Stateless Subjects: Chinese Martial Arts Literature and Postcolonial History
By Petrus Liu

Reviewed by Paul B. Foster
MCLC Resource Center Publication (Copyright August 2013)

ISBN: 978-1-933947-82-2 (cloth);

*Stateless Subjects*, by Petrus Liu, is a well-researched book that offers innovative perspectives on the compelling subject of Chinese martial arts literature of the twentieth-century. Through excellent summaries of individual texts—both film and fiction—as well as contemplative consideration of selected historical events in the socio-political milieu during which they were produced, the author’s research aims to challenge both early May Fourth (negative) views of martial arts fiction and to transcend canonical analysis of the genre “as the ideological instrument of Chinese nationalism” (2-3). Liu provides excellent background analysis of the tensions between pop fiction and May Fourth literature, and in the process brings postmodern comparative literature perspectives to bear in his “intervention” into the dominant May Fourth literary discourse. Readers interested in interconnections between diverse sociopolitical issues such as intellectual history, feminism in martial arts film, the Cultural Revolution, the Cold War in Asia, and tensions in Taiwan/Hong Kong martial arts literary discourse will find many points of departure for further research. Especially notable are the unorthodox subjects from the martial arts literary canon addressed in the five chapters that comprise this book, including Islam, gender issues, and homosexuality. Liu should be applauded for addressing such seemingly taboo subjects in early twentieth-century literary discourse and supplying interesting readings that demonstrate a creative comparative literature approach.

The introduction and first two chapters largely situate Liu’s analysis as an alternative to prevailing views of martial arts literature in the postcolonial era. The author aims to “produce a descriptive account of the aesthetic properties of the genre” and to “resituate this genre as an interventionist and progressive cultural movement in twentieth-century Chinese intellectual history that invented the most important model of nonstatist political responsibility” (5). Thus Liu argues:

The martial arts novel invents scenes of stateless subjects to explain the constitutive sociality of the self. Its discourse of *jianghu* (rivers and lakes) defines a public sphere unconnected to the sovereign poser of the state, a sphere that is historically related to the idea of *minjian* (between the people) as opposed to the concept of *tianxia* (all under heaven) in Chinese philosophy. The martial arts novel presents the human subject as an ethical alterity, constituted by and dependent on its responsibilities to other human beings . . . [T]he human subject is made and remade by forces that cannot be defined by positive laws of the state—rage, love, gender, morality, life and death. The formation of this stateless subject is incompatible with the liberal conception of an autonomous rights-bearing citizen. (6)

The author provides an excellent, concise, and informative description of literary history and discourse in the twentieth century by disassociating new school martial arts wuxia fiction of the twentieth-century from its pre-modern predecessor, *xiayi* fiction, and situating it historically in opposition to the nationalist May Fourth literary tradition. The analysis carves out space for martial arts fiction in the modern literary critical canon, which has prioritized the intellectualism of May Fourth literature and too often scorned such popular fiction in the discourse of modernization. That dismissive view ignores the literary qualities of martial arts texts, most of which are written in a semi-literary Chinese that requires a literacy level beyond the vernacular. Marshaling these and other arguments, Liu’s introduction argues for the value of the martial arts genre in contemporary Chinese culture, noting the still-valid currency of the language and myths drawn therefrom.
Chapter 1, “The Vicissitudes of Anticolonial Nationalism,” delves deeper into the cultural currency of martial arts fiction (and film), tracing historical antecedents and modern touchstones in Hong Kong texts. Martial arts fiction, Liu notes, was “demonized” by intellectuals such as Mao Dun because it “was responsible for deflecting the revolutionary consciousness of the Chinese people” (32). This chapter describes the intriguing cultural phenomenon of making “traditional culture” into a pejorative term in the process of “the construction of May Fourth culture as China’s ‘modernity’” (37). Here the book contains a nice summation of May Fourth views of the “instrumentality of language,” “teleological thinking,” and “invention of feudalism.” While Liu’s examples are pertinent and to the point, he also has a tendency to overstate the case by ascribing too much importance to the May Fourth critique of public interest in martial arts fiction and its supposed effect as an “impediment to China’s march toward a classless society” (43). Still, Liu succinctly analyzes the discourse of “martial arts as language rather than action” (44), harking back to late Qing critiques by Zhang Taiyan and Liang Qichao. These interesting literary-historical snippets function to further situate the genre in Chinese cultural discourse, and describe the origins of the modern martial arts novel and the relation between “martial arts, language, and politics” (49). Here Liu introduces the origin of the Bruce Lee phenomenon—author Pingjiang Buxiaosheng’s recounting of the legend of Huo Yuanjia—and of his own title “stateless subjects.” Pingjiang’s seminal 1922 work is Stateless Heroes of Marvels (Jianghu qixia zhuan), which establishes three conventions of the modern martial arts novel: “the Secret Scripture, the narrative of Jianghu or statelessness, and the clans (menpai)” (51). This chapter ends with a detailed analysis of Stateless Heroes, demonstrating Liu’s argument that “the subjects of the Martial Order are not lawless, but stateless, answerable to a higher order of ethics than the laws of the state” (59). This sets the stage for Chapter 2, in which Liu further explores the concept of “stateless subjects” and attempts to illustrate the breadth of martial arts themes far beyond nationalism in an analyses that juxtaposes the blockbuster film Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon against the novel upon which it was based.

