

*Green Peony and the Rise of the Chinese Martial Arts Novel*. By Margaret B. Wan. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009. x + 235 pp.

The first page of Margaret Wan's monograph gestures at "the martial arts novel" in terms that seem to echo the transhistorical, Chinese-universalist rhetoric so often attaching itself to *wuxia xiaoshuo* 武俠小說 in fan forums and academic discussions alike:

The martial arts novel is the most widely read genre of Chinese fiction today, avidly consumed throughout the Chinese-speaking world and beyond. As essentially the only genre of traditional popular fiction to have survived beyond the imperial era in China, it is the oldest genre of Chinese popular fiction still being written. (p. 1)

By the end of the first chapter, however, Wan has circumscribed a far more concrete and consequently far more significant object of investigation. Over the course of this chapter she deals briefly with the figure of the martial hero as the thematic core of the tradition; assigns to the notoriously slippery term *xiaoshuo* the specific formal sense of "long vernacular fiction" as it took shape in China by the sixteenth century; and then focuses on a limited body of texts, ten novels from the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century. Beyond their temporal provenance, these novels share an interest in mingling characters, scenarios, and plot structures derived from the heroic tradition with those associated with tales of romance. More specifically, they appear to draw upon three previously established thematic genres within the prose fiction tradition—the court-case tale, the scholar-beauty romance, and that sub-branch of the historical novel which C. T. Hsia dubbed the "military romance"—and, at the same time, to be linked to a large body of prosimetric texts associated (in ways difficult to pin down) with the oral performance tradition. Wan dubs her core texts "martial romances." The subsequent chapters demonstrate the martial romance's connections to other texts and genres and analyze the significance of these relationships. Her meticulous efforts give us illuminating readings of some little-studied novels, shed light on an important stage in the development of narrative on martial themes, and, perhaps most important of all, elaborate our understanding of the formal, thematic, and social fabrics of narrative practice in late imperial China.

Wan's work is at heart a study of genre. Key, though, to an understanding of her project is an awareness of the fact that the term "genre" here refers to two rather different things. One is genre in the sense of major literary forms differentiated, on the most obvious level, by linguistic and structural conventions; the other is genre in the sense of conventions of theme, plot, and characterization within (and sometimes across) the boundaries of genre in the first sense. The novel is a genre in the former sense, the martial romance a genre in the latter. Wan is well aware of the difference (p. 7), and blame for the potential confusion caused by the term's dual function must be laid at the door of the English-language

critical tradition. One might wish that the term “thematic sub-genre” were less clumsy, or that something like Cawelti’s notion of fiction “formulas” had been refined and absorbed into the critical vocabulary.<sup>1</sup> In any event, one of the noteworthy aspects of Wan’s study is her demonstration that genre 1 and genre 2, while distinct, are also interrelated. Her analysis of the emergence of the martial romance as a thematic sub-genre makes clear that its formation signals, and possibly contributes to, a stage in the broader history of the traditional Chinese novel.

The book’s second chapter, “Formation of a Formula,” sketches the development of the martial romance from its beginnings in the late Qianlong era through its late maturity at the end of the Daoguang reign. Wan convincingly demonstrates that the form “brings together elements from diverse genres to form a new whole” (p. 21); that the pillaging and reassembling of material from already established formulas create something distinctive, informed by its materials but establishing its own conventions and implicitly calling for new readings. The texts Wan examines include *Tianbao tu* 天豹圖 (*The Picture of Tianbao*, 1814), *Lü mudan* 綠牡丹 (*Green Peony*, first printing n.d.), *Shan e tu* 善惡圖 (*Chart of Good and Evil*, n.d.), *Qun ying jie* 群英杰 (*Gathering of Heroes*, n.d.); *Wanhua lou* 萬花樓 (*Pavilion of Myriad Flowers*, 1808); *Zheng chun yuan* 爭春園 (*Garden of Competing Beauties*, 1819), and others. It is here that she lays out in detail both the borrowing of motifs and characters from court-case fiction, scholar-beauty tales, and the military romance, and the close relationship between the early martial romances and *chantefable* texts treating the same material. She focuses on three stages in the genre’s life: the first (ca. 1776-1814), in which ties with *chantefable* texts and storytelling seem closest, and in which the court-case tradition provides certain basic motifs and framework even as the figure of the judge cedes the stage to martial heroes; a second (ca. 1808-19), in which the establishment of a new structure facilitates the incorporation of a wider range of motifs, especially those from the scholar-beauty and martial romance formulas; and a third (1848-51), in which the appropriation of new motifs has nearly ceased, to be replaced by self-conscious play with the genre’s own now-familiar conventions. Wan’s argumentation here demonstrates breadth of reading, intimate familiarity with seldom-read texts, and skill in fine-grained textual analysis—strengths that carry over into subsequent chapters.

In chapter 3, “Parody and Roles in *Green Peony*,” Wan explores the functions and ramifications of the martial romance’s genre hybridization by means of an even more detailed analysis of the novel that gives her study its title. Drawing on Bakhtin’s discussion of “First Line” and “Second Line” novels, she argues that, as it merges and conflates elements from various pre-existent genres, *Green Peony* deliberately “miscasts” its characters, placing types from one formula (the romantic scholar, the martial hero) into situations, narrative segments, and roles derived

<sup>1</sup> John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976).