

Original Paper

A Comparison and Dissemination of the Cowboy Spirit in
American Western Mythology and the Literary Image of the Xia
in Chinese “Jianghu”

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Abstract

This paper compares the cultural images of American cowboys and Chinese martial arts heroes (Xia), examining their cultural origins, social contexts, and spiritual cores to explore the profound differences between Eastern and Western concepts of freedom, justice, and heroism, and how different societies construct ideals of freedom, justice, and heroism. In this comparison, we will also draw on typical scenes from books and films to more clearly illustrate these points. Cowboys are rooted in the American frontier myth, embodying individualism, personal freedom, and resistance to authority. In contrast, the martial arts characters in Jin Yong's novels reflect Confucian ethics and the moral responsibilities, loyalty, and emotional commitments shaped by the imagined “jianghu” world. This article highlights the fundamental differences between traditional heroic ideals in China and the West through examples drawn from films and literary works.

Keywords

cowboys, martial arts, heroism, Jianghu, cultural comparison, Jin Yong, Western mythology

I. Comparing Origins and Social Contexts: Cultural Background and the Construction of Imagery

In the cultures of various ethnic groups around the world, heroic figures reflect historical contexts and also reflect the values of society at that time. In the American “western myth”, cowboys have become the symbols of freedom and personal strength; in China’s “jianghu” (the underworld), heroes have built a completely different kind of heroism that placed greater emphasis on collective responsibility and commitment. These cultural images are not just shaped for entertaining the audience, but instead, they illustrate to us what values each culture conveys most.

“Western mythology” refers to the idealised narrative of 19th century frontier history within the American cultural context. This was a period marked by exploration and settlement in the American West. Amidst the harsh and dangerous conditions of life during this period, there was an increasing emphasis on individualism, free will, a pioneering spirit and a sense of adventure, as well as male heroism. Historian Frederick J. Turner proposed the Frontier Thesis, stating: Up to this point, American history can largely be described as the history of the settlement of the American West. Turner believed that westward expansion shaped not only American expansionist history, but also the unique individualistic spirit of the United States (Turner, 1893). From this aspect, we can see that the West does not merely represent a geographical space, but also acts as the source of the American character.

In this geographical and cultural context, pioneers, cowboys, bounty hunters and gunmen have become representatives of this spirit. Originally recognized as laborers who dealt with cattle, cowboys later evolved into national cultural heroes, reflecting the expectations and aspirations of American society. The film *High Noon* contains a classic line, “I’m not running away; I’m just choosing freedom”, which thus breaks free from conventional constraints, and the ideals of freedom it conveys resonate deeply with the American people, enriching their national spirit of outward expansion and daring to pursue their dreams.

In contrast, China’s martial arts culture stems from a fundamentally different tradition. Rather than originate from “frontier culture”, it constructs a mythical world that transcends reality and is imbued with idealistic elements. The culmination of Chinese martial arts fiction is seen in the work of Jin Yong, who created a series of distinctive martial arts characters whose destinies and choices reveal the unique “jianghu”. As scholar Ye Hongsheng noted, the traditional Chinese “jianghu” is not merely the stage for martial arts novels but also a “cultural sanctuary for imagining justice outside the system.” It embodies individuals’ aspirations for survival beyond established order (Ye, 2010). Zhang Hongjie adds: “The Jianghu is not merely about violence; it is a social space infused with the fusion of Confucian and Daoist spirits, embodying the contradictory unity of individual resistance and ethical responsibility” (Zhang, 2012). In this sense, “jianghu” fuses Confucian and Daoist ideas, maintaining a balance between individual independence and social ethics. It is not merely a fictional geographical space but a

non-geographical space outside the realm of official power, both opposed to and connected with the system, filled with martial arts practitioners, sects, and codes of honour.

II. Spiritual Core and Value Orientation: The Contrast between Individualism and Group Ethics

Western mythology and the Chinese Jianghu are both spiritual symbols in their respective cultural narratives, representing two distinct constructions in American and Chinese cultures. The former emphasizes freedom, exploration, and individual heroism, while the latter stresses ethical relationships and inner moral cultivation.

