

Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China

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Abstract

Invented largely for urban audiences and widely circulated across multiple media, the image of the female knight-errant attracted unprecedented attention among writers, readers, publishers, and officials in the first half of the twentieth century. This article focuses on three best-selling martial arts tales published in Republican China (1912–1949), paying particular attention to their martial heroines. It also explores what granted the female knight-errant character such enduring popularity and how the writers—Xiang Kairan, Gu Mingdao, and Wang Dulu—garnered the interest of their readers. As the author points out, martial arts novelists drew on a long and rich genre repertoire formulated before 1911 while taking into consideration contemporary debates regarding gender, thereby maintaining the female knight-errant figure as a relevant and compelling construct. More importantly, the author argues, through portraying their martial heroines in relation to family, courtship, and female subjectivity, martial arts novelists resisted the prevailing discourse on Chinese womanhood of their times while imagining female heroism.

Keywords: Republican China, Xiang Kairan, Gu Mingdao, Wang Dulu, female knight-errant, heroines, martial arts tale, genre repertoire, gender, female subjectivity, courtship

In his essay criticizing a widespread craze among ordinary audiences for martial arts fiction and films, novelist and critic Shen Yanbing (1896–1981, also known as Mao Dun) describes the fanatical reaction of the audience watching a martial arts magic film at a movie theater in Shanghai:

As soon as you arrive at a movie house, you can witness the great attraction of *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* [*Huoshao honglian si*] to the petty urban dwellers [*xiao shimin*]. As cheering and applauding are not prohibited in those theaters, you are surrounded by a fanatic crowd from the beginning to the end.... They cheer loudly while Red Lady [*Hong Gu*] flies down, not because it is played by the actress Butterfly Wu, but because Red Lady is a swordswoman [*nü jianxia*, emphasis added], the central character of *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple*. (Shen [1933] 2010, 774)

At the beginning of the essay, Shen traces the craze with one particular martial arts novel, *Biographies of the Marvelous Knights-Errant in the Jianghu* (*Jianghu qixia zhuan*, 1922–1928, hereafter *The Marvelous Knights-Errant*) written by Xiang Kairan (also known as Pingjiang Buxiaosheng, the “Unworthy Man of Pingjiang,” 1889–1957), from which the film *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* and many sequels were adapted. Shen loathed that the petty urban dwellers—both readers of the novel and viewers of the film—thought constantly of, and even dreamed about, two protagonists of the tale: the Gold Arhat (*Jin Luohan*) and Red Lady (Shen [1933] 2010, 773). Demonstrating the enormous appeal of the tale, the film was even made into comic strips (*lianhuan tuhua*) in order to reach hinterland towns that did not have movie theaters (Shen [1933] 2010, 774).

As Shen acutely notes, Red Lady’s presence in an imaginary martial arts world fascinated and even mesmerized audiences. Shen unmistakably detested the “martial arts craze” (*wuxia kuang*) and the immense attention paid to the female knight-errant (*nüxia*) character of Red Lady.¹ But, with the privilege of hindsight, we know that Red Lady and her popularity on screen and in print embodied only a catalytic moment in a larger story of the female knight-errant character in Republican China. In the following decades, more martial heroines were created and popularized and continued to stir up acclaim and criticism. The female knight-errant of Huangjiang (also known as Fang Yuqin, hereafter Zither) from Gu Mingdao’s (1896–1944) best-selling martial arts novel of the same title, for example, was another staple character that appeared in the late 1920s and early 1930s, not only in newspapers, printed books, and comic strips, but also in film, Peking opera, and other local operas. During the mid-1930s, however, the novel was marked as “harmful” (*buliang*) and banned from publication and circulation by several local governments.² Nonetheless, the tale continued to occupy the Peking opera stage well into the late 1940s.³

These instances involving the character and tales of the female knight-errant are revealing. They symbolize a society caught between efforts, either backed by the state or endorsed by left-wing intellectuals, to police the imagining and the exhibition of female heroism, and an industry of cultural production that placed fantasizing about martial heroines at the center of public sensation.⁴ The censure of

¹ Numerous tales of martial heroines have been widely circulated in Chinese folklore throughout history. I focus on the female character created in the martial arts novel only. Terms such as “female knight-errant,” “female fighter,” and “woman warrior” are interchangeable.

² See, for example, “Qingdao jiaoyuju tongzhi” (1934) and “Jiangxi sheng zhengfu xunling” (1934).

³ Advertisements for the novel were widespread in newspapers like *Shanghai News* (*Shen bao*) in the early 1930s. In 1947, advertisements for the tale adapted to the Peking opera of the same name continued to appear in *Shanghai News* and *The Drama Monthly* (*Xiju bao*).

⁴ The animosity of critics such as Shen Yanbing toward martial arts fiction and film was in conjunction to but different from state censorship, as the former aligned with the efforts to build a new literature centering on the notion of literary realism whereas the latter appeared to be part of the New Life movement launched by the Nationalist government in the mid-1930s.

Shen Yanbing and other critics and state censorship failed to prevent the public from being drawn to the tale of the female knight-errant, as martial arts fiction remained one of the most popular types of publication and the female knight-errant was applauded continuously throughout the following decades.⁵ Given its far-reaching popularity in the Republican-era cultural arena, the female knight-errant figure became intrinsic to popular writers' exploration and navigation of new gender roles in a rapidly transforming society. In other words, the imagining of the martial heroine was closely tied to the changing perception of Chinese womanhood during the Republican period.

Over the past two decades, scholars have paid much attention to the image of the modern woman or new woman and its highly politicized nature when examining "the question of women" in modern China (Judge 2001; Barlow 2004). Literary scholar Ying Hu, for example, investigates how narratives of the new woman were produced and circulated through translation and appropriation of "imported images of Western woman" from 1898 to 1918 (Hu 2000, 5). Jin Feng focuses on the canonized works written by "a group of radical Chinese intellectuals" such as Lu Xun, Ba Jin, and Ding Ling in the 1920s and 1930s and notes that the new woman was represented as a "highly privileged urban figure" who "possesses a unique and deep emotional interior" and takes various forms, including the "girl student," "career woman," and "revolutionary" (Feng 2004, 2). Although such works underline the multifaceted nature of Chinese womanhood in the modern era, they overlook the field of popular writing—especially the image of the female knight-errant that was immensely popular with audiences—and its significance in understanding the popular perception of Chinese womanhood. As I will demonstrate, martial arts novelists were tremendously successful at captivating ordinary readers with images of the martial heroine that were closely tied to not only the tradition of martial arts literature, but also the questions being heatedly debated in their times, such as changing gender norms in relation to family, courtship, and female subjectivity. Their tales of the martial heroine confronting and configuring conflicting forces—moral obligation and individual pursuit, and virtuous sentiment and romance, for example—fascinated readers, who, perhaps just like the martial heroines that enchanted them, were navigating uncertainty between the tradition and the modern, the old and the new, in their own lives.

