

## Chapter 1

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# Introduction

## *Green Peony and the Martial Romance*

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.<sup>1</sup> Its origins remain obscure, however. While scholars recognize the martial arts novel as a major genre in the Qing, even specialized histories of the martial arts novel do not agree on when or how the genre began to take shape in the Qing.

Studies of the traditional Chinese novel tend to ignore popular genres like the martial arts novel, and instead focus primarily on the masterworks and lesser works that are still of high literary quality. For this reason, the martial arts novel has not received the kind of attention it needs to unravel its origins and intricacies. It is important because it was not only some of the most widely read fiction of its age, crossing boundaries of geography and social status; its prevalence in oral performance and easily understood performance texts also allowed it to reach people of almost every level of education. Its close relationship to both performance genres and the most elite literary fiction provides a unique opportunity to examine both common threads and significant differences between these milieus.

Let me begin by defining the martial arts novel. Modern critics vary widely in their use of the term “martial arts novel,” the only common ground being fiction about martial heroes. The English translation does not do the

Chinese term justice; martial arts comprise only half of the term *wuxia*. The modern author Liang Yusheng explains martial arts (*wu*) are simply the means, while a kind of heroism akin to chivalry (*xia*) is the goal.<sup>2</sup> In fact, before the term *wuxia* appeared in the late Qing, the term used to discuss these novels was simply *xiayi*, “heroism and altruism.” Martial arts fiction therefore has less to do with the description of fighting than with the ideal of martial heroes.

This ideal often forms the thread that binds together thematic studies of martial arts literature.<sup>3</sup> In a syncretic view derived from a range of genres spanning several centuries, James J. Y. Liu defines his “Chinese knight-errant” in terms of a set of values: altruism, justice, individual freedom, personal loyalty, courage, truthfulness and mutual faith, honor and fame, and generosity and contempt for wealth.<sup>4</sup> While he argues that the ideals of Western knights were similar in many respects, Liu also recognizes the differences between the two groups. In contrast to European knights, who were a distinct social class owing loyalty to the king, he argues that Chinese knights came from all walks of life, were often disruptive to society, and owed loyalty only to a *zhiji* (“one who appreciates you”). Anyone could be a knight in China; there was no particular organization and no religious affiliation. In contrast, European knights were tied to the Christian religion, which dictated many of the rules of their order. They were expected to be refined in their manners and were associated with courtly love. The Chinese knight, on the other hand, was often portrayed as crude and blunt, and would generally find women anathema.<sup>5</sup> Because of these differences I prefer the term “martial hero” to “knight.”

From antiquity, the concept of the martial hero in China formed a counterpoint and potential challenge to Confucian relationships. The disregard of protocol and indifference to the hierarchy of relationships is obvious from the stories of martial heroes and assassins in the *Shiji* (Records of the historian) and other early texts. On the other hand, martial heroes go to spectacular extremes to live out their own values, thinking nothing of dying for the cause. This ruffled Confucian feathers: If you will die for a complete stranger, what can you do for your parents? Still, even the martial hero’s apparent freedom is circumscribed by a code of ethics centered on revenge, requiting favor, and righting injustice.<sup>6</sup>

While these thematic approaches address some of the concerns of martial arts literature, they provide little sense of the martial arts novel as a historical genre.<sup>7</sup> A satisfying literary history must go beyond the thematic to find a specific form for specific content.<sup>8</sup> How did the martial arts novel develop?

Before exploring that issue we must ask, What is a “novel” in China? Scholars conventionally use the Western term novel to refer to long prose narrative fiction in China. This use is supported by similarities in form and

technique. In general, the narrative method employed by the Chinese novel bears comparison to realism in the West. Andrew Plaks notes its “exhaustive attention to fine details, maintenance of an orderly scheme of temporal movement, articulation of a consistent narrative perspective—i.e. point of view, and emphasis on credibility in motivation and personality.”<sup>9</sup> However, there is no one Chinese term that precisely matches the word “novel.” A variety of terms refer to the works of long prose fiction that are the subject of this study, each carrying its own connotations. The term commonly translated as novel, *xiaoshuo*, originated over a thousand years before the first long prose fiction in China and traditionally encompassed a wide range of materials. Ban Gu (32—92), compiler of the bibliography in the earliest dynastic history, explained the term *xiaoshuo* as follows:

