

The Other and the Tragic Subject in Chinese Martial Arts Fiction, Viewed Through Lacan's Schema L

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Abstract

This paper looks at the tragedy of Qiao Feng in Jin Yong's *The Demi-Gods and the Semi-Devils*. While it is common practice for Žižekian scholars to examine genre writing and popular culture with Lacanian theory, the martial arts genre has received little attention. In *Demi-Gods*, Qiao Feng experiences an 'identity crisis' at the peak of his career: rumour has it that though he was raised and trained in China, he was born a Khitan. Qiao Feng at first believes it is a just conspiracy, and henceforth is blind-sided by the imaginary relation between his ego and small others. He mis-recognises others' scheming as 'the Other of the Other,' while his supposedly deceased Khitan father occupies the corner of the Other in the schema L to orchestrate the manipulation game. However, what Qiao Feng is really under prey is the desire of the father, and of the two fatherlands, one Han-Chinese, one Khitan: his tragedy lies in the split of the national Other, in the impossibility of the ethical imperative *Your duty is to be loyal to your country*. And yet, it is exactly because of the emptiness in the ethical call that Qiao Feng can start to act as a subject, a subject that is by definition already always split. This paper thus interprets the actions of Jin Yong's hero according to Lacan's schema L, and also provides variations of the schema based on the twists and turns of this martial arts tragedy.

Keywords: Žižek; Psychoanalysis; Lacan; Jin Yong; martial arts genre

The Demi-Gods and the Semi-Devils (Jin Yong 1978) is set in the years of the Northern Song (960-1127 AD). During this tumultuous time the Chinese empire was under constant threat from the Liao kingdom, formed by the nomadic Khitan people, and the antagonism between the two powers had an impact on the martial arts society. A *xia*, or a chivalric gallant, has the duty of safeguarding the 'good', which includes the good of one's country and the well-being of its people. Esteemed martial arts schools such as Shaolin and Wudang at such a time necessarily see themselves as nationalist, and so does the Beggars' Guild, the ubiquity of whose members make it the most powerful of the guilds and schools.

Qiao Feng, in his prime at age thirty, is the present leader of the Beggars' Guild. He seems well respected by all sides for his superb martial arts skills and brilliant leadership, proven by several patriotic actions against the Northern nomads. But soon after his appearance in *Demi-Gods*, he faces a challenge: half of the guild is determined to dethrone him, for a reason that no one dares to reveal. Try as he may, Qiao Feng can only conclude that it is a conspiracy conjured up by his adversaries. In the martial arts world one can offend people without knowing, and fame and status easily invite envy and resentment. Despite the suspicion and uncertainty though, Qiao Feng is more than ready to confront the conspiracy against him: 'Go ahead and pull out your most scheming tricks. I Qiao Feng have never acted against my conscience in my whole life, so what do I have to fear of your plotting and framing?' (Jin Yong 1978, chap. 15).

The judge of the truth: the big Other

What Qiao Feng ultimately has faith in is the big Other. Though he may be suspect in others' eyes, he has faith that when facing the judgement of truth itself, and of right and wrong, he himself is righteous and has nothing to hide. He has always adhered to conduct of becoming a hero, and has always seen it as his duty to exemplify the principles of the Guild: to come to the aid of the weak, be loyal to the country, and help protect the Song Empire from its Khitan enemy. How could the guarantor of justice not

approve of him and be on his side? But is there really such a big Other that oversees everything and guarantees justice?

Sure enough, following one event after another, Qiao Feng's faith in the big Other is eventually shattered. Firstly, some hidden letters emerge, bringing to light a massacre that occurred thirty years prior. An assembly of Chinese martial arts masters had come to the border to launch an ambush upon a group of Khitan soldiers and fighters who, according to intelligence, were going to enter Han territory with malicious intentions. A Khitan group of men and women did show up and the Han camp had an advantageous start in attacking. But it soon became evident to the Han camp that this group of Khitans were not soldiers or trained practitioners, as they could hardly defend themselves in combat. The tip-off the Song masters received was obviously erroneous (later we find this to be part of an elaborate double-cross) and there was only one Khitan man in this group who could fight. He did his best to protect his people, including the woman and child who appeared to be his family. Even though his formidable combat skills outshone that of the Han group, he could not alone defeat them. At the end, too grieved to continue fighting after seeing the loss of his people and his wife, he leapt off a cliff. The only survivor of the Khitan camp was the infant, the child of the Khitan warrior.

