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## **Oriental Legends and the Writing of the Chivalrous Spirit: A Review of Ni Siting's *A Critical Biography of Huanzhu Louzhu***

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**Abstract:** *A Critical Biography of Huanzhu Louzhu* stands as a representative research achievement of Ni Siting, a Tianjin-based writer, in recent years. This biography systematically sorts out the life trajectory and literary creation practice of Huanzhu Louzhu (Li Shoumin), the master of martial arts fiction. With vivid narrative strokes and detailed documentary research, the author presents a relatively comprehensive organization and exposition of Huanzhu Louzhu's life and creative endeavors. The publication of this book fills some gaps in the thematic research on modern martial arts fiction writers and provides systematic historical data support for the study of Huanzhu Louzhu. Based on Huanzhu Louzhu's life experience and *A Critical Biography of Huanzhu Louzhu*, and in combination with the research methods and academic perspectives of this biography, this paper attempts to analyze the creative motivations and artistic characteristics of Huanzhu Louzhu, and take his poetics of creation as the foundation to explore the emergence and development mechanisms of modern Chinese commercial literature.

**Keywords:** Popular literature; Biography; Martial arts novels; Huanzhu Louzhu

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**标题:** 东方传奇与任侠精神之书写: 评倪斯霆的《还珠楼主评传》

**摘要:** 《还珠楼主评传》是天津作家倪斯霆近年来的代表性研究成果, 该传记系

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统梳理了武侠小说宗师还珠楼主（李寿民）的生平轨迹与文学创作实践。作者以生动的叙事笔触、翔实的文献考据，对还珠楼主的人生与创作进行了较为全面的梳理与呈现，此书的出版弥补了现代武侠文学作家专题研究的部分空白，为还珠楼主研究提供了系统性的史料支撑。本文以还珠楼主生平和《还珠楼主评传》为研究基础，结合该评传的研究方法与学术视角，尝试拆解还珠楼主的创作动机与艺术特征，以其创作学为根基，探析中国现代商业文学的发生与发展机制。

**关键词：**通俗文学；传记；武侠小说；还珠楼主

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*A Critical Biography of Huanzhu Louzhu* (Beiyue Literature and Art Publishing House, 2023) is the culmination of Ni Siting's recent dedicated research. It systematically traces the life journey and literary creative practice of martial arts fiction master Huanzhu Louzhu (Li Shoumin) through a chronological framework. Drawing upon meticulous historical research and vivid narrative expression, this book fills certain gaps in the specialized study of Huanzhu Louzhu within modern popular literature, providing a crucial reference for understanding the spiritual core and epochal significance of Chinese martial arts fiction. Compared to Xu Guozhen's 1949 work *On Huanzhu Louzhu*, which offered contemporaneous textual critiques of Huanzhu Louzhu's creations, *A Critical Biography of Huanzhu Louzhu* achieves a panoramic examination of the subject's life and literary output, presenting a more multidimensional research approach. Using this book as a scholarly foundation, this paper integrates perspectives from urban culture, chivalrous spirit, and regional literary history to explore the interplay between tradition and modernity in Huanzhu Louzhu's works. Simultaneously, it evaluates the research methodology and academic value of this critical biography, aiming to offer insights for contemporary studies in popular literature.

### 1. Conceptualizing the Form of Urban Literature

In the early 20th century, the modern architecture along Shanghai's Bund became a significant marker of China's accelerated urbanization. Concurrently, the lifestyle of urban residents transformed, with new practices such as reading newspapers in bank lounges and drinking coffee gradually becoming quotidian norms. The development and proliferation of modern media profoundly influenced the formative patterns and dissemination pathways of 20th-century Chinese literature. The spiritual demands arising from urban culture propelled the deep integration of popular literature with urban legend narratives, forging a distinctive literary legacy; The modern transformation of cultural paradigms spurred the development of urban literature, while economic modernity imposed commercial frameworks on literary creation and dissemination. Together, these forces propelled the formation, expansion, and flourishing of serialized novels in metropolitan contexts. As a northern metropolis blending modernity with local distinctiveness, Tianjin saw its modern characteristics gradually emerge during the 1920s–1930s, forming a cultural dialogue between north and south with Shanghai's urban culture. Unlike the traditional continuity model of classical literature, popular serialized novels intertwined narrative expansiveness with the dissemination efficiency of periodicals. *Legend of the Swordsmen of the Mountains of Shu* precisely aligned with contemporary urban aesthetics and reading demands, securing a broad readership that became a pivotal milestone in Huanzhu Louzhu's literary career. *A Critical Biography of Huanzhu Louzhu* analyzes the creative context of Huanzhu Louzhu from an urban cultural perspective. This approach transcends the limitations of traditional biographical

narratives that focus solely on life events, thereby enriching the research dimensions of the biography.