The *xiaoshuo* school probably evolved from the office of petty officials. The works were street talk and alley gossip, made up by those who engaged in conversations along the roads and walkways. Confucius once said, “Although a petty path, there is surely something to be seen in it. But if pursued too far, one could get bogged down; hence the gentleman does not do so.” Still, he did not discard them. Being something upon which those of lesser knowledge touched, they were collected and not forgotten, on the chance they might contain a useful phrase or two. They are really the discourses of rustics and eccentrics.<sup>10</sup>

From the beginning the term *xiaoshuo* carried connotations of marginality or even frivolity, something which “the gentleman does not do.” Up until the sixteenth century it was “an all-embracing category into which those texts deemed unfitting for other clearly defined categories were conveniently dumped.”<sup>11</sup> As the novel took shape in sixteenth-century China as long vernacular fiction, the term *xiaoshuo* was applied to it. Thus not only was the novel in China traditionally placed outside the canon of serious literature, but also by implication of the term *xiaoshuo* it was something on which one should not waste time. This passage also spawned the term “petty officials” (*baiguan*) for these narratives, which carries similar connotations.

The Chinese novel grew out of historical narrative. This early kinship is reflected in terms like “unofficial history” (*yeshi*) and “popular elaboration” (*yanyi*). History in China served as a repertoire of moral models, positive and negative. As such it held a central position in Chinese culture, so association with history could elevate or justify other narratives. “Unofficial history” conceives of the novel as “leftover” history, justifying these narratives on the grounds that they provided information the official histories left out. The term “popular elaboration,” which appears in the titles of many narratives, claims to retell history in a more accessible form. Some of the *yanyi* narratives are indeed popularized history, but even those that are fiction “justified their

writings by emphasizing their effectiveness in terms of popular historical education (claiming that formal historiography was too difficult for and inaccessible to the common reader).<sup>12</sup> The novel's supplementary relationship to history meant that it could serve the same moral purpose, but it also implied a subservient position for the novel.

Many of the earliest Chinese novels, including *Sanguo yanyi* (Three Kingdoms), strive to faithfully present historical facts while incorporating legend and lore.<sup>13</sup> Some, like *Shuibu zhuan* (The water margin), claim a historical framework but "make no pretensions to be serious history," focusing instead on the exploits of a hero or brotherhood.<sup>14</sup> Martin Huang argues that one way to look at the development of the novel in China is to see it as a process of "dehistoricization," in which each of the great novels critiqued its predecessors by dealing with a less historical and more intimate subject. Whereas the scope of *Three Kingdoms* is the fate of a dynasty, that of *The Water Margin* is the rise and fall of a band of outlaws, while *Jin Ping Mei* focuses on the fortunes and domestic squabbles of one family. As the focus narrows to the individual, the settings and concerns also shift to the private.<sup>15</sup>

A similar pattern appears in the development of the Chinese novel beyond these masterworks, although the chronology is not as neat. Among the earliest novels, more "responsible" historical novels coexisted from the very beginning with a looser branch, known as the military romance (*ying-xiong chuangqi*).<sup>16</sup> As the novel freed itself from history, other favorite themes grew into genres, including scholar-beauty romances (*caizi jiaren*) and novels on the supernatural. Over the next two hundred years each of these thematic genres would spawn scores of novels. Scholar-beauty romances became the most popular theme in novels of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, while military romances burgeoned through the nineteenth century.

The mid-seventeenth century was a defining moment for the novel in China. *The Water Margin* and *Three Kingdoms* attracted the interest of iconoclastic intellectuals who argued for the legitimacy of the novel as literature. They edited and published new editions of these novels replete with literary criticism and detailed commentary that demonstrated the artistry of each novel. Such criticism shaped the aesthetic of the traditional novel in China, an issue to which I will return in chapter 4. These critics struggled to raise the status of their chosen novels by calling them "books of genius" (*caizi shu*) and ranking them on a par with the greatest literary works China had produced. Still, these advocates of the novel tend to elevate a particular work at the expense of the genre, arguing that *this* work shows excellence and cannot be compared with ordinary novels.<sup>17</sup>

Most novels never received the kind of serious attention lavished on *Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margin*. As a consequence, the definitions of thematic genres, which encompassed the vast majority of novels, remained

largely implicit. Since in late imperial China the novel fell outside the canon and, therefore, beyond the scope of most bibliographers,<sup>18</sup> there was traditionally no need to define the novel as a form, much less divide it into constituent thematic genres. Genres can still be discerned in the conventions of titles and the grouping implied by the works mentioned in a particular preface, but this does not constitute explicit genre criticism. Modern genre criticism in China began only in the late Qing. Thus it is not surprising that the term for the martial arts theme, *wuxia*, also appeared during this period.<sup>19</sup>

The serious study of martial arts fiction in China began with Lu Xun.<sup>20</sup> In *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe* (A brief history of Chinese fiction, 1924), Lu Xun devotes a chapter to martial arts and court-case fiction, and although he never offers a formal definition for the genre, his discussion set the corpus of works and the general approach for future research.