Qiao Feng is that infant, now thirty years old and a hero of the battles against the Khitan. The very kung fu masters who taught him everything he knows were accomplices to the border massacre that took his real parents' lives. After realising that the Qiao couple who brought him up are his foster parents, Qiao Feng is at a loss:

If I were a Khitan, then wouldn't I be the most disloyal person by having killed several Khitan people, destroyed war plans of my country? And wouldn't I be the most disgraceful son, if my parents were murdered by Han people at the border and I looked up to the killers as my masters, mistaking them to be dear parental figures to me? My, Qiao Feng, what shame that you live as such a scandalous, disloyal person. And if Mr Qiao were not my real father, then should I not be Qiao Feng either? What's my family name? What name did my father give me? Alas, not only am I a disloyal citizen and shameful son, I'm also a person without a name. (Jin Yong 1978, chap. 18)

Qiao Feng, after thinking thus to himself, nevertheless feels more determined than ever: "But then, what if all of this is but the tricking and plotting of some evilest character? How could I Qiao Feng, a man of pride, let others ruin my life and meddle in my fate like this?" (idem, chap. 18).

Conspiracy theory: the Other of the Other

Qiao Feng becomes determined in his following actions not because he is more confident in the Other which should be on his side; quite the opposite, his resolution comes from the belief that someone or something is responsible not only for the malicious plotting and scheming, but also for the turn of his fate, for temporarily obscuring the big Other *qua* Justice.

He goes to visit the site of the massacre, hoping to find traces of the encounter that happened thirty years ago. As though the past is re-enacted, he finds a Song troop hunting down a group of Khitan civilians as prey. An elderly Khitan who has seen his fellow tribesmen killed and has been fatally wounded himself, rips open his shirt, howls to the sky, and dies. Underneath the ripped shirt is a wolf's head tattooed in blue ink, identical to the one on Qiao Feng's own chest. Qiao Feng's identity is thus revealed: the wolf's head is the symbol of one of the most distinguished families of Khitan, the Xiao clan, and all Xiao boys are tattooed with the mark at a young age.

Uncertainties and suspicions are cleared up: Qiao Feng's surname is not Qiao, but Xiao. He is not Han-Chinese but Khitan. The ambush that took his parents' lives was organised by a highly respected kung fu master known to everyone as Lead Brother, who is thus the direct cause of Xiao Feng's misfortune. There is no need for Xiao Feng, or Qiao Feng, to wonder, 'Why me?' There is now a villain and he is to blame for everything and must pay for Xiao Feng's parents' deaths. But who exactly is Lead Brother? The band of Han martial arts masters, who having witnessed the death of Xiao Feng's parents and tribesmen survived the border massacre, would certainly know who he is. But as Xiao Feng finds out the whereabouts of each of the elders involved in the border massacre, that person is mysteriously discovered dead. For Xiao Feng this only shows the extent of the conspiracy: Lead Brother is murdering the elders in order to

remain anonymous. As if to double Lead Brother's apparent villainy, there are always traces that link these murders to Xiao Feng. Some victims seem to have died from punches that resemble Xiao Feng's signature kung fu move; there are even witnesses who claim to have seen Xiao Feng fleeing from the crime scene.

Xiao Feng starts to refer to the still unknown Lead Brother as the Villain. This is a familiar logic of fantasy: whenever the rightful order is threatened, it is always due to the conspiracy of the evil Other. A conspiracy theory can work like this: firstly, one accepts that the big Other does actually exist and that there is a 'right order of things.' Secondly, one believes that there is someone to blame for the malfunctioning Other, for the world that has gone wrong. The Villain is the figure of the Other of the Other: *if it weren't for you, my symbolic universe would still be intact and whole; I would still be the hero, who has done nothing wrong in the eye of the symbolic Other*. What is behind the conspiracy theory is however a more menacing conspiracy: to have one think that someone is to blame for the schism of society, to overlook the reality that the society is never a whole, and is always split and inharmonious (Žižek 1994: 50).

