon Crouching Tiger*. Peter Lorge, in his 2012 *Chinese Martial Arts* even tried to date Chinese martial arts back to the Stone Age (5). The only conclusion I can draw from this situation is that there must be a unique Chinese mentality and structure of cultural references in Jin's novels which appeal to Chinese readers only.

I argue that Jin's novels are read both as entertainment and as moral allegories (on this, see also Chen) and most of them are in fact *Bildungsroman*-s in which young heroes after learning martial arts walk into swordsmen's world. After surviving hardship in fighting and winning deserved glory, they eventually exit and return to the world of ordinary people. Thus the heroes' life is an allegory about what a Chinese person hopes to achieve. There is, indeed, no more chivalry in Chinese than other cultures. On the contrary, in Chinese culture with its long history of selecting officials through examinations, a person does not have the right to claim that he is born with the noble qualities of swordsmen, but, instead, he could hope to achieve them by his actions. That is why it is not fair to regard Jin's novels as fantasies and easy readings, since they contain some other principles generally and tacitly accepted and that are based on time-honored traditions of morality and a sense of ethics akin to what

Jürgen Habermas designated as "universal pragmatics." While there has been much controversy about Habermas's notion on "social consensus" (see, e.g., Rescher), in my view the debate is not relevant to the evaluation and interpretation of Jin's novels because in Chinese culture the "postmodern" is tied to what I call "deep cultural codes" and that underlie people's subconscious value judgments. At the same time, it is also true that in Chinese culture there is a lack of basic codes for social interaction and behavior: people live by politics and tactics meant to cope with what is happening from day to day. Among Chinese intellectuals who care about the future of culture, some declare that "unmasked selfishness is better than faked nobleness" while those on the other end subscribe to the view that culture must remain society's "ultimate concern." Neither of the two notions provides an effectual remedy to the current want of consensus as the Chinese are facing an ideological vacuum that can hardly be filled by rationalization through critical reflections. One solution might be to reach for a fundamental stratum of Chinese mentality with its cultural and social traditions in order to recover consensus. Habermas discussed what he called "background consensus" (54) and that functions as the foundation people are not often aware of even when they practice it in their daily life. In order to have a glimpse of "background consensus," we need more penetrating critical reflections, which, for example, could be achieved through interpretations of Jin's novels.

All of Jin's novels are set in the eleventh to the seventeenth centuries, in China's Middle Ages, that is, in a world with no intervention by Western ideas nor forced importation of Western material culture. Hence in analyses of Jin's novels progress and modernity—or the lack of such—in Chinese culture could be employed as critical tools. Apart perhaps from the last of Jin's novels (*The Deer and the Cauldron*), all are located in a homogeneous historical background and except stories located in dynastic reigns there is not much social change in Chinese society during these centuries and Jin's novels reflect this in his narration and plot structure. In *The Deer and the Cauldron*—the novel takes place in the seventeenth century—the story includes the border conflict with Russia when the latter was pushing into East Siberia and that led in 1689 to the Sino-Russian Treaty of Nerchinsk. The treaty is an important mark in Chinese history because it was the last conflict that did not result in defeat. Another example I would like to refer to is the often mentioned invention of gunpowder by the Chinese and in some of Jin's novels there is a dangerous timer-detonator attached to a keg of gunpowder, which, symbolically, fails to function and this is a metaphor for the non-function of "progress." Indeed, readers of Jin's novels have to share something in common that are not yet tainted by the history of the post-opium wars. In this respect, Jin's novels are farthest from modern China as novels could be and this facilitates an interpretation to locate the paradigms of the Chinese mentality, or, to put it simpler, the common denominator for Cas a debate on *The Book of Change*, the celebrated ancient Chinese interpretation of the world and in another novel the decisive duel between Kungfu masters takes the form of a verbal fight over Daoism and its texts. This is why when after winning the title of Supreme Kungfu Master the combatants enter into a dilemma: to have proved themselves superior above everyone else means no more communication with the rest of the world. The protagonist named Dongfang Bubai ("The Undefeatable of the East") in *神雕侠侣* (*The Return of the Condor Heroes*) leaves a testament before his death: "All my life I longed for a rival but found none. The loneliness is now unbearable."

In Habermas's view, the paradigms of social communication have been distorted systematically and overshadowed by the prejudices of the different interest groups and classes in society. All of Jin's novels were written in the fifteen years from 1955 to 1970, which were tumultuous years of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution in Mainland China. In those years, Chinese people were so eager for communist "progress" that any means were considered justifiable. It is not difficult to see that Jin's novels were written under the shadow of the anxiety and over-blown utopian enthusiasm resulting in much destruction. In *侠客行* (*Ode to Gallantry*) Jin narrates that there is a stone-inscribed ultimate secret of martial arts hidden on an island, but that the writing—with some resemblance to oracle bone hieroglyphs—is undecipherable. Many martial arts masters spend dozens of years studying the various annotations, which, it turns out, were meant to mislead the learners/readers in the first place, but no aspiring master could afford to ignore the notes.