Lu Xun's extensive discussion of *Sanxia wuyi* (The three heroes and five sworn brothers, 1879) and *Ernü yingxiong zhuan* (Moral heroes and heroines, 1878) explains why those two works appear consistently in later scholarship as representatives of the genre and are often portrayed as the earliest martial arts fiction. He presents them as exemplifying two different varieties of the martial arts novel intended for different audiences. He posits the novel's audience bifurcated in the Qianlong reign period (1736–1795); up to that time, everyone read the four classic novels, but when *Honglou meng* (Story of the Stone) became popular it replaced *Three Kingdoms* in the eyes of the literati, while the common people still preferred *Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margin*. With changing tastes the genre of martial arts fiction evolved, producing two streams, *Moral Heroes and Heroines* for the literati and *The Three Heroes and Five Sworn Brothers* for the folk. I will return in chapter 5 to the question Lu Xun's model raises about the relationship between "popular" and "literati" literature in the mid-Qing.<sup>21</sup>

Lu Xun's most influential observation about martial arts fiction concerns the judge as a central figure (fig. 1.1). He observes that *The Three Heroes and Five Sworn Brothers* seems to retain the flavor of *The Water Margin*, but goes on to say this is only superficially true; in spirit the two works are quite different. Even though their intention is to relate tales of brave martial heroes helping people and saving their country, the later works differ in that there is always a famous official who directs all the heroes, in this case Judge Bao.<sup>22</sup> The judge serves as the structural framework around which the novel is built. Because they are the judge's helpers, the heroes work inside the system instead of being outside society and opposed to the government. This is a far cry from the famous heroes in *The Water Margin* who were "forced to climb Mount Liang."

Nearly all studies of the martial arts novel give a nod to *The Water Margin* as a precursor or early example of the genre and then start in the Qing with different works. For example, among recent histories of martial arts fiction,



Figure 1.1 Judge Di Renjie, from the 1800 edition of *Green Peony*

Liu Yinbo starts with *Shi Gong an* (Cases of Judge Shi), while Wang Hailin suggests the martial arts theme was revived in the novel at the end of the Jiaqing or the beginning of the Daoguang reign period (around the 1820s).<sup>23</sup> However, he does not discuss these novels, beginning his analysis instead with *Moral Heroes and Heroines*. This gap is due to the influence of Lu Xun's pioneering study.

Even more than Lu Xun's chronology, however, later work on martial arts fiction has been dominated by the political implications of his analysis. If the rebels in *The Water Margin* are praiseworthy for rebelling against feudal society, then the heroes of martial arts fiction are reprehensible for capitulating to it. This stance also explains why the genre was not given much scholarly attention in China from the 1950s to the 1970s. Although newspaper and journal articles continued to appear, most of them dismissed the novels as politically incorrect or "feudal." Much of the criticism of martial arts fiction in China has revolved around the question of values, from a Marxist point of view.<sup>24</sup>

As a major genre in the Qing, the martial arts novel deserves attention in its own right. Previous studies ignore the early development of the martial arts novel and, thereby, fail to acknowledge the complexity of the genre and its rich relationship to other genres of fiction. I will show that the early martial arts novel sheds light on the relationship between the popular novel, literary fiction, and other popular narratives such as *chante-fables* in the nineteenth century. It demonstrates the enormous mutual influence of genres that are usually treated separately. This has implications for our understanding of "genre" in both senses of the word: as the formal and aesthetic conventions of the novel and as an entity defined thematically by shared content—what could be called a "subgenre" of the novel.

