

Rik's Dissertation:  
A Synopsis for Stray Readers

(purely fictional, by Annie Pearson  
for readers of [Chaos House](#))

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Pair-bonded Friendship Motifs in  
Cantonese Popular Culture, 1950 to 1970:  
Literary Comparisons,  
with Auxiliary English Translations

by  
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A Dissertation

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**Synopsis:** The research for this thesis began with a simple question: “Does popular literature in mid-twentieth century Hong Kong pursue innovative directions or does it follow a continuation of past traditions in Cantonese and Chinese literature?” Both the question and the required research are novel from a theoretical perspective. To undertake the research, this thesis employed a comparative approach, studying contemporary texts from different genres and exploring links with texts from earlier eras to identify parallels between classical Chinese literature and contemporary Cantonese popular media.

This thesis asserts that mid-century popular literature in Hong Kong is a creative continuation of Cantonese and Chinese literary traditions. Further, this thesis asserts that pair-bonding is a fundamental motif over twenty-five hundred years of literature. The significance of this motif has been overlooked in other scholarly explorations but is shown in this thesis to be a motif for further scholarly explorations, especially given its manifestations in popular Hong Kong literature.

**Methodology and Literature Review:** Chapter 2, “Hong Kong Cantonese Popular Culture and Chinese Classical Literature,” examines scholarship that draws parallels between ancient writings such as *The Book of History*, the *Book of Songs*, and books from T’ang and later eras. The research in this thesis emphasizes tales from the T’ang dynasty, where a new genre rose which we think of as the novel. This new genre introduced heroic adventures, romance, supernatural incidents, and fictional history — of which newer Cantonese popular stories are direct descendants. In this thesis, the T’ang sources are cited as a foundation for the argument that popular contemporary literature represents an undisrupted continuation of literary traditions. The T’ang texts themselves refer to tales of friendships, some as old as the Warring

States period and including the narratives of the famous assassins in Sima Qian's *Shiji* (*Records of the Grand Historian*).

As is currently true in United States universities, it is novel among scholars to pursue "popular culture" as a topic worthy of intellectual investigation. Hence, my research is limited to what can be found at the time of this writing, which principally identifies large gaps in scholarship. To mitigate this limitation, the comparative analysis in this discussion frequently makes use of epistolary discussions with literature professors in Hong Kong universities. Extensive critical examination of contemporary thought on this topic awaits future publications by scholars.

The extensive sources cited here are illustrative of literary traditions over two millennia. This research examined traditions within both classical Chinese literati and Hong Kong popular culture, utilizing these methods and sources:

- 1) Ancient literati and T'ang texts, using versions of poems and novels identified as having been preserved closest to the dates of their original creation. The texts cited support the evaluation in this thesis of quotations from earlier literature that appear in contemporary popular works.
- 2) Critical texts, focusing on T'ang and mid-twentieth century scholarship, especially texts that discuss the rise of the novel during the T'ang era.
- 3) A selection of novels, movies, and comics in mid-century Hong Kong, emphasizing mainstream popular media—that which might be called "bestselling" in Western cultures.

**Findings and Analysis:** In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, this thesis employs inductive analysis coupled with qualitative methods,

particularly using close reading and content analysis to reveal how classical texts illuminate the continuing literary traditions of language, metaphor, and motif in mid-century popular culture, especially those with themes focused on identity and community. In general, it is not possible to “synthesize” sources in the traditional sense of combining other scholars’ work as a foundation to new insights. At the time of this writing, no contemporary scholarship has been published on this topic in Chinese or English. Current sources consist of newspaper and magazine articles from Hong Kongese and other Cantonese reviewers, which do not remotely resemble literary criticism.

In the examination of novels, movies, and comics, this thesis supports close reading and analysis with the following methods for extracting deeper meaning from the source material:

- 1) An excerpt from a popular source, typically five hundred words, in both Cantonese ideograms and pinyin.
- 2) The author’s two-part English translation, which, first, offers a close word-by-word ideogram-to-English translation, and second, presents a context-dependent translation that seeks to incorporate the flavor or emotional feeling of the passage or scene.
- 3) Citation of extensive parallels or direct quotations from T’ang novels or older literati poetry as used in the excerpted popular source.

In Chapter 3, “Concepts of Pair-Bonded Friendship in Cantonese Novels,” the translation and analysis examine Jin Yong’s *The Deer and the Cauldron*. In general, the mid-twentieth century stories in the popular *wuxia* genre feature itinerant martial-arts warriors in ancient eras. Jin Yong, a prolific modern Hong Kong

novelist, has published novels considered classics of the genre and which reflect many themes from early T'ang novels.

