

Victims and Rebels Under Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Analysis of Mu Nianci in The Legend of the Condor Heroes and Guo Xiang in The Return of the Condor Heroes

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on Mu Nianci from Jin Yong's martial arts novel *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* and Guo Xiang from *The Return of the Condor Heroes*. Through a comparative analysis of these two female characters' behavioral patterns and destinies within the framework of Confucian ethics, the paper explores how Confucian ethics shapes female characters in martial arts fiction and the manifestation of their rebellious spirit. The research finds that Mu Nianci embodies the constraints of Confucian chastity concepts through "internalized moral resistance," while Guo Xiang achieves a breakthrough beyond traditional gender limitations through "self-transcendent awakening." However, both forms of rebellion ultimately fail to completely overthrow the Confucian ethical system. Integrating feminist critical theory and New Confucian ethics, this study proposes a "limited resistance" theoretical model. It reveals the tragic nature and cultural significance of female characters in Jin Yong's martial arts narratives, offering a new theoretical perspective for gender studies in martial arts literature.

KEYWORDS

Confucian ethics; Jin Yong's martial arts fiction; Female characters; Mu nianci; Guo Xiang; Rebellious spirit

1 Introduction

Jin Yong's martial arts novels, as classic representatives of twentieth-century Chinese popular literature, not only construct a vast "jianghu" (martial arts world) but also profoundly reflect the ethical concepts and gender order of traditional Chinese society. Within the field of martial arts literature research, while significant work has explored themes like chivalric spirit ("xia yi"), "jianghu" narratives, and male character archetypes, systematic studies of female characters remain insufficient. This research imbalance reflects a certain limitation in academic perspective and hints at the potential influence of traditional gender concepts within literary criticism. This paper selects Mu Nianci from *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* and Guo Xiang from *The Return of the Condor Heroes* as research subjects. These two female characters respectively represent the archetypal figures of the "victim" and the "rebel" under the Confucian ethical framework. Their life trajectories profoundly reveal the dual role of traditional ethics on female subjectivity—simultaneously imposing moral constraints and stimulating rebellious consciousness.

Through this comparative analysis, this paper aims to uncover how Confucian ethics shapes the tragic destinies of female characters through norms such as chastity and filial piety. Mu Nianci's character demonstrates the suppression and disciplining of female emotions by Confucian concepts of female virtue ("fude"), while Guo Xiang embodies the possibility of a more complex form of resistance within the same ethical framework. It is noteworthy that despite adopting vastly different survival strategies, neither character's rebellion completely breaks through the boundaries of Confucian ethics. This characteristic of "limited resistance" warrants in-depth exploration. Furthermore, as a male author, whether the fates of Jin Yong's female characters implicitly critique the traditional gender order is also a key question this paper seeks to address.

This study has dual significance: Theoretically, by establishing an "ethical constraint - subjective awakening" analytical model, it fills a gap in systematic research on Jin Yong's female characters. Practically, the different paths of resistance taken by these two women offer an illuminating historical reference for contemporary gender equality issues. The research employs a methodology combining close reading of the text with theoretical interpretation, re-examining Jin Yong's martial arts texts from a feminist critical perspective to achieve a deeper understanding of gender politics within popular literature.

2 Literature review and research approach

Existing research on Jin Yong's martial arts novels exhibits a distinct gender imbalance. According to the latest bibliometric analysis, of the 487 Jin Yong research papers indexed in CNKI over the past decade, only 83 (approximately 17%) involve analysis of female characters, and the majority of these focus on major female characters like Huang Rong and Xiao Longnü (Li Ming, 2023). This research bias not only reflects limitations in academic focus but also, to some

extent, replicates the gender power structures within the texts themselves. Notably, within the limited research on female characters, most works still follow traditional character analysis methods, lacking systematic theoretical frameworks and in-depth gender perspectives.

International scholarship on martial arts fiction shows different academic orientations. Scholars like Hamm (2018) primarily focus on cultural politics and identity issues within martial arts literature, while Chen (2020) emphasizes the aesthetics of violence and moral philosophy in martial arts narratives. While these studies broaden the horizons of martial arts literary criticism, they generally neglect gender dimension analysis. In contrast, research by Hong Kong and Taiwan scholars demonstrates greater critical awareness. For instance, He Suwen (2021) points out that female characters in Jin Yong's novels are often "functionalized," serving as tools to drive the growth of male protagonists or create conflict; however, this critique has not yet formed a systematic theoretical framework.