This study traces the origins of the martial arts novel to the late Qianlong period. To chart its development, I examine ten essentially unstudied novels published between the late eighteenth century and 1850, placing them in the context of the literary and performance-related genres out of which they grew. Because they prominently feature love stories, I call this corpus the "martial romance." I focus on *Lü mudan* (Green peony, 1800), one of the earliest examples, as representative of the genre.<sup>25</sup>

*Green Peony* opens with Empress Wu Zetian on the throne. She exiles the young crown prince, despite protests from loyal generals. The novel then turns to its protagonist, Luo Hongxun, the scholarly son of a martial official. Hua Bilian, the martial daughter of a notorious bandit, falls desperately in love with him at first sight. Luo refuses to marry her, ostensibly because he is already betrothed. Three proposals of marriage and three refusals provide the structure for the plot. Every time Luo refuses a proposal he runs off to play the hero—with disastrous results. Whether he tries to save Hua Bilian's family from a local despot, rescue a widow from a rapist, or avenge his ser-



**Figure 1.2** Collective portrait, from *Green Peony Drum Ballad* (Jinzhang shuju edition)





卷之十  
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vant in a martial tournament, his attempts at heroism always end in disaster. Twice he is brought to court on false charges springing from these attempts. Each time he is saved by bandits or pirates, but his association with them simply incurs the wrath of powerful scoundrels and gets Luo into more trouble. After he refuses the third proposal of marriage, the bandits set up a funeral ruse; leading Luo to believe his mother and fiancée have died, they trick him into coming to their stronghold. Captured and framed as a bandit, he is then escorted toward the capital. Along the way, martial artists seeking revenge ambush him. At the last minute he is saved by pirates and travels with them to find his mother. He marries Hua Bilian and his original fiancée, and all the heroes go to the capital. Their pretext for entering the capital is a special women's examination that Empress Wu is inspired to hold after a green peony blooms in her garden, whence the title of the novel. With the aid of Judge Di they defeat the wicked officials in league with Empress Wu and restore the rightful emperor to power. All of the villains having been brought to justice, the emperor enfeoffs the heroes and everyone lives happily ever after (fig. 1.2).

Even this brief synopsis suggests that *Green Peony* incorporates elements from previous popular fiction: the scholar-beauty romance, the historical novel, and court-case fiction. How does it relate to these genres?

#### Relationship to Court-case Fiction

The relationship between court-case novels and martial arts novels has been a vexed question ever since Lu Xun discussed them in a single chapter. What are the differences between them? Are the terms synonymous, or is there a basis on which to distinguish them? Following Lu Xun's lead, most histories of the martial arts novel claim that the two strains came together in the Qing to form the "court-case adventure" novel (*gongan xiayi*).<sup>26</sup> However, the many important exceptions make it unreasonable to lump all Qing martial arts novels together as court-case adventures.<sup>27</sup>

Let me quickly outline the development of court-case fiction. Patrick Hanan defines it as "works in which the judicial solution (of some crime or other social disorder) is of central importance."<sup>28</sup> Its history is too long to go into here. While the court-case theme was popular from at least the Song dynasty on, it attained spectacular popularity in the Ming in the form of collections of short tales, the most durable collection being *Longtu gongan* (Longtu's court cases).<sup>29</sup> Thereafter, no major new works of court-case fiction appeared for over a century, until the theme reappeared, much changed in both form and content, around the turn of the nineteenth century as a genre of the novel.<sup>30</sup>

A comparison of *Green Peony* to *Cases of Judge Shi*, an early court-case adventure novel,<sup>31</sup> suggests a close connection between the two works. Besides typical features of the court-case adventure novel, such as the judge

figure, *Green Peony* and *Cases of Judge Shi* share several subplots and one character, Pu Tiandiao.<sup>32</sup>

Despite these similarities, *Green Peony* does not fit the category of court-case adventure novel. *Green Peony* and *Cases of Judge Shi* treat similar situations from opposite perspectives. In *Cases of Judge Shi*, the courts dispense justice; heroes are admired, but they must strictly uphold the law. In contrast, in *Green Peony* the courts suffer from corruption, so the bandit heroes must step in to right injustices. Thus while in *Cases of Judge Shi* the hero Shi Zhong (Huang Tianba) acts in his official capacity to stop his bandit friends' attempt at a jailbreak, the bandit heroes in *Green Peony* successfully break their friends out of jail. Furthermore, in *Green Peony* the judge plays a fairly minor role. Judge Di Renjie appears only in the last twenty chapters of *Green Peony* and, rather than solving everything neatly, he simply lets the protagonist Luo Hongxun out of prison. He does not even try the case; in fact, one interesting feature in *Green Peony* is that the bandits hold their own court.<sup>33</sup> Far from directing the heroes, Judge Di is hardly involved in the final raid on the capital that restores the throne to Emperor Zhongzong.<sup>34</sup> Whereas in *Green Peony* the reader sympathizes with the outsiders, in court-case novels he sympathizes with the government. Official justice works better in the court-case novels than in the martial romance.