Defining Huanzhu Louzhu's literary achievements solely by sales figures would be unduly reductive. After all, while his works achieved widespread popularity, the intricate and multifaceted cultural traditions behind them are what truly captivate readers. Huanzhu Louzhu fully integrates traditional Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist doctrines into his narratives—such as the Daoist cultivation of both mind and body, the Buddhist cycle of rebirth, and the Confucian virtues of loyalty, filial piety, and righteousness. Among these, Daoist concepts serve as the core values for his cosmological framework and literary aspirations. The novel takes traditional culture as its core and adopts the chapter-based narrative form, persistently infuse with surrealist elements. It strikes a chord with the public's voyeuristic desire for traditional values, thereby realizing the work's commercial value.

Xu Guozhen (1949, p. 1) noted in his 1948 publication *On Huanzhu Louzhu* that the success of *Legend of the Swordsmen of the Mountains of Shu* remained an unsolved mystery in an era of scientific progress, where the clash between traditional witchcraft and modern civilization might have been a key factor. Yet when examined through the lens of modernity, it becomes evident that urban populations universally grapple with repetitive daily routines and psychological inertia. In Mao Dun's (1981, p. 359) critique of popular literature, we particularly discern the subconscious desires and spiritual aspirations of the masses under modern urban civilization—a critical driver behind the phenomenal popularity of *Legend of the Swordsmen of the Mountains of Shu*.

The mechanization and repetitiveness of urban daily life have fostered an inherent public demand for spiritual compensation. This demand drives them toward the fantastical worlds constructed by literary works such as *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple*, the novels of Eileen Chang, and Zhang Henshui. Against this backdrop, the commercial success of *Legend of the Swordsmen of the Mountains of Shu* was no accident but an inevitable cultural product that fulfilled the spiritual needs of urban citizens amid the development of modern Chinese urban civilization.

The promotional slogans for *Legend of the Swordsmen of the Mountains of Shu* at the time—"the unparalleled masterpiece of martial arts fiction, a monumental work whose readership only grows with time," "thrilling, intense, terrifying, mysterious, and grand," "so captivating you can't put it down, so immersive it purges worldly worries"—reveal the work's alignment with the reading demands of urban audiences. Taiwanese scholar Ye Hongsheng (2002, p. 3) noted, "It (advertising) indeed reflects the worldly characteristics of *Legend of the Swordsmen of the Mountains of Shu* and the primary reasons for its widespread social impact." It is known that at the time, from high-ranking officials to common peddlers and laborers, many were avid readers of Huanzhu Louzhu's works, eagerly anticipating *Legend of the Swordsmen of the Mountains of Shu*, demonstrating the novel's strong artistic appeal and audience attraction. The literary dissemination and social influence of *Legend of the Swordsmen of the Mountains of Shu* gradually shifted after the founding of the People's Republic of China in October 1949.

The discontinuation of the "Shu Mountains Universe" series in January 1951 marked a pivotal moment in Huanzhu Louzhu's literary career; Meanwhile, the collective creative model of domestic martial arts fiction gradually declined. Later scholars investigating the waning of modern martial arts fiction creation often attribute it to policy influences, yet such policies represent only one aspect. Fundamentally, the recreational reading ecosystem grounded in the publishing market underwent a radical transformation. Amidst the era of publishing institutions transitioning to state-owned operations, commercial value (including circulation volumes of periodicals and books) ceased to serve as the core evaluation criterion for literary works, and writers no longer prioritized catering to public references as their primary creative orientation. The disappearance of

commercial creative motivations deprived Huanzhu Louzhu's supernatural martial arts fiction of its corresponding market support.

## 2. The Inheritance of the Chivalrous Spirit

Based on textual analysis of *A Critical Biography of Huanzhu Louzhu*, Ni Siting completed a multifaceted consideration of Huanzhu Louzhu's family background, adolescent experiences, and growth trajectory. His official family lineage in the first half of his life and his travels through famous mountains and great rivers were inextricably linked to his subsequent writing endeavors. The combination of the internalization of the scholar and the externalization of the traveler also constituted vital roots for his composition of *Legend of the Swordsmen of the Mountains of Shu*.