In making its argument, this article engages with other examinations of the female knight-errant figure, in both its premodern and modern incarnations, a topic of considerable scholarly interest (Bao 2005; Cai 2005; Zhang 2005; Zeitlin 2007; Altenburger 2009; Edwards 2010; Liu 2011; Chen 2012; Li 2014). Film scholars, for example, examine the "new centrality of women's bodies" in the modern imagination with the aid of film technology in Republican China (Zhang 2005, xxxii) and highlight the "irreducible heterogeneity" of the "vernacular body" of female knight-errant on the Chinese silent screen, as a result of plural modes of cultural translation (Bao 2005, 196–198). They reflect on the women warriors depicted in a long line of cultural products and elucidate the strategies of contemporary success

⁵ For censure against martial arts fiction, see, for example, Qu ([1931] 2010) and Zheng ([1932] 2010).

on the global screen, including “accentuating the cultural specificities of the woman-warrior-as-spectacle” in Chinese tradition (Cai 2005, 444) and dexterously depicting women warriors that “both conform to historical expectations and break from these norms” (Edwards 2010, 65). Literary scholars treat female figures, whether martial heroines, courtesans, or chastity martyrs, as narrative tropes in the long tradition of Chinese literature and scrutinize how they had provided metaphors or subject matter for cultural debates. Judith Zeitlin, for example, calls attention to the transformation of Lin Siniang tales over time and contends that they enabled seventeenth-century Chinese literati to “work through memories of the old dynasty’s recent death” and “confirm the legitimacy of a new imperial power” (Zeitlin 2007, 106).⁶ Analyzing the same set of Lin Siniang tales, Wai-ye Li illustrates the myriad purposes Lin was pressed to serve, which allowed late imperial Chinese literati to comment on “the demise of a world” and to cement male literati’s homosocial bonds (Li 2014, 268, 291).

Acknowledging the close ties between martial arts fiction and film, this article focuses on the female knight-errant figures constructed in the best-selling martial arts novels of three Republican-era writers: Xiang Kairan, Gu Mingdao, and Wang Dulu. Unlike their literati predecessors, martial arts novelists were removed from the traumatic dynastic transition in the mid-seventeenth century and wrote instead for a commercialized reading market. They no longer held the prestige of their literati predecessors. Although martial arts novelists drew on a rich literary tradition, they created and recreated martial heroines not so much to express nostalgia for the past as to mark a distinctive stance regarding the present. I explore how feminine imagery and female personae functioned as a venue for statements of cultural critique, which allowed martial arts novelists to resist the prevailing discourse of their times, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the popular perception of Chinese womanhood in Republican China.

In this article, I first revisit the female knight-errant figures created in the imperial period, draw attention to two prototypes, and identify the parameters that these figures set for later writers. I then zero in on the martial heroines of three Republican-era novelists and consider the following questions: What were the elements that contributed to the appeal of these female knight-errant figures? What were the issues underscored by the tales that made them relevant to readers? Most important, what did martial arts novelists reveal of their views on Chinese womanhood under various circumstances? The article concludes with brief remarks on the significance of the female knight-errant figure for gaining a better understanding of the literary culture of Republican China.

⁶ Lin Siniang is a fictional figure whose appearance in seventeenth-century poems, memoirs, and ghost stories has been closely associated with the fall of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). In these tales, Lin is transformed from the vengeful ghost of a palace lady into a sword-wielding female knight-errant and then into a tamed figure in the mythmaking imagination.

Two Pre-1911 Genre Precedents: Nie Yinniang and He Yufeng

The female knight-errant figure appeared in Chinese texts as early as the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BC) characterizing the female sword-player with both swordplay skills and unrivaled bravery.⁷ Despite a seemingly modest debut, the image of the mysterious and skilled woman warrior continued to be visible in the ensuing dynasties across a broad spectrum of genres—including historical and fictional texts, popular drama, ballads, elite poetry, and vernacular novels—testifying to the figure’s enduring appeal to both writers and readers. Among the texts that recorded the heroic female character-type, a great many martial arts tales feature the heroine’s martial arts skills or magic; her virtues, such as filial piety and loyalty; and her heroic deeds, such as saving the weak and poor from distress. A long and rich narrative repertoire was consequently formulated, which indicated the martial heroine’s centrality in attracting audiences’ attention to martial arts tales.⁸

Two female knight-errant figures stand out in the corpus of martial arts tales. One is Nie Yinniang from a Tang dynasty (618–907) tale of the same title attributed to Pei Xing (825–880); the other is He Yufeng (also known as Shisanmei) of the late nineteenth-century classic *Tale of Heroes and Lovers* (*Ernü yingxiong zhuan*, 1878, hereafter *Heroes and Lovers*), written by Manchu bannerman Wen Kang (fl. 1821–1860). The two characters became important prototypes and provided genre parameters for later writers’ making and remaking of woman warrior characters. The following discussion of the two tales reveals similar fundamentals and different emphases placed in relation to social norms and gender imaginaries.

The daughter of a military officer, Nie Yinniang is abducted at the age of ten and taught martial arts and magic by a Buddhist nun for five years in the wilderness. After Nie returns home, she becomes an assassin and begins to work for a series of warlords. She ultimately deserts the first warlord she serves, but she protects and remains loyal to the second one after being impressed by his powers of divination.⁹ This tale was subversive for a number of reasons. First, although Nie’s martial prowess allows her to roam between nature and culture, it also alienates her from her parents. Second, Nie has both autonomy and dominance in her choice of spouse and marital life. Third, she defies patriarchal authority by leaving the first warlord, who used to be her father’s supervisor, and choosing to serve a second, rival lord. At every turn, Nie Yinniang refuses to be bound by the patriarchal rules and expectations of Confucian society.

Published nearly a millennium later, *Heroes and Lovers* is an innovative work that unites the chivalric theme and scholar-beauty (*caizi jiarren*) romance and represents the culminating point of the imperial-era female knight-errant stories. The tale features a martial heroine, He Yufeng, who, in pursuit of revenging her father’s death, saves a hapless young scholar, An Ji. She also frees several young

⁷ James Liu (1967) identified the “Maiden of Yueh” as the earliest portrayal of the female fighter.

⁸ For a survey of the knight-errant archetype in Chinese narrative tradition, see Liu (1967); for that of the female knight-errant in Chinese narrative, see Altenburger (2009).

