



Margaret B. Wan, *Green Peony and the Rise of the Chinese Martial Arts Novel*

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IN *Green Peony and the Rise of the Chinese Martial Arts Novel*, Margaret B. Wan has written the first monographic study of martial art-type fiction as a literary genre. As Wan points out, novels with a strong focus on martial arts are one of the few (if not the only genre) to have survived the transition from imperial times to the contemporary period. The genre has enjoyed remarkable longevity and thrives today in comics, martial arts fiction, and *gongfu* (kung-fu) movies, attracting broad audiences in China and the broader diaspora. A study of this remarkable phenomenon is well overdue. Wan has given us more than a study of the emergence of martial-arts type fiction. Drawing on little-known and hard-to-access martial arts novels and using sophisticated theoretical frameworks drawn from Bakhtin (*The*

Dialogical Imagination, 1975) and scholars of metafiction, Wan offers us a wealth of insights into the interaction between the oral and dramatic arts and their textual derivatives, and offers a new way of understanding the interaction between “folk” and “literati” narratives in the case of Chinese fiction. Her analysis will need to be taken into account in future studies of genre conversion and transformation in fictional works of the late imperial and early modern periods in China.

The volume, one of the SUNY series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture, is meticulously produced and a pleasure to read. It comprises five substantive chapters, two tables, and fifteen high quality illustrations drawn from a range of martial arts and related works of fiction. An appendix sets out the often rare and inaccessible texts on which Wan’s analysis is based. Also appended is a “Glossary of Chinese Terms” and a “Selected Bibliography,” which is nonetheless very substantial, and an index.

Students and scholars of the history of Chinese fiction will be aware of the seminal discussion of martial arts-type narrative in the early twentieth century by Lu Xun in his history of Chinese *xiaoshuo* (fictional) writings. Lu Xun differentiated between the “literati” and the “folk” versions of the martial arts genre, a theory Wan revisits in this volume. The reader may also be familiar with the study by James J. Y. Liu of what he called “The Chinese knight-errant” and “military romances” (*The Chinese knight-errant*, 1967). Drawing on ten previously unstudied works from the late imperial period (eighteenth to nineteenth centuries), Wan thoroughly revises the earlier paradigms to allow for a better understanding of the full complexity of the genre. She chooses one as a representative exemplar of the genre as a whole. The chosen work is entitled *Green Peony* (*Lü mudan* 綠牡丹, c. 1800), a story set in the reign of Empress Wu. *Green Peony* is a highly relevant example as its literary characteristics place it at the intersection of such earlier genres as the scholar-beauty romance, the historical novel, and court-case fiction. She terms *Green Peony* and similar works “martial romances” but notes that the authors are not particularly interested in the usual romantic elements common in, for example, scholar-beauty fiction. In the “martial romances” the love and courtship scenes serve as frames to the action rather than being the chief focus of the author and reader. Fighting is, of course, the *raison-d’être* of martial arts genres. In the case of *Green Peony* and similar texts, the focus is not on a general marshalling his troops into battle. Instead the author adopts the perspective of an audience at a spectacle that pits man against man (or sometimes, woman). The focus is on the virtuoso display of skill at fighting. It is this spectacle of highly skilled combat that has been adopted and reinvented in diverse ways in modern day media and cinema.

In Chapter 2 Wan examines ten novels of martial romance forms and analyzes their complex relationship of derivation and development with earlier chantefable-type fiction in the Qing period. This demonstrates effectively the importance of performance-related or imitation genres such as chantefable (a prosimetric narrative) to the evolution of prose fiction in this period. In Chapter 3 Wan argues that *Green Peony* and related texts enact a sophisticated parody of the usual conventions of the scholar-beauty and military romance. She carefully distinguishes her use of parody here from the treatment by Andrew Plaks of irony in his analysis of the “Four Masterworks” of Ming fiction. In Chapter 4 she demonstrates the high level

of borrowing of the literary aesthetics of the “four masterworks” of Chinese fiction in the case of the Qing martial arts novel. This was partly a marketing ploy. Jin Shengtan’s (1608–1661) analysis of rhetoric in the case of the “four masterworks” of the high tradition were so popular that they could not be ignored even in the case of martial arts fiction of later centuries. In this chapter Wan argues for the self-conscious artistry on the part of the author of *Green Peony*, who blended elements of earlier fictional genres within a deliberate rhetorical framework. In this chapter Wan draws on Bakhtin’s ideas about the relationship between language and society and ideas of metafiction drawn from William Gass and Robert Scholes. Metafiction in this context refers to works that “explore a theory of fiction through the practice of writing fiction” (102). In its delight in parody and inversion of conventions, *Green Peony* is seen as a significant precursor to that great novel of the Qing period (also set in the reign of Empress Wu), *Flowers in the Mirror* (128). In the concluding chapter, Wan convincingly argues for the importance of seeing narratives based on performance arts such as chantefables, works of prose such as the martial arts novel, scholar-beauty romances, and the recognized “masterworks” as neither belonging to folk or the literati. Rather they belong to a rich continuum that was perceived as *xiaoshuo* (fictional works) of universal popularity across the social spectrum.

This is an important study not just for those who love martial arts novels and want to know how these originated, but also to those with a serious interest in the interaction between oral and performance texts, the transformation of literary genres, and the vibrancy of print culture in the later imperial period. *Green Peony and the Rise of the Chinese Martial Arts Novel* will be read with profit by students of Chinese literature and social history and those with an interest in the history and development of fictional genres.

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