In *A Critical Biography of Huanzhu Louzhu*, Ni Siting (2023, p.56) narrates the life of Huanzhu Louzhu, enabling readers to distinctly perceive the "chivalrous spirit" embodied by Li Shoumin. This spiritual characteristic also became a crucial thread for the three-dimensional shaping of the biographee's image in the critical biography. Ni Siting's interpretation of Huanzhu Louzhu's chivalrous spirit may involve either personal emotional projection onto the research subject or rely on his comprehensive collection of the subject's anecdotes. What remains certain is that this critical biography connects the author's personal character with his creative ethos, clearly delineating the formation and developmental trajectory of his chivalrous spirit. *A Critical Biography of Huanzhu Louzhu* employs a methodology of "historical research + spiritual interpretation," deeply integrating the subject's life events with his spiritual attributes to achieve intertextual research between the "person" and the "text." This constitutes a significant breakthrough compared to Xu Guozhen's *On Huanzhu Louzhu*—Xu's work focused solely on chivalric depictions within the text of *Legend of the Swordsmen of the Mountains of Shu* without establishing profound connections to the subject's personal spiritual characteristics.

The wondrous life experience of internalization and externalization during his youth cultivated, to some extent, Huanzhu Louzhu's (Li Shoumin) broad-mindedness that found solace in the vast expanse of heaven and earth. In his scholarly pursuits, Li Shoumin did not solely adhere to the indoctrination of Confucian doctrines; rather, the extensive assimilation of Buddhist and Taoist classics, an intimate connection with natural landscapes, and the exploration of all things' spirituality collectively shaped his cognitive framework. Gradually, within his adolescent mind, he had discerned the profound mysteries between Buddhism and Taoism. After the Taoist concepts of "mountain, medicine, divination, physiognomy, and fortune-telling" (shān yī míng xiàng bǔ) left their mark on Li Shoumin's scholarship, martial arts can be regarded as a branch of the Taoist "mountain" category.

In the tumultuous era of Republican China, law could not reach every corner of society, and justice beyond the law required individuals to uphold it; The influence of the times and the continuation of childhood temperament cultivated Huanzhu Louzhu's worldly chivalrous character. From Huanzhu Louzhu's military uniform photograph, one can discern his adherence to worldly ideals and chivalrous sentiments. When worldly ambitions were thwarted, literature became the vessel through which the author expressed his values and chivalrous ideals.

Martial arts fiction carries profound connotations of traditional Chinese culture. Unlike Gong Baiyu, who turned to martial arts fiction for livelihood after failing to realize his literary ambitions, Huanzhu Louzhu's creations were deeply rooted in his unique value system and ethical concepts. Many plot elements in his works can be viewed as artistic projections of his patriotic sentiments, chivalrous principles, and reflections on life. *Legend of the Swordsmen of the Mountains of Shu* extensively portrays patriotic sentiments, depicts the chivalrous and righteous spirit, and integrates classical cultural elements. Works such as *Longbrowed Taoist*, *Tales of the Cloud Sea Struggle*, and *Nineteen Heroes of Qingcheng* all feature classic passages of punishing evil and promoting

virtue. The exhilarating portrayal of retribution in such narratives directly reflects Huanzhu Louzhu's chivalrous values in his literary creations.

Classical novels serve as a clear mirror reflecting ancient societal culture, capable of depicting human relationships and social customs while outlining an authentic panorama of ancient societies. Structurally speaking, the influence of classical martial arts fiction tropes on the first half of the work is profoundly evident. The conventional pattern of "good ultimately triumphs over evil" consistently shapes the narrative framework, while the distribution of narrative energy bears distinct characteristics reminiscent of Zhang Henshui and Pingjiang Buxiaosheng. However, as the plot progressively unfolds and the imaginative scope expands, *Legend of the Swordsmen of the Mountains of Shu* demonstrates transcendent qualities over numerous popular novels of its era. The classic episode of "Three Heroes and Two Clouds" battling at the Purple Cloud Palace showcases Huanzhu Louzhu's authorial craftsmanship, becoming a highly representative plot within his oeuvre. Subsequent narrative developments gradually build intense artistic tension from this pivotal moment.