⁹ For an English translation of the tale, see Liu (1967, 89–90).

female hostages confined by lascivious monks and arranges for one of them, Zhang Jinfeng, to marry An Ji so they can travel together. The first half of the tale renders He Yufeng one of the most unforgettable martial heroines with the qualities of many previous female fighter characters, such as chastity, peerless martial skills, and uncompromising righteousness. Nevertheless, the second half narrates her transformation into a docile wife after her enemy is punished and An Ji's father persuades her to marry An as a second wife. This narrative shift has attracted much scholarly critique (Wang 1997; Hamm 1998; Lee 2007; Altenburger 2009). The tale was written right before the collapse of the Qing state and Confucian order. Its structural imbalance reveals the author's intention of writing the tale to stress "heroism as a virtue that cannot be fully realized until it is complemented by the virtue (and adventure) of love" (Wang 1997, 157). In order to achieve genuine heroism, He Yufeng must revoke her chivalric past and submit herself to a higher mandate that symbolizes ideal womanhood.

Written while Confucian gender ethics dominated, the two tales underscore the intriguing interplay of martial prowess, gender roles, and the possibility of social transgression. Rather than staying in the inner quarters, both Nie Yinniang and He Yufeng were imagined as being empowered by martial arts and magic and able to roam in and out of society. Moreover, in the imaginary martial arts world where martial arts tales unfold, the empowered female fighter, like her male counterpart, eradicates evil and fights for justice. And yet, her heroic deeds mostly involve restoring the social order predominated by males, and she more often than not retreats from the martial arts world or returns to a domestic setting when her mission is complete. In other words, the martial heroine "is not a feminist fighting against patriarchal norms, but rather an exceptional woman making a remarkable sacrifice to protect the status quo either in terms of family structures or the imperial order" (Edwards 2010, 67). The inherent tension between acting "as defender of an unquestioned patriarchal Confucian order" and being perceived "as a disruption and threat to this very order" marks "the basis of the ambiguity of the female knight-errant character" (Altenburger 2009, 53).

Recognizing its ambiguity, I contend that the female knight-errant figure functions as a valuable venue in which writers navigated an array of questions and therefore signified a distinctive position regarding gender norms of different times. For example, to what extent do martial skills allow the female fighter to transgress gender boundaries and conduct deeds that are otherwise unthinkable for women? Can martial deeds render possibilities of self-realization and eventually a path to female subjectivity? The Nie Yinniang tale is brief, but its influential motifs—such as the mysterious nun master, the heroine's detachment from familial relationships, and her eventual retreat into the mountains—underscore a key issue: the compatibility of martial prowess and sex, yet not without sexiness. By injecting the theme of romance into He Yufeng's tale, Wen Kang highlights the significance of emotion (*qing*) as the legitimizing basis for the social order. He Yufeng enters the martial arts world avenging the murder of her father and leaves it abiding by her father-in-law's will, thereby affirming the orthodox order and the moral ideal of filial piety as the true forms of heroism. Although Wen Kang unmistakably endorsed the filial virtue, his innovative approach to martial heroism produced an important

formula that later writers continued to visit and reproduce, thereby further complicating the image and significance of the female knight-errant.

Widow, Runaway, and Nun: Ramifications of Social Propriety

It is impossible to ignore Red Lady when talking about images of martial heroines in Republican China. Red Lady first appeared in *The Marvelous Knights-Errant*, Xiang Kairan's best-selling novel. Xiang's novel was originally serialized in *Scarlet Magazine* (*Hong zazhi*, 1922–1924), the Shanghai literary weekly later renamed *Red Rose* (*Hong meigui*, 1924–1932). Interestingly, Red Lady was never designed to be a central character in the novel. Introduced in chapter 2, the tale of Red Lady spanned only two chapters in a total of 106 chapters. And yet, her dashing martial skills and glorious appearance not only made her an iconic character but also crystalized the championship of the female knight-errant character in modern China.

Flying down from a rooftop into a room, Red Lady's first appearance is rendered through the eyes of a young male novice warrior:

While Liu Chi crouched by the window and eavesdropped on the conversation between his master and unidentified visitors, he suddenly felt a breeze passing by. He saw bright red. It was so bright it seemed as if the room was on fire. Stunned by surprise, he heard people in the room cheering together, "Red Lady is here!" He looked again [into the room]: his master had gotten off the bed. A dozen people who were sitting on both sides all rose with their hands down. A lady in red stood in the middle of the room. Her apparel was very unique: she wore fire-like red color from head to toe. He had no idea about the fabric, but he was dazzled by that redness! Both her head and face were covered in the red, showing only her eyes and nose. More than two or three hundred ribbons, long and short, were all over her body. The sleeves and dress trailed along the ground, covering her hands and feet. On her face—which was prettier than a pomegranate blossom—two black eyes, like two stars, were sparkling. Her pearly teeth shone through her cherry-like lips. Liu Chi was just about to hear what this red lady would say. Unexpectedly, he was nearly frightened out of his wits the moment she opened her mouth! "You are all so careless. Don't you know someone is eavesdropping outside the window?" Red Lady said. (Xiang [1923] 2009, 13–14)

Standing in the middle of the room, Red Lady is the center of attention. Her entrance is absolutely striking. Even in a private setting, the reader can easily visualize her outstanding appearance. The lavish depiction of her fire-like red color is particularly worth noting. It not only conveys a spectacular visual effect but also instantly evokes the image of He Yufeng from *Heroes and Lovers* showing up in the Nengren Temple to rescue An Ji, who is covered in red from head to toe (Wen [1878] 1980, 80). Xiang Kairan substantially elaborated on the glaring red color and

made it a signature trait of Red Lady, even using it in her name. By employing the detail of the color in a refreshing way and invoking the classic martial heroine image, Xiang readily placed his Red Lady in a long lineage of female fighters and effectively ensured her forever association with He Yufeng, thereby lending legitimacy and credibility to his female fighter and tale.

Although rendered through a male fighter's voyeuristic gaze, Red Lady's bodily integrity is not compromised.¹⁰ Rather, readers soon discover that Red Lady is a diligent and frugal widow, loyal to her late husband, and rigorous in raising her only son, thereby conforming clearly to Confucian expectations of the widow in late imperial China (Sommer 2000; Mann and Cheng 2001; Theiss 2004). Additionally, upon inheriting property from her late husband, Red Lady encounters adversities similar to those faced by many chaste Qing widows: for example, her husband's family plots to set her and her son on fire so as to seize the inheritance (Xiang [1923] 2009, 82–83). Fortunately, a mysterious nun learns of the plot and saves Red Lady and her son. Revealing the danger to Red Lady, the nun master, who is adept at martial arts, trains her to become a skilled female fighter (Xiang [1923] 2009, 84).