Chapter 2 is titled “Women and Martial Arts: Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon’s Marital, Martial, and Marxist Problems.” This chapter is a marvelous close reading of both the film and the original martial arts novel. The author challenges the film’s “presumed novelty” (68) by putting it in historical perspective, providing a reading that aspires to be an “intervention” in the “scholarship on postcolonialism, feminism and globalization” (66). Liu reviews the popular reception of the movie and rightly shows that interpretations that claim this film as a “newfound feminist discourse” arising out of “globalization” are “particularly absurd” (69). Moreover, Liu’s historicization of the novel proves a ready critique of May Fourth feminism as devoid of sexuality, and reclaims the gendered and sexualized role of woman in martial arts fiction from the early twentieth-century. The unique contribution of this chapter is the author’s demonstration that martial arts literature can function as a thorough critique of Chinese intellectual discourse of the twentieth-century. This chapter is highly useful as an example of an interesting and engaging approach to teaching the range, depth, and biases of May Fourth and modern Chinese intellectual discourse. Liu observes that “In May Fourth literature, the relation between men and women is hypostatized into a stable object of intellectual contemplation, which is further satirized as a failure of nationalist consciousness” in stories by Lu Xun, Mao Dun, and others (87). Liu then offers readings of stories such as Lu Xun’s “New Year’s Sacrifice” to demonstrate this perspective and presents a reading of Wang Dulu’s “more sophisticated” exploration of gender in the martial arts novel that is the basis for the movie Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. Wang is said to introduce a “romantic entanglement” and the search for and learning of a Secret Scripture to overcome the constrictions of propriety and accelerate one’s martial abilities beyond those of one’s elders. Liu cogently identifies in these features of the novel Wang’s “counter-discourse,” in which a woman who both participates in “free love” (like the May Fourth feminist ideal) and behaves as an “independent social actor whose mobility derives from her ‘martial arts’” (not recognized in May Fourth intellectual discourse) can only go so far since her “proper place” is eventually that of wife (94). It is notable that both sex and gender are components of martial arts novels, whereas sex is marginalized in May Fourth discourse, and the author’s reading makes fine use of Wang Dulu’s novels to exemplify this.

Chapter 3 is “The Permanent Arms Economy: Jin Yong’s Historical Fiction and the Cold War in Asia.” As with the previous chapter, the title of this chapter is attractive, but the chapter itself doesn’t live up to its promise. To characterize the works of Jin Yong, the author coins the term “ethical alterity,” which “uses the theme of martial violence to highlight the vulnerability of the human body and the precariousness of human life” through a “dialectical movement between self and history” (110). Liu provides a detailed history of Jin Yong’s fiction and its reception, noting that, while “[c]rammed with fascinating lore, Jin Yong’ novels often read more like cultural encyclopedias than traditional novels” (117). The primary focus of this chapter is Jin Yong’s Tianlong babu, which is given a close reading as representative of the “permanent arms economy.” Liu’s analysis creatively (although not convincingly) links Tianlong babu to Jin Yong’s critique of communist China’s military modernization as a reaction
to American containment (and as part of its quest for nuclear weapons). Tianlong babu is said to be “Jin Yong’s most ambitions exploration of the problem of ‘permanent emergency’” which draws on “Buddhist concepts of the transience or impermanence of life, suffering, and attachment, to critique the contemporary rhetoric of preemptive war mobilization” (119). While the author asserts that the theory of the “stateless subject” applies here, particularly in the persons of the three main characters, this reading is at odds with the fact that the novel is framed by competing martial artists representing different “states” and ethnicities framed in the plot. Jin Yong’s characters act out tragedies of ethnic and national conflict. Liu’s reading is interesting, but it does not seem to go far enough to satisfy the thesis of statelessness—that the “subject is a product of social constraints that only appear to be autonomous and voluntary” (121). Liu seems to selectively exaggerate the forces on the main character Xiao Feng, and ignores Jin Yong’s depiction of Xiao Feng as the epitome of the ethical Confucian, even to the extent that Xiao prevents his Qidan brethren from invading Song China. As an interesting juxtaposition, this chapter ends with a section titled “The Cold War in Asia,” which discusses Jin Yong’s reportorial writings at the time he was working on his martial arts fiction. This section doesn’t contribute to the thesis of the “permanent arms economy,” which remains weak, but provides engaging historical information and a creative reading of Tianlong babu.