In the American Western myth, the “cowboy” as the central figure is generally shaped as free-spirited, righteous, and often acts alone by himself. His spirit emphasizes individual action and free choice, with actions often driven by personal beliefs and moral judgments rather than obedience to law or collective missions. In the film *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, the blond-haired young man is not a good person—he is cunning and seeks money. Yet he still upholds his own sense of justice. He helps a dying soldier, giving him a coat without saying a word. This quiet kindness shows that even though he lives outside the law, he still has his own values. His actions are not about fulfilling a duty to society but about personal decisions. This highlights a very individualistic way of thinking: those who grew up idolizing cowboys might believe that everyone should fight for themselves and not be too constrained by others. The film also features the greedy and murderous outlaw Tuck, the law-abiding cowboy Brandi, and the cunning killer Santanza. None of these three main characters are entirely “good” in the traditional sense. They are greedy and cunning, but in the desert and chaos, they also display unexpected loyalty, courage, and choices. These imperfect and contradictory traits make their characters more three-dimensional, becoming objects of worship and admiration for Americans at the time.

In martial arts culture, the spirit of chivalry focuses on the moral responsibilities and choices. Figures like Linghu Chong, Guo Jing, and Zhang Wuji fight in the martial arts world not solely for themselves, but to make sacrifices in the conflicts between “family and nation”, “master and disciple”, and “righteousness”. For example, in *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer*, Linghu Chong refuses to join the Shaolin or Wudang sects to preserve his original intentions. This spirit resembles the Western cowboy’s notion of “not being bound by systems”, but his decision to abandon personal honour and achievements differs greatly from Western cowboy individualism: his freedom is not just for himself but also to protect others and maintain integrity. Li Zehou expatiates in *A History of Modern Chinese Thought*: “The Chinese knight-errant is not the Western-style pure individual heroism, but a sense of responsibility rooted in Confucian ethics” (Li, 1994). He argues that although martial arts behaviour operates outside such a system, it is not chaotic but reflects a self-awareness of an “inner moral code”. Therefore, we can say that martial arts heroes do not act freely for the sake of freedom. They are responsible for others. They may live outside society, but they do not live without rules. Instead, they follow up with their own “inner code”. This contrasts sharply

with the Western cowboy's liberal hero model and reveals the differences in the cultural foundations of China and the West.

It is worth noting that in the Western cowboy culture that emphasizes masculine virility and the tough guy image, women are often portrayed as certain desired objects to be protected or pursued. Authors often comes with the weakness or ignorance of female characters to highlight the male protagonist's bravery, with the functional role of the character taking precedence over their agency. In contrast, female characters in Jin Yong's novels possess greater agency. They are often intelligent, brave, and unyielding characters who hold independent value in shaping cultural imagery, rather than merely serving to highlight and emphasize male gender advantages and characteristics. Li Yinan, a researcher in literature, notes in "An Analysis of Feminist Consciousness in Jin Yong's Novels" that the female characters in Jin Yong's works break away from the conventional narrative pattern of "male leading, female supporting", particularly figures like Xiaolongnü and Huang Rong, who "are no longer objects of gaze but subjects with will, emotion, and cultural agency in the narrative" (Li, 2015). This indicates that Chinese martial arts culture grants women greater room, allowing them to become fully realized characters. They are not merely supporting roles. They make their own decisions and exert significant influence on the story. This independence and complexity of female characters stands in stark contrast to the female figures in Western films, who primarily serve to "assist male heroes".

In western culture background, Cowboy culture emphasizes the spirit of "pioneering", conduct of "conquest" and realization of "personal justice", while martial arts culture places greater emphasis on "self-reflection", "morality" and "group relationships". Although the hero models of the two cultures share some similarities (such as lone heroes and marginal identities), their core values and cultural foundations are vastly different, reflecting two entirely distinct worldviews. The table below highlights the main differences between cowboy heroes and martial arts heroes across various cultural dimensions.

Table 1. Comparative Dimensions of the Cowboy and the Xia: Cultural Origins, Core Values, and Gender Roles

Aspect	Cowboy	Xia
Example Character	Blondie (The Good, the Bad and the Ugly)	Linghu Chong, Guo Jing, Xiaolongnv (Jin Yong novels)
Culture Origin	19 th -century American frontier expansion; Based on real history and land conquest	Imagined martial arts world outside the official system; influenced by Confucian and Taoist thought
Core Values	Freedom, individual action. self-reliance	Loyalty, righteousness, emotional and moral responsibility

Female	Supportive, passive,	Independent, intelligent
Role	used to highlight male hero	