This incident is remarkable: it explains the reason behind Red Lady's path to knight-errantry and juxtaposes her role as martial heroine with her identity as a widow, thereby revisiting the central question of the compatibility of martial prowess and sex. Although she appears to have broken free of social taboos and displays outstanding individuality by wearing fire-like red and being a master, she nevertheless abides by all of the expectations that Confucian society imposed on widows. In other words, her martial prowess was achieved at the cost of her sexuality. This seemingly aggressive, yet essentially conservative, approach to her character is also reflected in her status in the imaginary martial arts world. During the early 1930s, one reader observed that Red Lady is notable and yet always secondary to the Gold Arhat, the male martial master of the tale:

The novel does not explain the Gold Arhat's background and is also concise in depicting his experiences. This is because he is the real primary character, just like bodhisattva Guanyin in *Journey to the West* [*Xiyou ji*]. On occasions of unsolvable, big disasters, all problems will be solved once he shows up. Red Lady, too, appears important. And yet, she functions as the replacement of the Gold Arhat and handles problems well whenever the Gold Arhat does not need to be personally present. (Yu 1934, 16–17)

¹⁰ Jiacheng Liu analyzes how *bangzi* (a variant of clapper theater commonly called *qinqiang*, "the tunes of Qin") actresses in 1910s Beijing intentionally revealed their actual bound feet in performance, fascinated voyeuristic male audiences, and created "an essentially flirtatious relationship between the actress and her spectators" (Liu 2016, 46). Red Lady's debut depicted here resembles much the onstage "striking a pose" (*liangxiang*) in traditional operas and shows popular culture as fertile ground for negotiating, exercising, and imagining gender roles.

In other words, although Red Lady commands much attention both within and without the tale, she remains subordinate to a senior, patriarchal figure.

The ambiguity underlining the image of Red Lady is also seen in another female fighter, Red Lady's disciple Gan Lianzhu. Gan's character development signifies the growth of female subjectivity with particular constraints. Born and raised in a bandit family, Gan has a grandfather, father, and brother who make a living by periodically robbing and killing people. Skilled martial fighters, her grandmother, mother, stepmother, and sister-in-law manage and protect the familial bandit enterprise. Turning a blind eye to the evildoings of her family, Gan discovers her own agency only when her husband asks her to leave with him. Thus, Gan's decision to break away from her family does not originate from a sense of social justice or quest for independence. Rather, she conforms to the old idea of "If you marry a chicken, follow the chicken; if you marry a dog, follow the dog" (*Jiaji sui, jiagou sui*) (Xiang [1923] 2009, 68). Although Gan replaces one patriarchal order represented by her father with another symbolized by her husband, the fights she undertakes in breaking away hold great significance. Gan's husband is depicted as a gentle man who has little martial arts training. The challenge of confronting her family, therefore, falls on Gan (Xiang [1923] 2009, 71–72). Purposely choosing a day when all male family members are away, Gan and her husband battle the female figures, each of whom guards one gate with different weapons and brawl with Gan as she attempts to sever the familial ties. The fighting between Gan and her maternal relatives literally and figuratively renders the totalizing and brutal effect of her breakaway. In a dramatic scene in which Gan struggles against her mighty grandmother at the last gate, she is saved only when the Gold Arhat, who somehow senses Gan's trouble, sends his ferocious eagle to intervene and assist Gan in her escape (Xiang [1923] 2009, 77). Successfully breaking free, Gan and her husband become members of the Gold Arhat's martial arts clan—ironically, another patriarchal order dominated by a male figure—after they take pains to split off from her patrilineal family (Xiang [1923] 2009, 77–82).

The early 1920s, when Xiang Kairan started to serialize *The Marvelous Knights-Errant*, was the heyday of the iconoclastic spirit of the May Fourth Movement. Although late Qing intellectuals had long promoted improving the status of Chinese women, May Fourth advocates sparked a movement that championed the individual freedoms of love and marriage and the exclusion of patriarchal arbitration in personal affairs. For example, the translation and performance of Henrik Ibsen's 1879 play *A Doll's House* (*Wan'ou zhijia*, also known as *Nola* [*Nala*]) and Hu Shi's farcical 1919 version of the same play, *The Main Event in Life* (*Zhongshen dashi*), were among the most controversial and influential works of the era. Images of independent women who were emancipated from familial constraints and broke away from the patriarchal order were widely circulated and debated. Nevertheless, in publications such as *Scarlet Magazine* where Xiang serialized his novel, popular writers, many of whom were cast as "literary beggars" (*wengai*) and "literary whores" (*wenchang*) by May Fourth advocates, expressed reservations about the radical changes occurring, especially those regarding gender norms (Ma 2008, 130–168).

Xiang Kairan's martial arts tale offers a valuable glimpse into the popular imagination of Chinese womanhood in the early to mid-1920s. In contrast to the iconoclastic intellectuals' denouncement of constraints pertaining to family and marriage, Xiang's tale seldom ventures beyond the immediate circle of family. Even the imaginary martial arts world is patrilineal and male-oriented, following precisely the order that had dominated Chinese society for centuries. Red Lady and Gan Lianzhu become known primarily due to their unusual appearance, in contrast to their male counterparts who became famous for their righteous deeds. They were never conceived to be central characters, despite the enthusiasm they kindled in the audience. This contradiction between identification and representation, and the paradox between literary construction and market reception, underscore the ambiguity of the character type: the female knight-errant remained the object of public pleasure, rather than the subject of substantial deeds. This contrast is even more striking when we consider how Xiang Kairan treats the question of familial and communal ties related to his martial heroines: Red Lady *has* to be a widow. Gan Lianzhu *has* to fight to break away from the patriarchal order (which yet results in her membership in an alternative male-centered community). Most of all, the initiator of the lineage of female fighters *has* to be a nun. Whereas the enigmatic nun master clearly evokes the Nie Yinniang tale for readers, she also signifies a proto-image of the female knight-errant and a path to female heroism that abstains from family, community, and, eventually, the female role itself. Xiang Kairan's depiction of the female knight-errant and its popularity demonstrate the lasting impact of social propriety on the popular imagination of Chinese womanhood and signals a resistance to the construct of the new woman and the discourse that promoted it in 1920s China.