Chapter 4, “Jin Yong’s Islam in the Chinese Cultural Revolution,” suggests the value of non-orthodox literary analysis, which is to open the reader to possibilities beyond the dominant canonical discursive interpretations of a text or genre. In this case, however, Islam and the Cultural Revolution are not convincingly or systematically analyzed in Jin Yong’s novels. Moreover, the chapter does not seem to relate to Liu’s thesis of stateless subjects. While Islam does have a presence in some of Jin Yong’s works, the author’s claims seem exaggerated. That said, Liu takes the opportunity to explore in interesting ways Jin Yong’s portrayal of homosexuality in the martial world, a typically taboo subject in Chinese literary discourse of the time. This chapter is exemplary for that reason alone. The critical exploration of the homoerotic component of Jin Yong’s literature is a unique contribution of this book, even as the promise of analysis of “Islam” is not fulfilled. The primary text the author analyzes is Xiao ao jianghu (State of divinity), which contains only superficial reference to Islam in the form of the secret scripture, Kuihua baodian (Sunflower scripture). Here the book seems a bit forced, or overstated at best; Liu’s intriguing analyses of the movie versions of State of Divinity aptly foreground the homoeroticism therein, but the discussion wanders far from Jin Yong’s original text. Liu’s apt connections between scenes in Jin Yong’s novel and the Cultural Revolution only coincidentally relate to Islam. This chapter also contains a section titled “Interpretation of Gender” that focuses on Xiao Longnü, Shen diao xialü’s (The giant eagle and its companion) female protagonist, but there is scant relation to Islam, the Cultural Revolution, or “statelessness.” The author does offer a creative reading of Xiao Longnü’s character, analyzing incest taboos and sex, but misses one of the obvious themes of Jin Yong’s novel in this text, shared with State of Divinity—Jin Yong’s harsh critique of traditional Confucian ethics regarding love.

Finally, Chapter 5: “A Tale of Two Chinas: Gu Long and Anomalous Colonies,” brings a second prominent “new school martial arts” novelist into the discussion, expanding the book beyond the master Jin Yong. Liu pertinently points out that Gu Long’s work belongs to “Sinophone” literature, not Chinese literature. As such, Gu Long’s works may be the best example of the thesis of “stateless subjects,” because they contain virtually no ethnic elements. However, Liu’s analysis does not pursue this line; instead, it is situated in the equally interesting discourse of anticolonial allegory. The author presents interesting background details from Gu Long’s upbringing in Hong Kong and education in Taiwan, and the attempt by both places to claim the writer as their own. Solid analysis of two of Gu Long’s works, The Eleventh Son and Legendary Siblings, situates these works within the discourse of modernization and postcolonial marginalization, which is arguably makes it part of a canonical discourse, as opposed to serving as a postmodern literary “interventions,” such as Liu aspires to in his critique of Jin Yong’s works.

While Stateless Subjects bristles with creative energy and contains many original themes to recommend it, the critical and analytical promises of the title and introductory chapters remain largely unmet in the end. Fortunately, Liu’s individual readings of martial arts are worthwhile, enriching the English language critical literature and understanding of Chinese martial arts fiction and film and making connections to selected crucial socio-political issues in Chinese studies. Although the “stateless subjects” thesis does not hold well, the fine textual analyses will hopefully engender further scholarship on the topic.

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