In general, cowboy culture tends more toward individual experience, while “chivalrous” culture places greater emphasis on self-reflection and ethical relationships. On the surface, both cowboys and chivalrous heroes pursue freedom of action and freedom from institutional constraints, but their underlying motivations actually point to different views of destiny and social structures within their respective cultural traditions, reflecting the differing cultural roots of the two countries. The cowboy’s freedom is “freedom from constraints”, often manifested as conquering nature and escaping civilisation, reflecting Western individualism in a frontier context; the knight-errant’s freedom is “taking responsibility”, a self-disciplined choice within complex human ethical relationships, following righteousness and loyalty. This “seemingly similar yet fundamentally different” structural disparity reflects the profound differences between Chinese and Western cultures in their concepts of freedom, justice, and the construction of social order.

III. The Mediatisation of Cultural Imagery: From the Paper World to Commodity Symbols

The construction of cultural imagery cannot rely solely on textual content. The enduring popularity of Western cowboys and Chinese martial arts heroes owes much to the development of communication media. Cowboys and martial arts heroes are not only active in traditional paper novels and films, but have also become commodity symbols and part of consumer culture in the minds of audiences. In the context of a highly globalised cultural society, cultural imagery in both Chinese and Western cultures is no longer merely the product of literary texts but is constantly being deconstructed and reconstructed through dissemination.

3.1 Print Media Transmission: Cultural Forging in the Textual Era

The construction of cultural imagery in the print media era relied more on the expressive power of the text itself. Jin Yong’s early works began as serialised columns in the *Ming Bao* and *United Daily News*, using a “daily update” format to attract readers, and over decades built a “more Chinese than China” martial arts world. Readers came to know Guo Jing, who “acts for the sake of the country and the people”, Yang Guo, whose “love and loyalty intertwine”, and Linghu Chong, who is “carefree and unconstrained”, through the text. They also internalized an “ideal personality for modern Chinese people” through the text, becoming timeless models in the hearts of readers. When *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* first appeared in newspapers, it sparked a “chasing updates” craze. In the 1960s and 1970s, Hong Kong society developed a reading habit of “reading Jin Yong after meals”, with martial arts imagery gradually embedding itself into public life and national spiritual imagination.

In the United States, the image of the Western cowboy was initially popularized through dime novels and newspaper serials. The small format, low cost, and portability of dime novels made them more accessible to readers, who could carry them around and read them at any time. At the time, authors re-imagined real historical figures as heroic characters in these stories, deifying them through words. However, these images were essentially the “American Dream” imagined by print media, the preconceived notions created by mainstream media at the time, and the initial prototype of the Western frontier hero. At this stage, cultural imagery had not yet been visualized, but the first round of shaping the “imagined community” had been completed through text. In the Western novels of the time, the image of the “lone hero” cowboy accumulated value on the pages: they were not real people, but “culturally constructed needs”.

Anderson noted in *Imagined Communities* that print capitalism, through the widespread circulation of fixed texts, constructed an “imagined consistency” within a nation (Anderson, 1983). Whether it is the “reading Jin Yong after dinner” culture formed by Jin Yong’s novels in Hong Kong and Macao, or the “pioneer hero” image constructed by dime novels in the United States, the role of print media is not only to disseminate stories but also to shape specific cultural values into a shared “national imagination”.

3.2 Online Dissemination: Film, Television, Games, and the Realization of an “Interactive Martial Arts World”

As a medium of popular culture, film visualizes the “tough guy” and “lone hero” traits of the cowboy image. *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* constructs a visual myth through extensive close-ups, minimal dialogue, rapid cuts, and images of the western desert, leaving a lasting impression. Similarly, the plot settings and dialogue in Jin Yong’s novels also interpret the cultural symbol of “chivalry”. For example, in *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*, Guo Jing embodies the four traditional moral categories of loyalty, righteousness, filial piety, and benevolence. Though not intelligent, he strictly adheres to rules, embodying the “greatest form of chivalry”. His ultimate choice to defend the borders, resist enemies, and protect his homeland is a modern interpretation of Confucianism’s teaching that “cultivate oneself, harmonise the family, govern the state, and bring peace to the world”. In this cinematic narrative, the images of cowboys and martial artists have deeply resonated with audiences.