Roaming with a Male Partner: A New Story of Nie Yinniang

Starting in the late 1920s, Zither, the female protagonist of the martial arts novel *The Female Knight-Errant of Huangjiang*, was popularized in print, on screen, and on stage, adding another image to the genealogy of martial heroines. In early 1929, inspired by the enduring popularity of Xiang Kairan's *Marvelous Knights-Errant*, Gu Mingdao started to serialize the novel in the literary supplementary of the Shanghai newspaper *Sin wan pao* (*Xinwen bao*). At the time, Gu had been active in the Shanghai popular literary scene for more than a decade, writing romance novels. Initially planned as a novella, the serialization turned out to be so popular that Gu had to expand it to a novel at the cost of structural coherence (Ye 1985, 84). Readers nevertheless begged for a sequel when the serialization ended. Gu therefore serialized a sequel in *Sin wan pao* in late 1930. Reader demand persisted throughout the 1930s, and Gu added four more sequels before he brought the tale to an end in April 1940, resulting in a total of eighty-eight chapters, at least "six reprints" of the tale, and perhaps "a million readers" over the decade (Fan [1931] 1985, 1). The novel was Gu's greatest career success.

Despite its triumph in the market, the tale was largely dismissed by contemporary critics due to a number of flaws, such as the "incongruous literary style," "jumbled storyline," "narrow scope," and "melancholy undertone" (Ye 1985,

85; Zhang 1991, 146–147, 152). These critics attributed the popularity of the tale to its “novelty” (*xinxian gan*) in the mid-Republican era, which some identified as a “combination of martial arts, romance, and adventure elements” and some “nationalist sentiment” (Zhang 1991, 148; Ye 1985, 83). Gu’s peers, nevertheless, viewed the element of “boy-girl romance” (*ernü qingshi*) and the theme of emotion (*qing*) as *the* appealing features of the tale, which, they asserted, presented a different perspective for the writing of martial arts tales (Yan [1929] 2007, 324). Examining the image of Zither in relation to virtuous sentiment and man-woman romance, I contend that the tale denotes the anxiety and uncertainty associated with ideas such as “freedom of love” (*ziyou lian’ai*) and “freedom of marriage” (*ziyou jiehun*) that were forcefully advocated by iconoclastic intellectuals in the 1920s, which allowed Gu Mingdao to command readers’ attention, achieve commercial success, and, most importantly, contest the changing gender norms of his time.

As the tale’s title suggests, the storyline centers on a female knight-errant from Huangjiang, Zither. Born in Huangjiang, Zither has a carefree childhood until her father, a retired bandit, is murdered by an old enemy. Determined to avenge his death, Zither spends years learning martial arts and magic from a mysterious Buddhist monk in the mountains. After she returns home, Zither awaits her pursuit of the enemy until her younger brother and mother both die. During her quest she meets Yue Jianqiu (hereafter Sword), a young and long-orphaned male knight-errant, who teams up with her in assisting the good, vanquishing numerous evils, and eventually eliminating her enemy. From the outset, Gu Mingdao explicitly associates this story with the tradition of chivalric tales by utilizing a number of motifs, including the mysterious monk master, supernatural martial magic, and training in the mountains. One contemporary critic thus characterizes Gu’s tale as a tale of “new Nie Yinniang” (Ye 1985, 84). That Zither embarks on the path of knight-errantry due to the murder of her father also evokes for readers the tale of He Yufeng and brings to the fore the virtue of filial piety. From a Confucian perspective, Zither is a virtuous female fighter.

In a departure from Nie Yinniang and He Yufeng, however, Zither roams around with a male partner, Sword. The issue of chastity is consequently at stake. Similar to Red Lady’s debut, Zither is introduced through Sword’s voyeuristic gaze: when Zither is wounded while attempting to assassinate a villain that Sword has pursued, Sword emerges from the dark and takes her away for treatment. During their first encounter, Zither exposes her “snow white, pinkish, and soft arm and shoulder” due to the wound, but her bodily integrity is not compromised (Gu [1929] 1985, 5). Discovering that they have the same master and impressed by each other’s martial skills and bravery, they decide to join forces for their shared plan (Gu [1929] 1985, 44–45). Clearly drawn to each other, Zither and Sword nevertheless prioritize a higher cause—Zither’s revenge and travel as “martial brother” (*shixiong*) and “martial sister” (*shimei*) (Gu [1929] 1985, 56). During their adventures, Zither’s purity is questioned time and again while he travels with or even without Sword (Gu [1929] 1985, 119). Sword’s loyalty is also put to the test numerous times. In one incident, for example, Sword is separated from Zither and abducted to a Daoist monastery where three nymphomaniac swordswomen live. Each of the three sinister yet alluring sisters attempts to seduce him with both sexual pleasure and

coercive force. Sword at one moment is mesmerized under the effect of drugs but ultimately is awakened by his strong will and eliminates all of the female seducers (Gu [1929] 1985, 122–137).

Seemingly to tease readers, Zither's monk master reveals early on that Zither and Sword are destined to unite in marriage (Gu [1929] 1985, 121). And yet, a Zither-Sword marriage does not happen until the very end of the tale. Both male and female characters in the novel frequently exhort a union between the two fighters. For example, Yun Sanniang, Sword's secondary master and an adept swordswoman and Daoist, urges Zither to stay in the human world, conduct chivalric deeds with Sword, and anticipate "endless merriness," when Zither expresses her intention of "concentrating on cultivating the Dao" after realizing her revenge (Gu [1929] 1985, 87). Other characters express similar requests so much that they call it a "public case" (*gong'an*) that Zither and Sword are not yet married (Gu [1940] 1985, 1590–1591). They want Zither and Sword to have a wedding so they can drink wine and the couple can "have a baby sword-player, so everybody will be happy" (Gu [1940] 1985, 1593). Even villains surmise a union between Zither and Sword. One peculiar example is their encounter with a bandit couple that is impersonating Zither and Sword, occupying a mountain, and extorting fees from passersby. As a fellow bandit explains to the real Zither and Sword, whom he does not recognize, "Who doesn't know that she [Zither] is a young married woman? Her partner is Sword of the Kunlun clan. They live together, long married!" (Gu [1929] 1985, 1572). Zither blushes at the comment, grows furious, and becomes determined to "clean up" her reputation even if it entails the risk of entering "the tiger's lair and the dragon's den" (Gu [1940] 1985, 1573). Zither and Sword eventually eliminate their bandit impersonators. This episode, however, stirs up another round of discussion among their acquaintances, who unanimously urge them to get married (Gu [1940] 1985, 1588–1590). When Zither and Sword finally wed in the last chapter, nearly all the knights-errant of the tale are present and turn the wedding into a most celebratory event (Gu [1940] 1985, 1610–1613).