The common question that protagonists in Jin's novels have to answer is "What could be counted as life's achievement?" In classical Chinese philosophical terms, it could be a choice between *dao* (道, truth) and *qi* (气, instrument) or one between *ti* (体, fundament) and *yong* (用, utilitarian). This hard

choice has become more confusing and frustrating in modern China as seen in the controversial motto 中体西用 (Chinese fundamental and Western utilitarian) proposed by the New Confucianists throughout the twentieth century. Another example is this: in *笑傲江湖* (The Smiling Proud Wanderer, a difference in doctrines splits the martial arts world into two: 气宗 (Spiritual Sect) and 剑宗 (Sword Sect), the former stressing cultivation of the mind while the latter skill in swordsmanship. The split started half a century before the beginning of the story when the founding fathers of the two sects fought for a secret scripture and each grabbed half of it. After the split their disciples have been fighting and killing each other as deadliest enemies generation after generation and neither sect would tolerate anyone who dares to take the middle ground. This is a scathing satire of the dilemma that modern China has been facing.

Judging by his other novels, however, Jin seems to be more on the "spiritual" side, as few of the masters in his novels make achievements through sword practice. In *The Return of the Condor Heroes*, the heroin Little Dragon Lady cultivates her understanding and practice of culture and personality quietly through meditation for sixteen years, thus reaching accomplishment. "Internal power," therefore, forms the basis of genuine martial arts. Once that power is lost, all other powers disappear and those who mis-exercise internal power bring harm to themselves and thus in *The Smiling Proud Wanderer*, Master Ren tries to "dissolve all vital breath with a forceful internal power" thus causing great damages to his own body. The only viable way for the acquisition of the internal power, therefore, is reading and meditation. Further examples of Jin's focus on thought and the reading and practice of texts include *雪山飞狐* (The Flying Fox of Snowy Mountain) where all of the hero's powers come from listening to lectures, in *射雕英雄传* (The Legend of the Condor Heroes) Huang becomes a Kungfu master after fifteen years of absorbing the five thousand volumes of Daoist texts, in *连城诀* (A Deadly Secret) the protagonist who is besieged in the mountains meditates until his pulsations flow around his body enabling him to break the siege, and in *天龙八部* (Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils) the fighting strokes are named after Buddhist gestures of meditation.

As exemplified in Jin's novels martial arts are not primarily physical in their nature, the supreme status in the Kungfu world could only be achieved by transcending technique and physicality. In *The Return of the Condor Heroes*, there are three swords to be won—a sharp steel one, a blunted iron one, and an edgeless wooden one—and "the most effective sword" is the wooden one, that is, the "non-sword." This is Jin's answer to the contention between the fundamental and the utilitarian. The Master in *The Smiling Proud Wanderer* teaches his disciple how to fight and the characters in the novel offer different explanations about the meaning of sword fighting, but the correct behavior should be that the sword is not to be used at all. Thus Jin's novels suggest that the greatest martial arts are non-martial arts, but thought based on the reading and absorption of the written word.

The long tradition of Chinese popular fiction is to make Confucian moral codes triumph in the end no matter how the characters chase selfish interests in the story. Swordsmen in martial arts novels are not to be hesitant to fight and kill, which is hardly ethical or justifiable, whereas the plot must end in the victory of the righteous overcoming the evil and every retribution is to be completed to the readers' satisfaction. Jin's novels, nevertheless, refuse to follow the ethical norms of the "genuine" popular novel. In a few of his novels all the characters are vicious with almost not a single good person. In *Fox Volant of the Snow Mountains*, one after another successor of the sect's patriarch are ruthless killers and treasure hunting thieves. In *Demi-Gods and Demi-Devils*, the swordsmen all prefer notoriety rather than living in anonymity. In *A Deadly Secret*, the protagonist meets a series of evil masters each worse than the last and finally he wants nothing else but running away letting people fight it out among themselves. Neither is there in Jin's novels a distinction between the doctrines of orthodoxy and the heretic. In both *Heaven Sword and Dragon Sabre* and *The Smiling Proud Wanderer*, there is a devilish cult inside which there always hangs the shadow of murderous conspiracy for the position of the patriarch: gangs from the mountains keep fighting each other in a bloody war for the title of "Orthodox Kungfu" and since the Chinese do not have a monotheistic religion, hero worshipping escalate easily into demigod worshipping. There are a few such megalomaniacs in Jin's novels, who, surrounded by sycophantic disciples, think that they do not have to hesitate to deify themselves since they have made unprecedented achievements. Master Ren in *Ode to Ganlantry* declares that "in the five thousand years from the past to the future, I can find no comparison" and in *Demi-Gods and Demi-Devils*, the disciples compete in gaining the favor of the patriarch. In *The Deer and the Caul-*

*dron*, Master Hong thinks that he himself is definitely a god. There is no loyalty, on the other side, among the disciples who conspire for the throne and the one sitting on it expects no loyalty among his subordinates.