The Villain and the Other: misrecognition

Xiao Feng's belief in the Villain, in the Other of the Other, is a classic example of misrecognition: an actual person, the Villain, is conflated with the role of the Other. It is a conflation of two different registers, the imaginary and the symbolic, exactly what Lacan warns analysts against when he sketches the schema L:

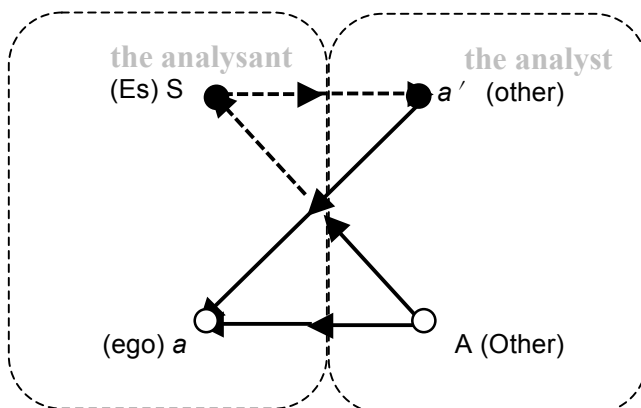


Fig. 1. Schema L: the analytic scene (adapted from Lacan 2006: 40)

If we see the schema L as Xiao Feng's grid of subjectivity, what Xiao Feng should pay more attention to is the S-A vector, but as the schema illustrates, the symbolic axis is half-way obscured by the axis between *a* (ego) and *a'* (other), the relation between the opposing couple who are "involved in reciprocal imaginary objectification" of a mirror stage relation (Lacan 2006: 41). Just like in an analysis, it would be a mistake to do psychoanalytic work based on this kind of two-person relationship, and Xiao Feng's first wrong move is to focus on this relation only, thereby allowing the antagonism, competitiveness, and envy (the drama that is characteristic of the mirror stage) to consume his time and energy.

Lacan (1993 [1955-1956]) uses the metaphor of card games to explicate the difference between the imaginary and symbolic relations. He likens the two-person scenario to the mind game between two card players: each tries to guess the opponent's hand (by reading certain body movements such as a facial tic or the caressing of a wedding ring), in order to gain an advantage, and this is what Xiao Feng is mainly doing with his opponent, the Villain: Lead Brother. However, Lacan suggests that what can better describe the analytic dual is a game of bridge, where there are four players involved. Firstly, while the analysand does see himself in the ego (*moi*), his subjectivity also lies somewhere else, in the position of S, as indicated in the schema L. This is the 'him' that he himself does not know of (or the unconscious part of himself). S is capitalised, indicating its unconscious status just like that of A, the Other. As to the analyst, she also has an ego, comprised of her personality and the values that inform her judgement. However, she does not play her role alone and has another partner, the dummy, which is a hand that the French call *le mort*, the death. The analyst "must be dead enough not to be caught up in the imaginary relation," (Lacan 1993 [1955-1956]: 162) so as to "bring out the fourth player", the subjectivity (S) in the analysand (Lacan 2006: 492).

Xiao Feng, being in the position of the analysand, should envision that beyond the imaginary relationship between his ego (*a*) and the Villain's ego (*a'*), his unconscious subjectivity (S) is also at stake. His opponent, like the analyst, plays not just one hand but two hands, by enlisting the hand of the dummy which is allocated in the corner of A

(big Other). However, Xiao Feng spends most of his time and energy second-guessing the Villain, playing against him on the level of the specular relation, of the mirror stage. Before the final twist is revealed, Xiao Feng does indeed have a growing uneasiness whenever he sees his own image in the mirror. At one point, he briefly sees someone who looks just like him. His look-alike is Ah Zhu in disguise. Ah Zhu later becomes Xiao Feng's lover, but at that time she is only known to Xiao Feng as the house maid of Murong Fu, the other major character in the novel. Ah Zhu is an expert in putting on disguises and at the time is attempting to rescue some trapped Beggars' Guild members by pretending to be Xiao Feng without his knowing.

As the story unfolds, we find that Xiao Feng's suspicion about there being a criminal double who is framing him for murders is not unfounded. There is another Villain who has been the true mastermind, staging the murders of those who know Lead Brother's identity, as well as manipulating Xiao Feng's hostility against Lead Brother. This Villain behind the Villian is no other than Xiao Feng's supposedly dead father. Xiao Feng's father Xiao Yuanshan has been playing dead. He had jumped off the cliff, but due to luck and his superhuman kung fu, he didn't die, and later returned to the precarious martial arts world.