Should the court-case novel and the martial romance be considered different genres? To what extent are differences in values significant to generic distinctions? Lu Xun does not categorize genres based on values; consequently he recognizes significant relationships between works with conflicting ideologies, such as identifying *Dangkou zhi* (Quell the bandits) as a reaction to *The Water Margin*.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, Bakhtin's theory of genre in Western literature posits that each genre uses language to imply a certain set of values.<sup>36</sup> I will demonstrate below that particular values lie at the core of genres of Ming-Qing fiction like the scholar-beauty romance and the historical novel. Moreover, the martial romance and the court-case novel differ in structure as well as values. While the better-known court-case adventure novels are long, episodic, and generate endless sequels, the martial romance novels are generally relatively short and self-contained.<sup>37</sup>

If we consider the martial romance and the court-case novel separate genres, how do we account for their similarities? The simplest way would be direct borrowing. However, in the case of *Green Peony* and *Cases of Judge Shi*, there is not enough textual evidence to support such a claim. Rather, we must look to their common roots.

Signs of the influence of Ming and Qing court-case story collections appear in the plot and structure of both the martial romance and the court-case adventure novel. Many subplots in *Green Peony* and *Cases of Judge Shi* recall stories in *Longtu's Court Cases*.<sup>38</sup> The idea of structuring long court-case

adventure novels around a single judge may also stem from Ming court-case story collections, as Chen Pingyuan suggests.<sup>39</sup> However, without evidence of textual borrowing such similarities cannot prove that either the martial romance or the court-case novel derived directly from court-case stories. They are thematically but not textually related.

A further tantalizing connection between *Green Peony* and *Cases of Judge Shi* is in their relationship to *chantefables*, ballads which alternate between prose and verse. *Chantefable* versions of both exist,<sup>40</sup> and the same merchant, Baiben Zhang, sold *chantefable* versions of both *Cases of Judge Shi* and *Green Peony*, suggesting that by the Daoguang or Xianfeng period (1821–1862) they participated in the same milieu.<sup>41</sup> These *chantefables* underscore the close relationship performance genres bore to both the martial romance and the court-case novel. Two of the earliest martial romance novels, including *Green Peony*, are clearly adapted from *chantefables*, as I will demonstrate in chapter 2.<sup>42</sup>

Thus both the martial romance and the court-case adventure novel derive thematically from earlier court-case story collections, while historically they developed in close relationship with performance genres. They simply developed in different directions, a point I will take up in chapter 2.

Similar questions are raised by the relationship between *Green Peony* and other thematic genres. While much effort has been expended on the relationship between martial and court-case fiction, its relationship to two other genres of popular fiction current at the time, the scholar-beauty romance and the historical novel, is hardly ever mentioned.

### The Element of Romance

*Green Peony* is structured around a romance of sorts. The predominant model for romance in fiction and drama of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the scholar-beauty romance, which typically centers on the courtship of a couple who are both brilliant and attractive. The Ming play *Lü mudan* (Green peony) by Wu Bing (1595–1648) is a typical example of the scholar-beauty romance theme, although the play bears no relationship to the Qing novel that is our focus here. In the play heroes and villains are distinguished primarily by talent; while the heroes write impressive poetry, the villains not only cannot write well, they can barely read.<sup>43</sup> Poetry plays a central role in the development of the romance plot; upon reading each other's poetry, the protagonists recognize talent and pursue the match.

In contrast, the Qing novel *Green Peony* contains few if any meetings of the lovers, exchanges of poetry, or the like. In the martial romance merely the idea of the betrothed sends the parties off on journeys that lead to various adventures, whether the man travels to marry his fiancée in her hometown

or the woman narrowly escapes abduction or marriage to another man.<sup>44</sup> It is almost as if the earlier romance is emptied of its usual content, and all that remains is a framework.<sup>45</sup>

Lin Chen outlines the conventional tripartite structure of the scholar-beauty romance as: love at first sight, separation of the lovers by external forces, and a final reunion. These correspond to the three underlying values of the genre: free choice in marriage; loyalty and chastity in love; and a happy marriage for the lovers. There are also three scenarios for how the boy and girl meet. In the first scenario, the boy and girl both see each other, or the man admires the woman's poetic talent, or the man is looking for an outstanding woman. In any of the above cases they will get engaged secretly. In the second scenario, if the girl is choosing the man, her father or uncle must look for a suitable talented young man, and she must approve. In the third scenario, the man saves the woman, and they end up marrying through others' efforts.<sup>46</sup>