As patriotism has all along been regarded as the minimum ethical requirement in Chinese culture, the loyalty to one's nation should be an unchallengeable code. Jin's novels, however, question that "ultimate virtue." For example, in *Heaven Sword and Dragon Sabre* Master Zhang is determined to "expel all nomads from China" yet he falls in love with a Mongolian princess in spite of the vehement protest by all of his friends and associates. Even filial piety, the absolute virtue in the Confucian ethical system, is suggested conditional in Jin's novels. Since most of the fighting is actually family or clan feuds, filial piety is made the undeniable reason by all kinds of evil persons to wage war. The feud among the four families in *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain* lasts for a century and any measure is considered justifiable and such ends in vendetta-s. For example, in *Demi-Gods and Demi-Devils*, the character Yu is a hesitant person, but does not show hesitation in the family feud and his wife Lady Ye has to kill one baby everyday just to demonstrate her hatred of humanity after she lost her son. Yet ethics behind the killing is so confused that there can always be found a defensible moral excuse behind any murder. The only ethical code left unchallenged is no fighting. In *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*, the protagonist Guo goes to the Mongolian emperor Genghis Khan to plea for a countermand of his order to massacre the city about to fall. In *The Return of the Condor Heroes*, the Buddhist Kungfu master refuses to fight even when he is beaten up. The greatest hero in all Jin's novels is perhaps Xiao Feng in *Demi-Gods and Demi-Devils*, who, born a nomad himself, dissuades successfully the nomad army from a triumphant invasion of China, but he commits suicide after that to demonstrate that the loyalty to his people is still in his heart. To stop the devastation of a large-scale war is, therefore, more ethical than fighting in "patriotic" war. If the greatest martial arts are not martial, the greatest moral for martial arts masters is to refuse to fight. Thus most of the heroes in Jin's novels eventually retire from the swordsmen's world. They withdraw to mountains in *The Return of the Condor Heroes*, retire as ordinary people in *The Smiling Proud Wanderer*, or emigrate to overseas in *Sword Stained with Royal Blood*.

The two issues of ethics discussed above lead to a more universal conception of ethics. Reason, however well grounded, could become an obsession that brings harm to oneself and society if carried too far. Thus what is suggested in Jin's novels is that martial arts could be less moral and when turned possessive, could be damaging. For example, one of the ambitious Kungfu masters in *The Smiling Proud Wanderer*, Patriarch Ren who is too much preoccupied with acquiring the technique called "Galactic Art," is overthrown by usurper Dongfang who in turn goes so far as castrating himself thus giving Ren an opportunity to stage a comeback or in *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*, Master Mei who practices "Nine Femininity Arts" which enable him to snap the enemy's head with her fingers, becomes an addictive killer who ends miserably. Interestingly, in Jin's novels there are few "pedantic" characters. However, if there appears a character who is fond of quoting Confucius, he is more likely defending his unreasonable moral stand. For example, in *The Return of the Condor Heroes* when Master Guo wants to kill the hero who falls in love with his woman teacher, he quotes from the Confucian canon *The Book of Rites* the warning of "rigorous prevention between men and women." There are, in Jin's novels, a number of high-ranking Buddhist monks, but they are almost inevitably evil or stupid. On the other hand, lovable monks in Jin's novels are often those who do not abide by monastic rules: in *Demi-Gods and Demi-Devils*, the monk-cum-medical-doctor Xuzhu cannot stand the temptations of "falling into the traps" of meat-eating and womanizing, yet he saves a large number of people in dangerous situations. Thus, it appears that in Jin's novels to hold the middle ground by avoiding extremes is the best way to benefit the world. In an episode in *The Return of the Condor Heroes* Master Zhang, when training himself with the art of "Moving of Objects by Mind," learns the first six "levels" successfully. Then he finds that the following 19 instructions are too hard to practice and as a modest person by nature he skips that part. It turns out that the part is actually mistakenly written by the founding father of that sect and that it should be practiced in earnest and this could have killed the learner.

In Chinese culture important elements include filial piety, temperance in drinking, restraint in sexuality, industriousness, and a pragmatic attitude toward beliefs thus—different from the West—no wars of religion. All these are actually derivatives of the consensual codes discussed above. These ethical codes lead by no means to the conclusion that Chinese culture would be morally superior to other

cultures. Chinese satisfaction with instrumental reason without yearning to understand the ontological being of either the mind or the world stops Chinese thinking short from reaching for unlimited of transcendence. That is partly the reason why the Chinese mind does not feel the need of monotheism since a variety of gods could meet better practical needs and a sense of moderation. This makes Chinese mentality resistant to religious obsession, but also deprives them of spiritual redemption. I posit that the popularity to read martial arts novels in fact results in a dismissal of the mastery of martial arts and this is paradoxical in itself. The common Chinese people cannot afford to live like those wise heroes as they have to survive all kinds of daily necessities, but this is exactly because the common people are so practical in their mundane life and hence they want to read in the world of martial arts novels about noble heroes who could be so admirably disdainful of worldly success.

In conclusion, we can see that Jin's novels, although full of fierce fights and ruthless killings, are underlined by a profound ethical logic and that the highest achievement seems to be non-action, namely the overwhelming moral choice of tolerance and the greatest ethical code, namely moderation.

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