In *A Critical Biography of Huanzhu Louzhu*, Ni Siting provides an objective interpretation of Huanzhu Louzhu's creative motivations. He contends that *Legend of the Swordsmen of the Mountains of Shu* developed a unique literary characteristic within the wave of popular literature development, emerging as an immensely influential work of Republican-era popular literature and giving rise to the large-scale "Shushan Xianxiang" (a cultural phenomenon centered around the Mountains of Shu). This perspective also affirms the value of Huanzhu Louzhu's commercial literary endeavors. Against the turbulent backdrop of the Republican era, *Legend of the Swordsmen of the Mountains of Shu* exhibited multifaceted literary functions. While expanding the expressive boundaries of martial arts literature and satisfying readers' psychological needs, it also generated substantial market demand, thereby fulfilling the commercial objectives of both the author and publishers. Furthermore, this work propelled the development of Republican-era commercial literature creation paradigms by integrating an Orientalized chivalrous and righteous spirit into martial arts fiction. Its intrinsic literary value remained unobscured by commercial considerations, generating widespread dissemination effects among contemporary readership. However, *A Critical Biography of Huanzhu Louzhu* still exhibits deficiencies in its examination of this "Shushan Xianxiang," focusing merely on describing the phenomenon itself without delving into the underlying dissemination mechanisms and socio-cultural driving forces.

Additionally, *A Critical Biography of Huanzhu Louzhu* meticulously documents and presents Li Shoumin's personal embodiment of the chivalrous spirit through detailed accounts—such as his legendary confrontation of a rickshaw driver to rescue a beauty and his demonstration of martial prowess by holding silver chopsticks in his mouth to deter adversaries in a tavern. These episodes imbue the biographical subject with legendary aura, establishing profound intertextual connections with Huanzhu Louzhu's martial arts fiction. This narrative strategy evokes in readers the aesthetic perception that "the writing mirrors the writer," thereby reinforcing the public impression of unity between the author's personality and his literary style. It is to be affirmed that the critical biography does not stop at glorifying legendary deeds; instead, through rigorous historical research, it verifies the authenticity of these legends. Throughout this verification process, the work remains closely linked to the manifestation and significance of the chivalrous spirit in Li Shoumin's daily life, which constitutes a distinguishing feature of the book's approach to historical sources. However, the book exhibits certain academic shortcomings. Its interpretation of the chivalrous spirit has largely remained at the level of phenomena and deeds, lacking deeper integration with modern theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, it fails to provide a systematic comparative analysis of Huanzhu Louzhu's chivalric narratives alongside those of contemporaneous popular literature authors. His youthful romance during his time in Suzhou, the

overt and covert rivalry with banking tycoon Sun Zhongshan, the sensational court case over a forced marriage that shook Tianjin, followed by his sworn brotherhood with renowned Peking Opera artist Shang Xiaoyun and his subsequent role as an advisor to Fu Zuoyi—all these events etched legendary or chivalrous imprints onto the life of Huanzhu Louzhu.

*A Critical Biography of Huanzhu Louzhu* adopts the pervasive chivalrous spirit as the core thread for interpreting the biographical subject. Through interwoven narratives of legendary deeds and everyday experiences, combined with historical verification and clarification of factual accuracy, the biography constructs the subject's distinctive spiritual demeanor. This narrative approach renders the subject's image more three-dimensional and vivid, while lending greater persuasive force to the interpretation of the chivalrous spirit.

### 3. Distinctive Narratives in Tianjin's Literary History

During the Republican era, Tianjin exhibited a convergence of modernity and tradition, finance and dock culture, merchant communities and grassroots society, heroic narratives and rivers-and-lakes culture. The chivalrous ethos became an integral component of Tianjin's urban identity, with its indigenous chivalric culture displaying distinctly more pronounced characteristics compared to southern metropolises. From the 1920s onward, Tianjin abounded with martial arts schools, and during the Anti-Japanese War period, numerous legendary heroic chivalric deeds emerged. The tangible chivalrous and righteous spirit in reality became deeply intertwined with the fantastical chivalric narratives in literature, precipitating the proliferation of various martial arts periodicals. Huanzhu Louzhu's ability to commence his core creative and life journey in Tianjin resulted from the confluence of regional cultural influence and historical opportunities. His sworn brotherhood with Duan Maolan, acquaintance with Sun Jingxun, and even the creation and dissemination of the "Shushan Qunxia" (the group of the swordsmen of the Mountains of Shu) series were all inextricably linked to the cultural soil and networking opportunities provided by Tianjin.