How does *Green Peony* utilize these scenarios? The nature of the debt *Green Peony* owes to the scholar-beauty romance will be examined in more detail in chapter 3, but for now let us look at the ways the boy and girl meet. In *Green Peony* the romance motif recurs three times; the boy and girl meet twice, and marriage is proposed three times. The repetition serves to incorporate all three of the methods of meeting. The first time she is looking for a husband (#2), and they see each other and are each impressed (#1). The second time they meet he saves her life (#3). The proposals also combine the various possibilities, since she chooses him herself but has her father propose rather than secretly arranging the match herself. The recurrence of these motifs allows *Green Peony* to incorporate most of the typical scenarios of the scholar-beauty romance.

The romance plot provides the backbone for the structure of *Green Peony*. For all the emphasis the structure puts on romance, however, there is very little romantic content. First of all, the boy consistently refuses the match. Secondly, although they meet twice, both meetings are in public, leaving little opportunity for direct interaction between the boy and girl. While poetry was so crucial to the scholar-beauty romance that they were satirized as being written simply as frameworks in which to show off the author's poetry,<sup>47</sup> in *Green Peony* no poetry is exchanged at all. *Green Peony* is exceptional among the martial romances in giving a psychological description of Hua Bilian's feelings for Luo Hongxun, from initial infatuation to secret bliss when he catches her in his arms after she falls off a roof.<sup>48</sup> However, Luo's feelings are rarely described. Instead the reader must infer his thoughts from his initial praise of her skill and his unfailing propriety. Except for two tantalizing scenes, the romance remains merely a framework. Even in these scenes, it is hardly made explicit in the same ways it was in the scholar-beauty romance.

For this reason *Green Peony* is unsatisfying to read as a romance, a fact that critics have noted.

### Historical Fiction and the Military Romance

This odd reluctance shown by the boy reveals the influence of another genre on *Green Peony*. The work makes more sense if read in light of the lore of the woman warrior. The woman warrior is by no means new. As a romantic lead she appears in the late Ming, in chapters added to the Yuan Wuya edition of *The Water Margin*, as well as in accounts of the Yang Family Generals.<sup>49</sup> She develops in the military romance until her pursuit of a handsome general becomes a requisite element, while the object of her affections rarely requites them. As C. T. Hsia puts it, "While impressed by her beauty and power, the object of her love is usually too shocked . . . to acknowledge his interest."<sup>50</sup>

A preface which says *Green Peony* "imitated the unofficial histories (*yesbi*)" confirms its close relationship with the historical novel or military romance.<sup>51</sup> Critics have noted its typological similarity to a series of novels on the Tang Dynasty, including *Shuo Tang yanyi* (The tale of the Tang, 1736) and *Yishuo Fan Tang quan zhuan* (Another tale of rebellion against the Tang, 1753).<sup>52</sup> The rise and fall of Wu Zetian which begins and ends *Green Peony* also resembles a typical motif of the historical novel, the restoration of the dynasty after disturbances.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, in many editions *Green Peony* claims to be a sequel to the military romances on the Tang dynasty; it appears under the title *Fan Tang hou zhuan* (Later tale of rebellion against the Tang) and ends by referring to itself by that title within the text. How does *Green Peony* relate to these novels and genres?

The term "historical novel" refers to a heterogeneous group of narratives. All seem to share a general respect for historical fact, but the relationship between fact and invention differs from novel to novel and period to period. The difference between the definitions of the historical novel posited by Y. W. Ma and C. T. Hsia is instructive. C. T. Hsia says the historical novels "approximate the spirit and form of a popular chronicle," emphasizing their relationship with "serious" history.<sup>54</sup> Y. W. Ma, on the other hand, emphasizes the fictional aspect of these works, defining the historical novel as "a fictional work which embodies, in an artistic blending of actuality and imagination, a core of historically factual material, with allowance for inventiveness in both figures and events combined with respect for established facts."<sup>55</sup> The structure of the historical novel is based on a dynasty or a significant period within a dynasty, such as repelling invaders or restoring the dynasty after disturbances. It is generally characterized by moral seriousness and concern with instruction, either of historical events or, more often, of moral exempla.<sup>56</sup> Some of the earliest ones flaunt their relationship to serious history, especially