In recent years, with the deepening application of feminist theory in literary studies, some scholars have begun exploring new research paths. Zhang Lihua (2022) employs Simone de Beauvoir's "Other" theory to analyze Jin Yong's female images, revealing the implicit gender politics of the martial arts world; Wang Siyuan (2023) introduces Judith Butler's gender performativity theory to deconstruct the construction of the "female knight-errant" ("nǚxia") identity. These studies provide important theoretical references for this project, yet no scholar has systematically studied Mu Nianci and Guo Xiang as a pair with significant comparative value.

Building upon existing research, this study attempts to establish a more comprehensive analytical framework. By integrating feminist criticism, New Confucian ethics, and narratological theory, this paper not only examines the surface gender representations in the text but also endeavors to reveal how Jin Yong, through narrative strategies (such as character fate arrangements, plot settings), reproduces and potentially critiques Confucian gender norms. Particularly noteworthy is the theoretical resource of the "debate on emotion versus rationality" ("qing li zhi bian") within Confucian ethics, which provides an essential cultural context for understanding Mu Nianci and Guo Xiang's different choices. This interdisciplinary approach aims to transcend the limitations of traditional martial arts literary criticism and offer new theoretical perspectives for gender studies.

3 The female dilemma under confucian ethical discipline

The Confucian ethical system, as the dominant value system of traditional Chinese society, shaped individual behavioral patterns and identity through a comprehensive set of strict moral norms. Within the narrative context of martial arts novels, these ethical norms form both the logical basis for characters' actions and special constraints on female characters. Although Mu Nianci and Guo Xiang inhabit the "jianghu" world constructed by Jin Yong, they remain profoundly bound by the influence of the Confucian gender order. Their life trajectories clearly demonstrate the disciplinary mechanisms traditional ethics impose on female subjectivity.

Mu Nianci's character epitomizes the suppression and distortion of female emotions by Confucian chastity concepts. As a secondary female character in *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*, her tragedy lies in being caught between her emotional needs and moral imperatives. Her feelings for Yang Kang are both genuine and deeply conflicted, a contradiction stemming precisely from the internalization of the Confucian virtue of "fidelity to one man" ("cong yi er zhong"). It is noteworthy that Jin Yong meticulously plots this internalization process: when Mu Nianci discovers Yang Kang's moral flaws, she does not simply sever ties but plunges into a deeper ethical dilemma—a choice between emotion and morality. This dilemma reaches its apex in the plotline of her bearing a child out of wedlock. Here, the social pressure of Confucian chastity concepts is fully manifested through the attitudes and gossip of surrounding characters. Mu Nianci's ultimate choice of death as release carries profound symbolic meaning: it signifies not only the end of an individual life but also the complete subsumption of female subjectivity by Confucian ethics.

Compared to Mu Nianci, Guo Xiang demonstrates a more complex set of strategies in confronting Confucian ethical discipline. As an important supporting character in *The Return of the Condor Heroes*, her upbringing within a renowned martial arts family liberates her from the constraints of traditional "boudoir education" ("guige jiaoyu"). This unique environment allows her to partially transcend the traditional notion that "lack of talent is a virtue in women" ("nǚzi wu cai bian shi de"). However, a deeper analysis reveals that Guo Xiang's "freedom" remains subject to invisible limitations. Her emotional attachment to Yang Guo, though distinct from Mu Nianci's blind devotion, still does not entirely escape the mold of traditional female emotional patterns. More ironically, her eventual choice to become a nun and found the Emei Sect, seemingly an act of liberation, actually constitutes another form of compromise with the Confucian marriage system. Close reading shows that Jin Yong's arrangement of Guo Xiang's fate implies a profound paradox: the more she strives to transcend traditional gender roles, the more she highlights the tenacity of the Confucian ethical framework.

The relationship of both characters with patriarchal authority also warrants deep exploration. Mu Nianci's adoptive father, Mu Yi (Yang Tiexin), as a representative of the patriarchal system, directly intervenes in her marital choice. Her attitude towards this intervention shifts from obedience to passive resistance. Guo Xiang faces more complex familial

pressures. As the daughter of Guo Jing and Huang Rong, she must bear the weight of family honor expectations and the constraints of orthodox chivalric values represented by her parents. Intriguingly, both characters respond to patriarchal pressure through a form of "absence"—Mu Nianci chooses death, Guo Xiang chooses to leave home and establish her sect. This similarity in coping strategies suggests that within the Confucian ethical framework, female resistance to patriarchy often can only be realized through self-exile.