In the internet age, the once-closed world of creative works and their presentation has been shattered and constantly re-imagined, with cultural imagery now participating in the “user-driven” process through interactive forms. Take virtual communities like “Wuxia World” as an example. The domestically produced 3A game *Black Myth: Wukong*, launched in 2024, became a global phenomenon, selling over 3 million copies on Steam within 24 hours of its release. Overseas players rushed to “catch up on Journey to the West” on social media. The game, based on Chinese traditional mythology, incorporates elements such as Shanxi ancient architecture and intangible cultural heritage music, showcasing a new model of cultural output and civilisational dialogue (People’s Daily, 2024). Similarly, Western culture has also

taken on new forms of media dissemination through games like the *Red Dead Redemption* series. Players immerse themselves visually in the experience and can choose the direction of their character's actions, making life-or-death decisions at critical moments. Here, the cowboy is no longer a "screen icon", this form of communication is no longer a single narrative but an emotional structure that can be experienced, achieving a leap from "watching" to "empathy". This "immersive cultural experience" is a manifestation of Henry Jenkins' concept of "participatory culture"—users are no longer passive recipients but actively participate in the reproduction of culture through role-playing, game choices, and content re-creation, becoming co-authors of cultural narratives (Jenkins, 2006).

3.3 Symbolic Communication: The Commodification of Cultural Imagery for Consumption

The third role of media lies in transforming cultural imagery into commodity symbols and introducing them into the consumer sphere. Beyond media forms like games and advertisements, Jin Yong's wuxia culture has gradually been transformed into concrete "symbolic commodities" in consumer society, entering public daily life and sparking a wave of "cultural emotional consumption". For example, *Perfect Diary* launched a lipstick series co-branded with *The Heaven Sword and Dragon Saber*, featuring the *Ming Sect Holy Fire Red* shade. This not only leveraged Zhang Wuji's passionate image to evoke emotional resonance among consumers but also conveyed values such as "unwavering spirit" and "fighting for love" through product packaging copy; Other popular items on Taobao include the "Nine Yang Scripture Notebook", "East Toxin West Poison Perfume" and martial arts sect-themed stationery and planners, which translate the original literary concepts of "cultivation" and "martial arts sects" into purchasable "lifestyle aesthetics". These commercialised cultural extensions reflect Baudrillard's concept of the "simulacra society": cultural imagery is repeatedly "decontextualised" and transformed into circulable labels, identities, and symbols, with their original meanings replaced. People consume not "chivalry" itself, but the feeling associated with "chivalry" (Baudrillard, 1983). In this process, traditional literary imagery undergoes a transformative leap from "spiritual symbol" to "brand identity". As Baudrillard notes, in a consumer society, "symbols replace the essence", and the essence of culture gradually yields to the emotions, identities, and labels it carries. The knight-errant in Jin Yong's novels is no longer a symbol of loyalty and righteousness but a commodified expression of "sentiment", "attitude", and "personality". This transformation process also reflects how culture is deconstructed, repackaged, and imbued with new consumption logic within modern market mechanisms. People constantly refer and interpret characters in their daily lives for more convenient and concise symbolic communication, adapting to the fast-paced trends of modern society. People are sparked with interest and want to quickly and precisely grasp the story behind a concept, thus ensuring the enduring appeal of cultural imagery. The underlying logic of this transformation process is that cultural imagery enters the market as an existing product, is recoded by "consumer behaviour" into various appealing symbols, and this cycle continues, with literature and commerce closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing.

IV. Parallel Evolution of Media Forms and Heroic Spiritual Connotations

The previous part has traced how cowboy and Xia images have traveled from print texts to film screens, then in terms of digital games and consumer symbols, unpacking how media shapes and disseminates these cultural icons is of vital importance. Yet this journey of dissemination can be hardly separate from the changing spirit of the heroes themselves. Across the same historical timeline, as media technologies and cultural contexts shifted, the core values and behavioral motivations of cowboys and Xia evolved in lockstep—two parallel lines moving through time, not strictly causal, but deeply synchronized, each reflecting the social mood and cultural needs of their era (Anderson, 1983). Superficially, cowboys and Xia appear strikingly similar: both exist outside formal institutions, both uphold a private sense of justice, and both carry an aura of freedom and independence. Yet beneath these overlapping appearances, their inner motivations and moral logics have always been fundamentally different, and this contrast has persisted and evolved alongside media and historical changes.