*Zizhi tongjian* (Comprehensive mirror for aid in government).<sup>57</sup> Indeed, some are essentially popularized history, and many of the narratives published in the Ming share little of the usual form of the novel; the storyteller's manner, for example, may be minimal or absent.<sup>58</sup>

C. T. Hsia identifies another related genre he labels the "military romance," which "make no pretensions to be serious history."<sup>59</sup> In general, the structure of the military romance centers on a hero or group of heroes and devotes much space to military campaigns and battles. Like the historical novel, the military romance relates grand events like the restoration of a dynasty or defense against invasion. Both genres draw on existing legends of heroes. I would suggest that both also center around the values of loyalty, brotherhood, and filial piety, even if military romances start to parody those values by the eighteenth century.<sup>60</sup> Thus the military romance and the historical novel both revolve around similar character types, such as the loyal general, although the military romance often exaggerates these character types.<sup>61</sup> In addition, the military romance makes much play of characters who do not appear in the historical record, such as women warriors and the scions of historic generals.<sup>62</sup>

A series of military romances appearing in the Qianlong period demonstrates the popularity of this genre. Four novels on the Tang dynasty, each a sequel to the last, generated fifteen editions in the Qianlong period alone and remained in print throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>63</sup> The last of the series, *Another Tale of Rebellion against the Tang*, relates the adventures of the general's scion Xue Gang (fig. 1.3). Labeling *Green Peony* as its sequel suggests that publishers were trying to capitalize on the popularity of this series. Despite appearing under the alternate title *Later Tale of Rebellion against the Tang*, *Green Peony* is not, strictly speaking, a sequel to *Another Tale of Rebellion against the Tang*.<sup>64</sup> The sequel title was only attached to *Green Peony* more than thirty years after its first appearance. Moreover, *Green Peony* does not act as a sequel. It shifts focus to new characters who do not appear in the previous narratives and shows what else was happening while Xue Gang was having his adventures during Empress Wu's reign. *Green Peony* thus could be considered at most a paraleptic continuation.<sup>65</sup> Yet that might be overstating the relationship, since only a paragraph at the beginning and the last four chapters of *Green Peony* are specifically indebted to *Another Tale of Rebellion against the Tang*. Even within the "shared" sections, the narrative shows more differences than similarities.

One of the most obvious differences between *Green Peony* and the military romance (*yingxiong chuanqi*) is the mode of fighting. James J. Y. Liu argues that a different degree of emphasis on the individual separates the martial arts novel and historical fiction. Whereas the heroes of historical fiction are generals conducting strategy on horseback, the heroes of the martial



Figure 1.3 Xue Gang, from the 1800 edition of *Green Peony*



arts novel tend toward fighting in one-on-one encounters.<sup>66</sup> The acid test of such a distinction is *The Water Margin*. Should *The Water Margin* be considered martial arts fiction? Many studies of martial arts fiction do include it and, undeniably, it has exerted a major influence. Chen Pingyuan notes that *The Water Margin* shaped the genre's description of fighting and its expressions of chivalry, but he also argues convincingly that at most only half of *The Water Margin* is a martial arts novel. Echoing James J. Y. Liu's argument, Chen observes that the heroes of *The Water Margin* may start as martial heroes, but in the course of the book become generals rather than avengers.<sup>67</sup>

The military romance (*yingxiong chuangqi*) also focuses on the battlefield as an arena in which generals display their strategy, martial prowess, and magic arts as they lead armies to victory. In contrast, *Green Peony* completely eliminates the hallmark of the military romance, magic battle; it eschews the supernatural and keeps everything on a mortal plane. Fights rarely occur on the battlefield. Instead, *Green Peony* primarily pits man against man (or woman) as a display of skill before crowds of appreciative onlookers in a tournament or similar setting. Even the battles and sieges to restore the dynasty focus on single-handed efforts rather than pitched battle. Thus, at a critical moment in the restoration effort, one man's heroic stand against hundreds captures the crucial pass:

One of the [enemy] assistant brigade commanders yelled, "The bandit is about to open the gate, fire your arrows, what are you waiting for?" Before he had finished, arrows flew toward Hu Li thick as locusts. Hu Li had his back to the pass gate; facing the crowd, he used his two broadswords—up, down, left, right—to shield himself. To either side of him arrows piled up one or two feet high, and not a single arrow was able to strike him. After they had shot at him for the time it takes to eat a meal, all the arrows the soldiers had brought had been shot. They heard the officer order, quick, open the storehouse and bring arrows for them to use. Hu Li thought to himself, "I'd better take advantage of their being out of arrows to break the gate, what am I waiting for?" He turned around and broke the lock on the gate, but his left shoulder had already been struck by an arrow. The pain was hard for Hu Li to bear, so he couldn't open the gate wide, he just barely opened it a crack and yelled, "The gate is open, come in quickly, what are you waiting for?"<sup>68</sup>