4 Differences and limitations in modes of resistance

Mu Nianci and Guo Xiang adopt distinctly different resistance strategies in facing Confucian ethical constraints. These differences reflect not only the characters' personalities but also reveal the multiple possibilities and inherent limitations of female resistance in traditional society. Through comparative analysis, it becomes evident that female resistance in Jin Yong's writing exhibits complex layers, encompassing both explicit behavioral confrontation and implicit value reassessment. Yet, regardless of its form, it struggles to completely transcend the boundaries of Confucian ethics.

Mu Nianci's resistance can be termed "internalized moral resistance." Its characteristic is the internalization of Confucian ethical norms into self-imposed demands, seeking limited autonomy within this framework. This resistance pattern is most typically embodied in her ambivalence towards Yang Kang: on one hand, she cannot deny her genuine feelings; on the other, she constantly condemns both her own and Yang Kang's actions using Confucian moral standards. This persistent internal conflict results in a resistance marked by intense self-division. It is noteworthy that Mu Nianci is not entirely passive in accepting her fate; she demonstrates a degree of agency through repeated attempts to reform Yang Kang. However, these efforts remain confined within the traditional feminine virtue ("fudao") paradigm of "helping one's husband cultivate virtue" ("zhu fu cheng de"). Her death, superficially a victory for Confucian ethics, upon close reading, actually exposes how traditional ethics devastates individual life. The scene where she entrusts her son to Guo Jing and Huang Rong on her deathbed is particularly ironic: she exchanges her life for her son's legitimate status—a choice that conforms to Confucian maternal virtue while simultaneously hinting at the intergenerational transmission mechanism of gender oppression.

Guo Xiang's resistance manifests as "self-transcendent awakening," characterized by an active breakthrough beyond traditional gender roles and a persistent pursuit of personal value. Unlike Mu Nianci, Guo Xiang's resistance is achieved not through self-sacrifice but through continually expanding her sphere of life. Her exploration of the martial world, her pursuit of martial arts mastery, and her insistence on emotional autonomy all exhibit a more modern sense of subjective consciousness. However, a deeper analysis of Guo Xiang's path of resistance reveals an inherent paradox: the more she pursues independence, the more she becomes entangled in new constraints. Her emotional attachment to Yang Guo, while possessing greater spiritual depth, still does not completely transcend the limitations of traditional female emotional patterns; her act of founding the Emei Sect appears to realize her self-worth, yet it necessitates acceptance of a masculinized power structure and "jianghu" rules. This contradiction is especially evident in Jin Yong's narrative strategy: while he endows Guo Xiang with extraordinary personality and abilities, he simultaneously re-incorporates her into the traditional ethical evaluation system through her "life-long unmarried" fate.

The ultimate failure of both characters' resistance stems from their inability to transcend their historical context. Mu Nianci's tragedy lies in her complete internalization of Confucian ethical values, rendering her resistance self-consuming. Guo Xiang, though partially breaking free from traditional constraints, could only imagine freedom within the cognitive framework of a patriarchal society. Through these characters' fates, Jin Yong reveals a profound cultural dilemma: in a society dominated by Confucian ethics, female resistance often exists only in compromised or mutated forms. This phenomenon of "limited resistance" exists not only in the fictional world of martial arts novels but is also a reflection of gender relations in traditional Chinese society.

5 The gender politics of jin yong's narration

Jin Yong, as the most influential martial arts novelist of the twentieth century, warrants deep examination of the gender politics within his works. By analyzing the characterization of Mu Nianci and Guo Xiang and their functions within the narrative structure, we can discern Jin Yong's ambivalent attitude towards the traditional gender order—containing both potential critique and unconscious replication of certain gender stereotypes. This ambivalence reflects the characteristics of the author's own cultural transitional period, making his works significant texts for studying the evolution of modern Chinese gender concepts.

The characterization of Mu Nianci demonstrates Jin Yong's humanistic concern for the fate of traditional women. Unlike typical martial arts novels that reduce female characters to mere love interests or plot devices, Jin Yong endows Mu Nianci with a complex inner world and a tragic destiny. By meticulously depicting her struggle between emotion and

morality, Jin Yong effectively exposes the suppression of female life by Confucian concepts of female virtue. Notably, Mu Nianci's death is not a simple plot device but carries deep symbolic meaning: it serves both as an indictment of the cruelty of traditional ethics and a suggestion of the difficulty for women to find a genuine way out within the existing gender order. Jin Yong expresses a potential critique of traditional gender norms through this tragic ending, yet this critique is subtle and fraught with contradiction, as he offers no alternative value possibilities.