The urban characteristics of a citizenry in Tianjin furnished an optimal environment for the creation and dissemination of popular fiction, thereby fostering a sizable community of writers within Tianjin's 20th-century popular literature sphere. Huanzhu Louzhu and the Three Masters of Northern School Wuxia Fiction (Zhu Zhenmu, Zheng Zhengyin, Gong Baiyu) all engaged in wuxia writing in Tianjin, demonstrating certain stylistic continuities and interactive features within their respective bodies of work. Multiple factors—including the groundbreaking nature of Huanzhu Louzhu's literary creations, the maturation of commercial publishing models during the Republican era, and the public demand for heroic narratives—collectively propelled Republican-era martial arts fiction to its zenith. *A Critical Biography of Huanzhu Louzhu* situates its subject's literary output within the context of Tianjin's literary history, thereby addressing a gap in the intersectional study of regional literature and popular literature. This constitutes one of the work's significant scholarly contributions. In contrast, Xu Guozhen's *On Huanzhu Louzhu*, due to temporal constraints and the research perspectives of his era, did not address the connection between the subject's creative works and regional cultural context. Furthermore, Huanzhu Louzhu's success contained an element of inevitability. His adoption of the swordsword genre framework and long-form narrative format represented pioneering approaches that shaped contemporary literary trends. Coupled with the north-to-south cultural flow of literary influence, these factors propelled the "Mountains of Shu" series to achieve even broader impact.

As a native of Tianjin, Ni Siting's motivation for researching Huanzhu Louzhu also stems from upholding the tradition of scholarly integrity. Influenced by Mr. Zhang Gansheng during the 1980s, Ni Siting formed a connection with Huanzhu Louzhu's works at the Tianjin Library. By this time, he had already become captivated by the legendary life trajectory of Li Shoumin. The

renewed research and advancement concerning Huanzhu Louzhu in the new century, which is also attributable to Ni Siting's heartfelt passion for Tianjin's literature and culture – evident in his re-evaluation of Liu Yunruo's literary merits and studies on the evolution of Tianjin's traditional opera – demonstrates how the power of sentiment drove him to complete this critical biography of the martial arts fiction master.

Ni Siting's research on Huanzhu Louzhu commenced with the publication of *Prelude to Huanzhu Louzhu* in 2014, and his collection and textual research of biographical materials on Huanzhu Louzhu have extended throughout his subsequent research endeavors. The book's substantial research achievements stem from the author's long-term literary research and textual criticism coupled with on-site field investigations. Through a microscopic approach, the author meticulously reconstructs the biographical subject's life details – including the exact year and month of Huanzhu Louzhu's father's death and the precise timelines of his travels to Suzhou and Tianjin – all rigorously verified through the author's detailed historical analysis. The *Prequel to Huanzhu Louzhu* primarily chronicles the first half of the master's life, while *A Critical Biography of Huanzhu Louzhu* accomplishes a systematic study of the biographical subject's entire lifetime, achieving a comprehensive interpretation of Huanzhu Louzhu's life and creative works. Compared to Xu Guozhen's *On Huanzhu Louzhu, A Critical Biography of Huanzhu Louzhu* demonstrates greater comprehensiveness in historical source verification. It not only corrects certain historical inaccuracies in Xu's work stemming from the limitations of his era but also supplements numerous previously undiscovered biographical details of the subject. This establishes a robust historical foundation for research on Huanzhu Louzhu. However, the book exhibits minor shortcomings in its utilization of historical materials. The verification and examination of certain folk oral histories appear somewhat cursory, and the discussion of certain details lacks corroboration from multiple historical sources.

Surveying the history of Chinese literary studies, research on popular literature has long occupied an understudied domain. Many popular literature writers were indiscriminately labeled as part of the “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School”, their literary achievements neither fully researched nor adequately disseminated. Since the elite literary discourse system of the May Fourth period became the mainstream literary value standard, public perception of popular literature has long remained in a “non-mainstream” ambiguous state, and its research value has remained underexplored.

At the 2009 “Record of the Tianjin Sword Symposium—Northern School Martial Arts Fiction Seminar”, research on popular literature had already developed a robust framework characterized by a three-generation relay of scholars and cross-strait academic exchange. The rise of online literature research is driving renewed academic attention to the creative value of Republican-era popular fiction writers. The April 2023 publication of *A Critical Biography of Huanzhu Louzhu* stands as a significant achievement in modern popular literature studies, offering fresh research perspectives and historical references for Huanzhu Louzhu scholarship and Republican-era popular literature research, while providing valuable insights for advancing the balanced development of refined and popular literature studies. Certainly, *A Critical Biography of Huanzhu Louzhu* is not without imperfections. Its analysis of the connection between the artistic transition in Huanzhu Louzhu's later creative works and the temporal context remains relatively cursory. The discussion on the commercial publication mechanisms of his works also only touches the surface, without delving into the profound interactions between the Republican-era publishing industry and the creation of popular literature. These aspects represent potential directions for further development in subsequent research on Huanzhu Louzhu.

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