Why does Zither and Sword's marriage become such an important topic in the tale? What does the tension between Zither's insistence on revenge before marriage and others' encouragement of a Zither-Sword marriage connote? In his reading of the tale, Chen Pingyuan emphasizes Daoist thinking and concludes that "the main purpose of bringing male and female together is to combine their *yin* and *yang* and improve their fighting skills" (Chen 2016, 102). Chen dismisses the Zither-Sword romance by arguing that "it is not a confirmation of their relationship as man and woman but rather a confirmation of Daoist philosophy," on the basis that "since they are not married, it filters out the important issue of 'boy-girl relations'" (Chen 2016, 102). Interpreting Gu's tale as "mainly catered to urban middle-class male readers in big cities like Shanghai," Roland Altenburger considers the "sexual temptation" Gu depicted and the tale as "an allegory of the dangers of the modern city" (2009, 360).

Recognizing the appeal, and hence the commercial success, of suspending a Zither-Sword union, I draw attention to the social environment in which Gu wrote the novel. The late 1920s and 1930s witnessed pushback against ideas of "freedom of love" and "freedom of marriage" from both radical and conservative quarters,

literary scholar Haiyan Lee observes. The contentious relationship between romantic love and virtues like filial piety “became an important site on which new modes of subjectivity and sociality were worked out” (Lee 2007, 16). Portraying a physically attractive and martially powerful female fighter as chaste while roaming with her male companion, Gu brought to the fore the issue of “freedom of love” and the contention between romance and virtuous sentiment. Although Zither prioritizes the filial obligation of punishing the murderer of her father, her masters and friends appear to perceive marriage as a priority and urge her to pursue a union with Sword. This tense undercurrent allowed Gu to not only create an intriguing martial heroine and a gripping tale but also engage with the issues of freedom of love versus chastity and independence versus morality. His readers were thus challenged with a question directed at the female fighter: Shall Zither strive for filial piety at the cost of her romance, or marry Sword first, so to ease the chivalric fellows’ worries?

Images of several other women warriors in the tale accentuate Gu’s innovative stance on imagining female heroism. Song Caifeng, a young and good-looking female knight-errant, for example, departs for revenge after her father is murdered. Unlike Zither, Song and her mother, also a martial artist, travel in disguise (Gu [1929] 1985, 52–54, 68–69). After the mission is complete, Song returns home, gets married, and soon has a baby (Gu [1940] 1985, 1592). She becomes a docile wife and a loving mother—a similar trajectory to that of He Yufeng. Even Song’s name, Caifeng (literally, “colorful phoenix”), is reminiscent of Yufeng, which means “jade phoenix.” Yun Sanniang, another young female fighter, is portrayed as concentrating solely on the Dao and martial skills. Cold and aloof, she is never seen smiling (Gu [1929] 1985, 44–45). Overall, she conjures up the image of the nun master who inhabits a liminal space between the mountains and the human world.

Demarcating Zither from these female fighters imposes on her challenges that a self-governing female fighter has to endure: she is either urged to become a wife or belittled by her male counterparts. When Zither travels without Sword, she is constantly disparaged by male fighters, who either call her “a tiny little woman,” “a little girl,” or consider her too pretty to be adept at martial arts (Gu [1929] 1985, 69, 119, 140, 193). She has to fight fiercely to gain respect. Like Song Caifeng, Zither marries after she achieves her revenge. Her marriage, however, does not compromise her warrior identity. Rather, she remains a peerless martial heroine, which Gu implies through a modest yet significant episode: on the wedding night, after the celebration ends and the newlywed couple settles in their bedroom, a shadowy figure appears and sets fire to the bedroom. The fire quickly spreads. Fearing the death of the newlyweds, guests start to mourn for the couple. Miraculously, Zither and Sword survive, emerging from the ruins with swords in hand and ready to fight (Gu [1940] 1985, 1614). It is revealed that the arsonist is an enemy from one of their adventures. The tale ends with the couple’s elimination of the arsonist and their exit to the mountains, following their master (Gu [1940] 1985, 1617). This final episode indicates that even at the very moment when she assumes a new role as wife, Zither’s heroic identity persists.

At the juncture of genre repertoire and contemporary debates about “freedom of love,” Gu Mingdao invented a martial heroine, Zither, who challenged and resisted both narrative convention and trendy social changes. Unlike her

predecessors, Zither is able to wander around with a male partner on equal terms and maintain her heroic identity upon marriage: in her case, martial prowess and sex, and virtuous sentiment and romance coexist. The calls for a Zither-Sword marriage in the novel signify unease about endangering morality, which resonated with contemporary fears among conservatives over how the ideas of “freedom of love” and “freedom of marriage” threatened morality and the institution of marriage and family (Lee 2007, 16). The interplay of virtuous sentiment, romance, and chastity in the tale yielded striking relevance to real-world debates and complicated the meaning of female heroism, thereby making the tale and the martial heroine especially engaging to the reader.

A Quest for Female Subjectivity: The Metamorphosis of Yu Jiaolong

During the second half of the 1930s, as Japan advanced its military invasion of China, the discussion of individuality and women’s emancipation mostly took a backseat to the larger question of national survival. Chinese women prioritized the exigencies of the war and “subjugated their social reform to the work of the national collective,” departing from “individual emancipation and self-fulfillment of the May Fourth ideal” (Zhang 2013, 3). They engaged in political activism in order to mobilize civilians for military resistance and demonstrated a new kind of political consciousness.¹¹ For example, feminine imagery created by Chinese dramatists underwent a major change from championing “individualism and subjectivism” to expounding “collective goals and devotion to the nation” (Hung 1989, 170).

Nevertheless, martial arts writers’ imagination of female fighters appears not to have been disrupted by the war. Rather, building on a rich collection of narrative conventions, these writers placed their martial heroines at the juncture of moral obligation, romantic relationships, and individual pursuit, which complicated the signification of female heroism in wartime China. Like Zither of earlier fiction, many of the female knight-errant figures of this period were created in juxtaposition to their male counterparts, establishing their reputation through heroic deeds. While justice remained a defining quality of heroism, the issue of self-fulfillment emerged and became an imperative force that drove the development of the tale and the female protagonist. The martial heroines created by Wang Dulu (1909–1977) particularly embodied this new development.