Xiao Yuanshan has been following Xiao Feng around and framing his son for the murders, doing so easily thanks to their close resemblance in appearance. But the reason that Xiao Yuanshan, the real Villain, can manipulate Xiao Feng is not so much that he resembles his son physically, but that he evokes the symbolic register by dint of being the father: the position of A is the position of the Name-of-the-Father (Lacan 2006: 462)¹. The subjectivity of being a son, is what really triggers Xiao Feng's guilt and revengeful desire; it is what renders him vulnerable in the imaginary set-up between his ego and the alter ego, the latter presumed by him to be Lead Brother.

The father, the Other, and the superego

On one level, Xiao Feng's error is to stake too much on the imaginary relationship, directing his cunning towards Lead Brother who is in the position of the small other. Devoting his effort on the imaginary axis only, he overlooks the actual conspirator of the

'conspiracy' against him, his father Xiao Yuanshan, who stands in the place of the Other:

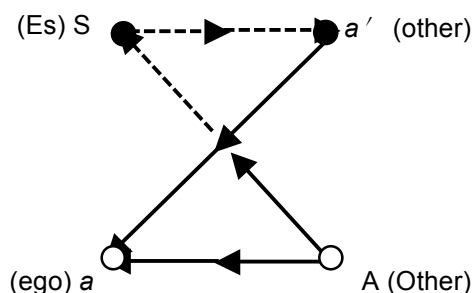


Fig. 1.a. Schema L

Being at the vantage point of A, Xiao Yuanshan is able to manipulate the players on the imaginary register, Xiao Feng and Lead Brother, to his own use. Xiao Yuanshan himself plays two parts: first as a father who employs the specular, hence the imaginary advantage of resembling the son, and second as the Other Villain who is able to be A in the schema L. This is ultimately because there is a non-coincidence between the actual father as the person, and the symbolic father as the paternal metaphor. “[T]he symbolic father is a metaphor, a metaphoric substitute, a sublation [*Aufhebung*] of the real [actual, physical] father in its Name which is ‘more father than father himself’, hence the term: ‘the Name-of-the-Father’ that Lacan uses almost synonymously for ‘paternal metaphor’ (Žižek 2002: 134). As a corollary of being the symbolic figure, Xiao Yuanshan knows well what the son wants and desires as the subject, and he exploits the unconscious relation between S (Xiao Feng’s subjectivity) and A (the role of the Other that the father plays).

What exactly does it mean when we say Xiao Yuanshan knows well the desire of our protagonist? First of all, paternal demands teach the subject his first lessons about social values and cultural idioms. Žižek (1996: 167) explains it thus: “what I desire is predetermined and at the Other Place: my desire is ‘mediated’ by the symbolic network of the cultural tradition”. Xiao Feng’s desire is mediated by what his father and his fatherland demand of him. Indeed the filial responsibility (*xiao*) and loyalty (*zhong*) are two virtues highly regarded in Chinese tradition and in the martial arts genre.

The demands of filial responsibility and loyalty are symbolic demands because they do not change when one’s father is deceased, or when one’s nation no longer

exists. In Xiao Feng's case, the symbolic demands do not change even when his father is the Villain, even when previously Xiao Feng had believed it to be his utmost duty to overthrow the Liao Empire, and kill as many 'Khitan dogs' as possible. Xiao Yuanshan knows that as a dutiful son Xiao Feng will still have to revere the father and respect his wishes. Similarly, Xiao Feng knows the father knows too, even when the father's wishes or desires involve sabotaging plans of the Song troop, and killing Song masters. These masters include Xiao Feng's own teacher, without whom he would not have become the leader of the Beggars' Guild, and the Shaolin *shifu* who gave Xiao Feng the mission of organising the campaign against the Khitan. Which father should Xiao Feng (or Qiao Feng) listen to? Whose demand should he adhere to, since fulfilling one father's wish would mean failing the other's? We will return to this ethical dilemma later.

The price of Xiao Feng's misrecognition of the imaginary for the symbolic is a number of innocent lives, including his beloved Ah Zhu's, sacrificed. But there is another kind of misrecognition at work here for which he pays a bigger price: Xiao Feng does not see the dimension of the real in the symbolic relation between him and his father. A son will always presume his father to be the best, the most heroic *xia*. When Xiao Yuanshan has finally come back to life, he turns out to be the opposite of the ideal father: he is the Villain who uses his own son as the vehicle of vengeance on all those who have been part of the border ambush. Yet he is still the father whose symbolic demands – to be a good son and remain loyal to the Khitan clan – will remain unconditionally binding. We can even say that the function of the symbolic father and the imaginary father is to cover up the fact that the father is also an obscene creature, withholding unspeakable desire, and Xiao Yuanshan is exactly this super-egoic father of the real who plays his own son like a fool. While the symbolic father, according to Žižek (2002: 134), is the sublation of the man who is the father, there is something left un-sublated: 'the 'non-sublated' part of the father' is the father of the real, who 'appears as the obscene, cruel and oddly impotent agency of the superego'. The 'oddly impotent' aspect of the real father in Žižek's arguments here is then to be understood as his failure to fulfil the paternal task of setting correct and moral examples. A super-egoic master even actively subverts the paternal demand by transgressions that involve cruelty and obscenity. All of Xiao Yuanshan's ruthless killings and manipulation of Xiao