Table 2. Historical Evolution of Cowboy and Xia Images, Representative Works and Corresponding Media Stages

Historical Stage	Evolution of American Cowboy Image	Representative Works / Events	Evolution of Chinese Xia Image	Representative Works / Events	Corresponding Media Stage
19th Century: Prototype Period	Realistic labor image, pragmatic and rugged, not a mythical hero	Western Pioneering Movement; Dime Novels	Legal-external chivalry, emphasizing righteousness and revenge with flat characters	Ancient chivalric cases and folk tales	Print Media (Textual Forging)
1930s–1950s: Classical Hero Period	Lone hero defending justice, individualism, guardian of social order	High Noon (1952)	Formation of Jin Yong’s new-style martial arts: patriotism, loyalty, and mature ethics	Jin Yong’s The Legend of the Condor Heroes (1957–1959)	Visual Media (Classical Canonization)
1960s–1990s: Anti-hero / Deconstruction Period	Morally gray, good and evil mixed, complex humanity	The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (1966)	Rebellion against feudal ethics, pursuit of self-worth, individual awakening	Jin Yong’s The Smiling, Proud Wanderer (1967)	Visual Media (Deconstructive Transformation)
21st Century:	Nostalgic tragedy,	Red Dead	Cinematization,	Black Myth:	Internet / Games

Historical Stage	Evolution of American Cowboy Image	Representative Works / Events	Evolution of Chinese Xia Image	Representative Works / Events	Corresponding Media Stage
Globalized Reconstruction Period	gamification, cultural symbolization	Redemption 2 (2018)	youth-orientation, cross-cultural communication	Wukong (2024)	+ Symbolic Commodification

The shifts in heroic spirit across these periods cannot be separated from the broader historical contexts and differing national conditions that shaped them. In the 19th century, both cultural images remained closely tied to social reality. The American cowboy emerged from frontier expansion and real labor conditions, while early Xia figures drew on folk ideals of justice outside institutional power. Print media fixed these archetypes in public consciousness, laying the foundation for later mythologization (Anderson, 1983). Even at this early stage, the motivational divide was clear: the cowboy struggled for individual survival and personal freedom, while the Xia acted for folk justice and protection of the vulnerable.

From the 1930s to the 1950s, post-war reconstruction and rising mass media elevated both heroes to classical, idealized forms. The cowboy became a symbol of individual order and moral courage, standing alone to defend his beliefs. Meanwhile, Jin Yong's Xia embodied Confucian loyalty and a strong sense of national and social duty. As Li Zehou (1994) notes, Chinese chivalric figures carried ethical responsibilities rather than pure individualism. Their shared appearance as "unrestrained outsiders" concealed a deep divide: the cowboy's courage served self-determined justice, while the Xia's bravery served collective ethics and moral obligations.

Social unrest and ideological liberation from the 1960s to the 1990s triggered a widespread deconstruction of heroism. In the West, morally ambiguous anti-heroes reflected disillusionment with grand narratives. In Chinese culture, martial arts heroes began to challenge rigid conventions, emphasizing individual will and spiritual freedom. Even as both types of heroes became more complex and humanized, the motivational difference remained stable: the cowboy's rebellion aimed to break external restrictions for self, while the Xia's rebellion aimed to preserve inner integrity for others and for justice. Such layered characterization revealed deeper ideological complexity in both traditions (Ye, 2010).

Entering the 21st century, globalization, digital media, and consumer culture reconstructed these heroes once more. The cowboy evolved into a nostalgic, tragic symbol of a lost individualistic spirit, while Xia was reimagined for global audiences through games and cross-cultural media. Interactive platforms allowed users to participate in meaning-making rather than only receiving narratives (Jenkins, 2006),

and commodification turned heroic spirit into emotional symbols (Baudrillard, 1983). Even in their modern, globalized forms, the core motivational contrast endured: the cowboy still represented freedom from constraints, and the Xia still represented freedom with responsibility.

Throughout these transformations, media forms and heroic spirits evolved in parallel, not as cause and effect, but as mutual reflections of their times. Cowboys and Xia each carried the values, anxieties, and aspirations of their respective societies. Their seemingly similar images as free, institutionally independent heroes have long concealed a profound contrast: the cowboy is driven by individual will and personal choice, while the Xia is driven by ethical duty and relational morality. This consistent, cross-historical difference reveals how heroism is continuously rewritten by history, culture, and the shifting media landscape, while retaining the deepest cultural genes of each civilization.

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Notes

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