Wang Dulu was a prolific writer with numerous vernacular novels, but it was his martial arts tales that made him famous. Born in Beijing to a low-income Manchu family, Wang grew up in poverty but managed to sit in on classes at Peking University and read in local libraries, while working as an apprentice in local stores (Xu 2005, 4–7). He began writing in the 1920s and serialized novels in newspapers in the early 1930s, and yet he did not attract much attention until he started to write a martial arts novel titled *Precious Sword Golden Pin* (*Baojian jinchai*, 1938–1939) in

¹¹ Chen Bo’er (1907–1951), for example, quit her persona of “modern woman” in early films such as *Plunder of Peach and Plum* (*Taoli jie*, 1934) and participated in antiwar guerilla theater in central and northern China, hoping to motivate and transform the masses (Chou 2004, 199–229).

the late 1930s (Xu 2005, 18–22). *Precious Sword Golden Pin* was a huge hit, followed by four interrelated novels written from 1938 to 1944, including the prequel *Crane Startled in Kunlun* (*Hejing Kunlun*, 1940–1941), and three sequels *Sword Qi Pearl Light* (*Jianqi zhuguang*, 1939–1940), *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (*Wohu canglong*, 1941–1942), and *Iron Cavalry Silver Vase* (*Tieji yinping*, 1942–1944). Together, these novels formed the *Crane-Iron Pentalogy* (*He-tie wubuqu*) and became Wang’s signature series (Xu 2005, 23–29).

It is unclear how far Wang’s works traveled due to the regional divisions caused by the war. It was rumored that someone in Chongqing—then the capital—pretended to be “Professor Wang Dulu” and made money by giving speeches on Wang’s martial arts tales (Xu 2006, 3). This anecdote shows that Wang’s works, especially his martial arts tales, were circulated beyond the geographic boundary imposed by the war. The publication of Wang’s works experienced a revival in the immediate postwar years but was soon halted due to regulations imposed by the Communist state.¹² Wang’s works reemerged and attracted attention only in 2000, when director Ang Lee released *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, an award-winning blockbuster film adapted from Wang’s novel.¹³

Wang’s female fighters, who share with their genre predecessors the qualities of youth, beauty, and peerless marital skills, strike readers with the particularly difficult dilemmas in which they are situated. For example, Bao A’luan of *Crane Startled in Kunlun* falls for a male martial artist, Jiang, whose father is murdered by her grandfather. Although drawn to Bao, Jiang is determined to seek revenge. The dilemma between following romantic feelings and adhering to filial obligations hence becomes the central question facing both the female and male protagonists. In another example, Yu Xiulian of *Precious Sword Golden Pin* and *Sword Qi Pearl Light* finds herself attracted to a righteous male warrior, Li, who unknowingly befriends Yu’s fiancé, who dies for Li. Neither Yu nor Li faces patriarchal intervention, yet the issue of loyalty—whether to a never materialized arranged marriage or to a friendship—becomes the primary obstacle to their romance.

In Wang’s *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* and *Iron Cavalry Silver Vase*, in particular, Dragon is placed in a similar predicament; her journey and character development represent a female bildungsroman. Reading the story of Dragon as “a narrative of desire,” Petrus Liu asserts that *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* offers “an alternative to May Fourth feminism, resisting dominant culture’s attempt to appropriate the sign of womanhood for state-building purposes” (Liu 2011, 71–72). Situating Dragon’s tale at the juncture of genre repertoire and the call for national salvation in wartime China, I contend that Dragon’s struggle for, and eventual

¹² In the 1950s, the Chinese government issued a series of documents that launched a nationwide campaign cracking down on “reactionary, obscene, and absurd” (*fandong, yinhui, huangdan*) publications. Martial arts fiction was one of the subgenres identified and consequently banned from publication and circulation until the early 1980s. See, for example, “Jianjue de chuli fandong, yinhui, huangdan de tushu” (1955, 1).

¹³ For more on the adaptation of Wang’s novel to Ang Lee’s film, see Deppman (2010, 11–33). There are considerable differences between Wang’s novel and Lee’s cinematic adaptation, in both storyline and character development. This article focuses on the novel.

success in achieving, self-autonomy—as both a highly regarded martial fighter and an independent individual—symbolizes not simply a usurpation of male power and authority but, more importantly, a path to female subjectivity. Departing from genre conventions, Dragon’s tale signals the perpetuation of the May Fourth goal of lifting institutional constraints imposed upon women, on the one hand, and a resistance to the prevailing nation-centered discourse that overpowered the discussion of individuality in wartime China, on the other.

Born into a prestigious Manchu official family, Dragon’s growth is designed by patriarchal figures, first by the father who arranges her marriage and then by her teacher. Projecting his gender ideal onto her, Dragon’s teacher instructs her in Confucian classics during the day and martial arts at night, aiming to turn her into a “miracle in the world”—that is, a woman combining the intelligence of female historian Ban Zhao (ca. 45–116), the bravery of female general Qin Liangyu (1574–1648), and the martial skills of heroines Hongxian and Nie Yinniang (Wang [1941] 1985, 214). Martial prowess empowers Dragon and indirectly leads to her affair with orphaned outlaw Luo Xiaohu (hereafter Tiger) and to her rebellion against the arranged marriage. In one scene, Tiger waits in the capital city and prepares to kidnap Dragon at her wedding. While Tiger is stranded in a small room in a small inn, Dragon is physically stuck in a heavily guarded sedan, facing all sorts of invisible forces, including filial obligations and fear of family humiliation (Wang [1941] 1985, 344–351, 368–370). The juxtaposition of Tiger and Dragon being stranded symbolizes the conflict between the coercion of social norms and the pursuit of individual freedom.

In the world of martial arts, Dragon defies patriarchal authority by repeatedly stealing the Green Destiny (*Qingming*) sword and unyieldingly resisting male challengers. The Green Destiny is regarded as the finest sword, and its owner, Li, is regarded as the utmost male authority figure—which is precisely why Dragon steals it (Wang [1941] 1985, 130, 382). When disguised as a man she runs away from her new husband, she is belittled by male fellows for appearing “effeminate” (*niangmen*) and urged to follow the norms of the martial arts world (Wang [1941] 1985, 397). Her disguise is later revealed, but she refuses to subscribe to the norms or submit to male fighters, resulting in numerous physical confrontations between her and a large band of men. When the male challengers ask about her true identity, she explains with the following lines:

I am the invincible Sword Goddess,
With the Green Destiny that has no equal.
Be it Li or Southern Crane,¹⁴
Lower your head and ask for my mercy.

I am the dragon from the desert,
With no trace to be discovered in my wake.

¹⁴ Southern Eagle is Li’s master, also male, a superb martial artist, and was once *the* patriarchal figure in the martial arts world.

Offending me, you meager guys,
Like crickets intending to shake the Tai Mountain.
(Wang [1941] 1985, 403)

When Li appears to take back his sword, she again reads the lines and unmistakably challenges him (Wang [1941] 1985, 418).

