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Classically Trained

Gladys Mac

Loyola Marymount University, Gladys.Mac@lmu.edu

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LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS CHINA CHANNEL

□ MENU



CHINESE CORNER

Classically Trained

March 19, 2019 Gladys Mac

Gladys Mac leaps into Jin Yong's retro wuxia language

When I was in elementary school, my sister and I would stay up late on Saturday nights to watch TVB's 1994 production of *Legend of the Condor Heroes* (射鵰英雄傳), based on a novel by Jin Yong, the beloved writer of *wu xiá* 武俠 (martial arts) fiction who passed away last year at the age of 94. The Los Angeles branch of the Hong Kong channel aired this drama at midnight – we would watch two episodes before going to bed at 2 am, quite the commitment from the under-ten set. This drama reran a couple times in later years, and each time my sister and I would watch it as eagerly as we had the first. Sometimes it aired on weekend afternoons, and once on weekday afternoons during summer vacation. We scheduled our plans around the show in order to catch every episode. Many versions of this drama were produced in the following years, but none of them are as fun and fast-paced as the 1994 version.

It wasn't until my teenage years that I learned that a lot of the TVB *wuxia* dramas are adaptations of Jin Yong's novels. I was born and raised in the United States, and Jin Yong's novels were the first Chinese novels I read. Jin Yong is the pen name of Louis Cha, who arrived in Hong Kong in the 1950s from mainland China. Trained as a journalist, he began writing *wuxia*



Statue of Jin Yong in his home province of Zhejiang

fiction on the side to help boost newspaper sales. He eventually went on to found his own paper, *Ming Pao*, and supported his fledgling establishment by serializing his fiction in its pages. Jin Yong has enjoyed huge popularity in the Chinese-speaking world, which is why his fiction has been adapted into cinema and television dramas so often over the last five decades.

I learned to read traditional Chinese characters from the subtitles of TVB dramas, and with Jin Yong's fiction I jumped into the deep end of literary Chinese. Subtitles reflect everyday speech – the written word can be a different animal altogether. Jin Yong wrote in a mash-up of vernacular and **classical Chinese**, the vintage language of 18th-century novels. This “classical vernacular” (古白話) gives his works a timeless familiarity that was accessible to Chinese readers from all over, regardless of their regional ties or what “type” of Chinese they spoke.

Classical Chinese is so succinct that it can be **incomprehensible** when read aloud by a modern Chinese speaker. Jin Yong's writing is more expansive than the code-like classical language, yet the grammar and the syntax are still very different from everyday spoken Chinese varieties. Jin Yong also avoids the use of modern words or concepts, and the more **Europeanized form** of modern Chinese. Reading Jin Yong as a Cantonese or Mandarin speaker is similar to an English speaker reading Shakespeare – both take some getting used to. Only Shakespeare is easier to decipher, because he used an alphabet. Jin Yong presented me with numerous Chinese characters that I had to learn, sometimes with the help of a dictionary; other times I was able to figure them out through context or **radicals**.

While in the past the “classical vernacular” allowed Jin Yong's fiction to cross national and linguistic borders, now it may be the greatest barrier for younger readers. His work is still a staple in Chinese bookstores around the world, but the books themselves may no longer be the primary form of consumption of Jin Yong's fictive world. The constant reinterpretation of his work have spun Jin Yong's *wuxia* world far out of its original orbit, flying ever-further from the word he formulated and printed on paper over 60 years ago. ■

*Header image: Ad for TVB's 1994 production of Legend of the Condor Heroes, via [HK01](#), under *fair use*.*

Published by Gladys Mac

Gladys Mac received her PhD from USC. She wrote her dissertation on Jin Yong's fiction and its visual adaptations. Her research interests range from Asian popular culture to ancient history and everything in between. [View all posts by Gladys Mac](#)