Even this short passage prefigures the spectacle typical of later martial arts novels and films. Little wonder that such scenes of martial display were a mainstay of drama and performance texts on *Green Peony*.<sup>69</sup>

Once again, *Green Peony* resembles the genres it draws upon while carefully maintaining its own difference from them. Chapters 2 and 3 will explore more fully the relationship of the martial romance to the historical novel and military romance.

### Implications

The above overview demonstrates that *Green Peony* draws on at least three genres of fiction without being subsumed by any of them. In this *Green Peony* characterizes a larger trend. The eminent bibliographer Sun Kaidi notes that at a certain point toward the end of each tradition, the scholar-beauty romance, the “loyal and righteous” subcategory of court-case fiction, and the historical novel all become concerned with “martial bravery” (*wuyong*) and the distinctions between them became correspondingly slight. Despite this observation, he refuses to establish a heading for “martial bravery”; since it is common to the last stage of all three traditions, he does not believe it has any characteristics by which it could be distinguished as an independent category.<sup>70</sup> I will argue for a different interpretation of this phenomenon.

Ferdinand Brunetière asserts that new genres always appear as a “dis-memberment” and “extension” of previous ones.<sup>71</sup> Thus the extensive cross-fertilization among genres of popular fiction in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century China provided ideal conditions for the formation of a new genre. The question is how a genre can create something new out of older material.

One theory holds that genres tend to form systems. Their characteristics are often defined in opposition to one another, as genre and countergenre. Sometimes this is mutually beneficial, as genres energize each other by counterbalancing each other’s values. Sometimes the opposed genres threaten each other by mutual criticism.<sup>72</sup> Either way, the genres form a dialogue over values, language, and technique. I will show the martial romance distinguishes itself from the genres it draws on by foregrounding this dialogue as it combines earlier motifs. *Green Peony* not only refuses classification as court-case fiction, military romance (*yingxiong chuanqi*), or scholar-beauty romance, but also plays the genre conventions off on one another.

By tracing the early development of the martial arts novel in the mid-Qing, we will see that while genre in the thematic sense is indeed useful to the understanding of popular fiction, these genres were never airtight boxes; there was frequent cross-fertilization between them. Still, their juxtaposition in *Green Peony* goes beyond this to reflect on the conventions of these genres. While *Green Peony* is first and foremost entertainment fiction, it is also the site of artistic play. This leads to questions about genre in its other sense. What defines the form and aesthetics of the novel in the nineteenth century? To what extent is that definition shared across the range of fictional practice?

Chapter 2 traces the development of the martial arts novel, focusing on the relationship between content and form. It examines a group of ten novels from the late Qianlong (1736–1795) to the Daoguang reign period (1821–1850), showing how previous genres of fiction interacted with performance genres in the formation of a new genre of popular fiction.

Parody of the genre conventions *Green Peony* draws upon is the subject of chapter 3. This chapter turns on the question of values. The major genres of popular fiction at the time, the scholar-beauty romance and the military romance (*yingshiong chuanqi*), are both predicated on adherence to certain codes of behavior. *Green Peony* self-consciously foregrounds the characters' attempts (and failures) to live by those codes, exposing the conflict between the conventions. It also explores the tensions between the values of court-case fiction and the military romance. On another level, *Green Peony* plays out the hidden potential in classic scenes in the Ming masterworks *The Water Margin* and *Three Kingdoms*. Thus it effectively functions as metafiction, highlighting the correspondence between the codes of behavior within the novel and the conventions of the genres themselves.

Chapter 4 argues that, while most of the popular fiction *Green Peony* draws upon presents itself as a model for life, *Green Peony* functions as a self-conscious novel. It shows that such literary reflexiveness is not merely the domain of the experimental novel; metafictional sophistication appears in popular fiction as well. *Green Peony* draws on an aesthetic informed by the masterworks of the Ming novel and the literary criticism that grew up around them, while critiquing the conventions and values of the thematic genres it builds on.

Chapter 5 returns to the question, How can we place the popular novel in nineteenth-century China? It discusses the relationship between the great novels of the Ming and Qing, popular fiction, and performance genres through an examination of their audiences, aesthetics, and cultural contexts.