In Chapter 4, "Bonds and Brothers in Hong Kong Fight Movies," the translation and analysis focus on a premier fight movie, *The Avenging Eagle*, by Hung Chin and Kuang Ni, produced by the Shaw Brothers Studios. Wuxia stories quickly transferred to movies early in the twentieth century. *The Avenging Eagle* is a typical example of a story featuring an unlikely friendship, with motifs of revenge, remorse, and hidden identity.

In Chapter 5, "Bonded Friendships in Hong Kong Comics," the analysis focuses on Wong Chak's *Old Master Q*," a *mànhuà* written under the pen name used by Alfonso Wong Kar-hei, who created the most influential comic character in Asia. The term *mànhuà*, or "impromptu drawings," comes from an earlier term used in literati painting, but now typically refers to comics about crime, gangs, and love affairs. These themes take a comical turn with *Old Master Q*.

**Synthesis:** Popular literature—as seen in novels, movies, and comics—tells stories of personal and intimate bonds. The authors typically choose images and words that connote debt and devotion, blood and fidelity. The works explored in this thesis go beyond promises of constancy and unity to explore deep emotions arising from ungenerous fate, such as separation caused by vicissitudes of life, war, or familial demands.

Often the popular culture tales in literary and cinematic materials involve elements of close friendships, filled with grief and anguish, but also softer emotions such as tenderness and amicable ridicule. A common motif is Heavenly Immortals, or demi-gods, who favor the tale's heroes, or else do not as in stories that end in tragedy. Recurrent motifs in Hong Kong novels, fight

movies, and comics have sources in the literary traditions of earlier novels and Daoist fables.

Common motifs explored in this work, and shared in popular versus classic materials, include the following:

- 1) The Wandering Life: A questing master or monk protects a naïve companion. Another instance of this motif: The Poet and the Warrior.
- 2) The Young Disciples: Inseparable brothers undertake questing adventures. This motif at times calls on a metaphor: Two fish that swim together.
- 3) Immortals Hidden on Earth: This motif has a fraternal twin: Fox Spirit Seeks to Become Human.
- 4) The Nine Gentlemen: Invincible warriors rescue the weak and vulnerable. This motif includes protector figures haunted by past failures.
- 5) The Son as Rebel: Heroes struggle against familial or class limitations. Separation from family might arise from adoption, neglect, or ambitions beyond their station.

Common images or provoking elements in these stories are shown in this thesis to be part of the literary tradition as far back as ancient Daoist tales, including, for example:

Escaping from centuries-long imprisonment in defiance of Heaven, ancient deities, or demons.

Protecting secret knowledge from outsiders or stealing it from insiders.

Defeating magical creatures.

**Conclusion:** This thesis demonstrates that in these stories a core concept is the notion of *zhiji*, which appears early in Classical Chinese. My review discusses other translators' attempts to

render depths of meaning in this ideogram. A common translation—"the one who knows me"—is frequently viewed through the lens of modern Western notions of romantic love. This thesis argues for general adoption of the definition asserted by a translator of *The Garden of Persuasions* (from the Confucian scholar Liu Xiang): "The person who knows the melody of my heart." His argument for this interpretation is supported by the examination in this thesis of over one hundred historical texts and references in Chinese literary traditions.

Pair-bonded friends appear in Hong Kong novels, fight movies, and comics with the following characteristics, often supported by quotations from the poetry of *Shi Jing*:

Joining together to battle evil and forging an enduring bond, often with madcap humor.

Understanding each other across differences, where such differences form the friends' shared strengths.

Pledging to undertake challenges and trials for each other out of mutual respect and admiration.

These stories examine the grace and complex gestures of men who devote—or literally give up—their lives to the person who best understands them. These bonded friends move in concert, each action in unity. Their words are often in sync with each other, or they act in unison without needing to speak. They feel the pangs and joys of life in concert. They laugh together in ways possible only in unique, precious friendship. They bond out of mutual need, making each other whole.

Looking back at older texts, T'ang stories and poems depict such bonded friends with references to Li Po and older poets as part of the continuous line that can be drawn from classical to modern Chinese literature and mid-century Hong Kong media.



**Notes on Cantonese-to-English Translation:** As discussed in the appendix to this dissertation, the problems in translation among all Cantonese dialects, and certainly for Hong Kong dialects, include new character sets for words imported from colonial languages, portmanteau words, plus meaning shifts coupled with tonal shifts from Classical Chinese.

Another problem in translating written Cantonese is the same as for all Chinese dialects: rich symbolism fills both the language and literature, where a noun does not just represent a physical thing but also three thousand years of inferences beyond the surface. A bird is more than a flying creature. Jade is more than a stone suitable for carving. And, as shown in this thesis, a friend can represent more than an acquaintance who is not a blood relation.