The image of Guo Xiang showcases Jin Yong's imagination and exploration of a new type of female character. Compared to Mu Nianci, Guo Xiang possesses stronger self-awareness and a broader sphere of life, reflecting Jin Yong's reconsideration of traditional gender roles. However, deeper analysis reveals that Guo Xiang's "freedom" remains subject to multiple constraints. Jin Yong grants her extraordinary martial talent and an independent spirit, yet ultimately arranges for her to enter the monastic life—a fateful design rich in implication. From a narrative function perspective, Guo Xiang's becoming a nun represents both an escape from the traditional marriage system and a certain dissolution of her female subjectivity—the freedom she gains comes at the cost of renouncing worldly happiness. This narrative strategy exposes the limitations of Jin Yong's gender concepts: while sympathetic to women's plight, he struggles to completely transcend the mindset of patriarchal culture.

From a broader narrative structure perspective, the positions of Mu Nianci and Guo Xiang within their respective works also reflect gender power imbalances. Mu Nianci's story consistently revolves around Yang Kang; her subjectivity is confined within the identity of "Yang Kang's lover." Guo Xiang, although granted more independent plot space, still has her characterization deeply centered on her feelings for Yang Guo. This narrative arrangement indicates that in Jin Yong's martial arts world, women's value is still largely defined through their relationships with men. Even the most rebellious female characters cannot entirely escape this underlying narrative logic.

The ambivalence in Jin Yong's gender narratives holds significant cultural meaning. As an author living during the transition from tradition to modernity, Jin Yong's thoughts on gender were influenced by traditional ethics yet also contained modern humanistic concern. Through the fates of female characters like Mu Nianci and Guo Xiang, he both reproduces the oppressive nature of the traditional gender order and explores possible paths of resistance. Although these explorations do not constitute a fully formed feminist perspective, they provide rich textual material for the study of gender politics in martial arts literature. This complexity in Jin Yong's narratives reminds us that gender analysis of popular literature should avoid simplistic value judgments and instead focus on the interweaving and collision of various discursive forces within the text.

6 Conclusion and further discussion

Through a systematic comparison of Mu Nianci in *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* and Guo Xiang in *The Return of the Condor Heroes*, this study reveals the survival dilemmas and resistance strategies of female characters under the framework of Confucian ethics. The research finds that although the two characters adopt different survival strategies—Mu Nianci choosing the stoic resistance of moral internalization, Guo Xiang pursuing active transcendence—their rebellions both ultimately fail to completely break through the boundaries of the Confucian gender order. This phenomenon of "limited resistance" profoundly reflects the systemic oppression women faced in traditional society and exposes the complexity of gender politics within martial arts narratives.

On a theoretical level, the main contribution of this study lies in proposing a bidirectional analytical model of "ethical constraint - subjective awakening." This model is applicable not only to gender studies in Jin Yong's martial arts fiction but can also serve as a reference for analyzing female images in other traditional Chinese literature. The research finds that Confucian ethical discipline operates through both explicit moral norms and more covert emotional patterns and narrative structures. Although female characters' resistance struggles to achieve complete success, the attempts themselves carry significant cultural meaning—they expose fissures in the traditional gender order, providing historical groundwork for subsequent, more radical gender equality movements.

In terms of practical significance, the different fates of Mu Nianci and Guo Xiang offer insights for contemporary gender equality issues. Mu Nianci's tragedy reminds us that fully internalizing oppressive ethical norms leads only to self-destruction. Guo Xiang's relative success indicates that even in severely constrained environments, individuals can still attain a degree of freedom by continually expanding cognitive and practical spaces. Of course, this freedom remains limited and costly, reminding us of the importance of systemic change in advancing gender equality.

This study also has limitations. Firstly, as a case study, the generalizability of its conclusions requires verification across more texts. Secondly, the historical contextual analysis of Jin Yong's gender concepts is not yet fully sufficient. Additionally, the research primarily focuses on literary text analysis; connections to socio-historical realities need strengthening. Future research could deepen in the following directions: 1) Expanding the textual scope to include more martial arts writers and works for comparative analysis; 2) Strengthening the historical dimension to explore the socio-cultural roots of gender narratives in martial arts fiction; 3) Introducing reader-response studies to examine how readers

of different genders perceive martial arts female characters.

In conclusion, through an in-depth analysis of these two classic female images in martial arts literature, Mu Nianci and Guo Xiang, this study not only enriches gender research on Jin Yong's novels but also provides a new perspective for understanding gender politics within Chinese traditional culture. Against the backdrop of contemporary society's continued push for gender equality, re-examining the cultural connotations of these literary figures holds special theoretical and practical significance.

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