Moreover, Dragon's character development transcends both the female fighter figure of the two preceding tales and the narrative cliché of the young runaway woman in the 1920s and underscores the issues of self-fulfillment and self-autonomy. Unlike the previously popularized martial heroines, such as He Yufeng and Zither, Dragon is never driven by a sense of justice, nor does she seek revenge. Rather, she repeatedly defies the expectations imposed upon her by either society or individuals due to her gender and social roles. Time and again, her will to defy is the drive that compels her to push through boundaries set for gender roles. At the end of *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, Dragon finally leaves behind the marriage her father arranged and reunites with Tiger. And yet, she leaves Tiger the next morning and embarks on a new journey (Wang [1941] 1985, 774–775). In the last novel of the *Crane-Iron Pentalogy*, Dragon adopts a new identity: that of a mother. She moves to the Kazakhs Steppe, uses a new name, and raises her baby independently. One of her acquaintances describes her in this way:

There are three taboo subjects about her life. First, she said her surname is Chun [spring] and does not allow anyone to ask her real name or background.... Second, she does not allow people to talk about whether she is male or female. She dresses for whatever she wants to be.... Third, she does not allow anyone to talk about her baby.... Anyone who talks about her behind her back will definitely meet disasters. Although she is so terrifying, she regularly assists the poor, supports those in distress, and takes pity on the aged, doing countless good deeds. (Wang [1942] 1985, 100)

Dragon is no longer a rebellious young woman severing ties with a patriarchal family, nor a willful novice female fighter challenging male masters. Rather, she has become a responsible mother who nurtures a new life, and an autonomous individual who takes full control of her destiny. All the struggles, conflicts, and confrontations that she experiences turn out to only foreshadow this ultimate metamorphosis. Unlike He Yufeng, who denounces her past and transforms into a docile wife so as to manifest the Confucian ideal of womanhood, Dragon is not tamed by social norms. Instead, she establishes rules for her own life. In this way, she completes a female trajectory of bildungsroman from a to-be-domesticated young woman to a rebellious female fighter, and, eventually, to a responsible and autonomous individual.

It is worth noting that Wang turned to the peripheries of China, such as Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and the Kazakh Steppe, where non-Han minority groups reside, for the settings of his narrative. Most strikingly, Wang romanticized the relative gender freedom in these areas. Xinjiang, where Dragon grows up, is

depicted as a place with extensive desert and endless grassland where Dragon rides horses freely and first meets Tiger. After Dragon relocates to the capital city, she constantly recalls Xinjiang and associates her pursuit of freedom with the geographic margin (Wang [1941] 1985, 230–231, 243). In *Iron Cavalry Silver Vase*, Wang even fantasized a different gender order on the Kazakh Steppe where Dragon rears her daughter. Corresponding to Dragon's fluid way of dressing, her daughter calls her "Daddy" (*diedie*), even though Dragon is her mother (Wang [1942] 1985, 130). Additionally, Dragon, her daughter, and their female friends participate in such activities as archery and horse racing, defeat Kazakh male competitors, and dominate the events (Wang [1942] 1985, 135). The fantasy of gender freedom and different gender norms in the periphery distinguished Wang's tale from its predecessors and influenced writers in the following decades.

Furthermore, Wang's tale, written in wartime northern China, is an even more engrossing read due to its explicit interest in the former imperial dynasty, the Qing Empire. In contrast to his own country, which was being torn apart militarily, Wang projected in his tale a powerful Qing that governed a vast land and was marked by peace and prosperity. For example, Dragon, the daughter of the governor of Xinjiang, lives an affluent life (Wang [1941] 1985, 108, 139). When she first appears in the tale, she is marked by stunning wealth, prestige, and beauty (Wang [1941] 1985, 4–5). When she roams around, she brings along not only her maid and exquisite, silk beddings but also her pet, a snow-white, blue-eyed Persian cat (Wang [1941] 1985, 379–382). At inns, she stuns waiters with her demands to have extravagant food prepared for her cat (Wang [1941] 1985, 387, 393). Even at the most distressing moment of exile, Dragon never forgets to maintain her standard of living as far as possible. The depiction of the peace and wealth of the Qing era, symbolized by Dragon, contrasts intriguingly with the daily experiences of Wang and his family in Qingdao under Japanese occupation (Xu 2005, 205–210). Nostalgia for the imperial past and its imagined prosperity very likely offered comfort to Wang as well as his readers.

Conclusion

All three martial arts tales discussed here were conceived in a market-oriented setting. Juan Shi notes that the publisher Shen Zhifang (1883–1949) saw in Xiang Kairan's works unusual novelty that was free of the widespread sentimentalism of the 1910s and thus hired Xiang with a competitive salary in order to boost the sales of his newly released *Scarlet Magazine* (Shi 2016, 129–130). The serialization of Xiang's *Marvelous Knights-Errant*, together with other contributions, attracted scores of readers. By 1925, *Scarlet Magazine* reached as far as Jinlin in the north, Guangzhou in the south, and Chongqing in the west (Ma 2008, 2–3). In turn, Gu Mingdao's take on the martial arts tale was inspired by the commercial success of Xiang's *Marvelous Knights-Errant*. Similarly, the pressure to survive and support a family in wartime Qingdao provided Wang Dulu a vital impetus for writing (Xu 2005, 14–20). This focus on market echoes historian Louise Edwards' observation of a commercial turn in the image of the modern woman who became "commercially rather than politically centered" in the late 1930s (Edwards 2000, 116). Appealing to

readers and selling their publications became priorities for writers as well as publishers. Wang Dulu, for example, explicitly stated that keeping his tale exciting and not stultifying the reader were his chief considerations (Wang [1942] 2014, 419).

Given the market success of all three novelists, their representations of the female knight-errant are telling with regard to the popular perception of Chinese womanhood that were overwhelmingly expressed by male writers. During the early 1920s, Xiang Kairan appeared to be resistant to, or at least conservative about, the independence of the female from the patriarchal order and the disintegration of that order. A few years later, Gu Mingdao tackled the question of “freedom of love” and issues of chastity and virtuous sentiment, capturing the anxiety and uncertainty that had consequently prevailed in society. Written in wartime northern China when national priorities subsumed the youth iconoclasm of the early 1920s, Wang Dulu’s series assuredly continued the discussion of female autonomy and even fantasized about the gender freedoms on the periphery of the Qing Empire in a nostalgic light. The three tales underscore the multifaceted nature of Chinese womanhood in the first half of the twentieth century. More notably, they manifest the significance of the women and gender issues that continually constitute a crucial conceptual venue for considering and engaging with social change.

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