Feng's fate are based on one secret desire, unknown to his son: the desire to avenge his ill fate on everyone, Khitan or not, Han or not.

The impact that the border ambush has on Xiao Yuanshan is just as grave as his son Xiao Feng's loss of faith in an Other that should be knowing and just. Liao and Song at the time enjoyed a relatively peaceful relationship. Xiao Yuanshan was a great favourite of the dowager Xiao of the Liao Empire, and was made a high-rank general because of his unparalleled combat skills, which he learned from his Han *shifu* at a young age. With a successful career and a new-born son, Xiao Yuanshan had planned a trip to the Song China to pay his *shifu* his gratitude when the ambush occurred. One moment he was at the top of the world the next moment he had fallen to the bottom. The Other was no longer the guarantor of justice and karma. Worse, unlike Xiao Feng, Xiao Yuanshan could not even conjure up an evil Other of the Other to provide justification for his ill fate; there is no plausible explanation whatsoever for the attack and consequential loss of his family members. No one is to blame, and yet the world is against him, so the target of his revenge becomes the whole world.

What Xiao Yuanshan is not aware of, however, is that while he toys with other people's lives, his own life is the target of another 'conspiracy'. His seemingly unpredictable misfortunes have a direct cause: it is Murong Bo who designed and set up the whole border ambush. Murong Bo was the one who created the false intelligence about a Khitan assault that led Lead Brother to organise the ambush. And why is Murong Bo doing this? This has to do with another 'Name-of-the-Father' – Murong is the surname of the royal family of the Yan Kingdom during the Sixteen Kingdoms period (304-439 AD). The Kingdom was built by the Xianbei clan of Hunnish descent, and was extinguished long ago during the wars between several tribes and kingdoms. Ever since, every Murong member has the demand laid upon them of being a filial child, and the only way to meet this demand is to rebuild the fatherland and bring back the glory of the Yan Kingdom. What we have here is a chain of superegos. Xiao Feng blames the (illusion of) the Other of the Other for his turn of fate, and it turns out to be his father, Xiao Yuanshan, who plays the super-egoic Other. When Xiao Yuanshan orchestrates revenges and killings on others by being in the Other's seat, he does not know he is but a pawn in Murong Bo's scheme. As for Murong Bo himself, he cannot shun the demand

of the Name-of-the-Father and not understand that he is only there to meet the desire of his forefathers.

Whenever one conjures up a conspiracy theory, the fantasy of the Other of the Other arises. And when there is one Other of the Other, there will be yet another Other of the Other behind the previous one, and it goes on and on. But what initiates the string of superegos, or the Others of the Others in the first place is the belief in a transcendent agency. Before finding out about all these superego figures (Lead Brother, Xiao Yuanshan and Murong Bo) Xiao Feng has already been plagued by guilt: 'Alas, not only am I a disloyal citizen and shameful son, I'm also a person without a name' (Jin Yong 1978, chap. 18). And 'we are guilty', Žižek argues, 'in so far as we accept that the big Other exists in the guise of a transcendent agency which plays a perverse game of cat and mouse, knowing well what our duty is but concealing it from us' (1996: 171).

'Knowing well what our duty is' means there is always symbolic demand; 'concealing it from us', on the other hand, means the demand can never be met. Demands, by definition, cannot be fulfilled. That is why ultimately, the demand of the Other is the desire of the Other: *you tell me this, but what exactly do you want me to do?* Things are much easier when one presumes there is 'an external agent with whom a relationship of exchange, sacrifice, 'haggling', is possible' (Žižek 1996: 171). By doing so, the moral law is 'reduced to the level of 'representation', 'becomes an object that stands opposite ourselves', and ceases to be 'the absolute Other' (idem: 171). The Other is demanding, but there is no way to confirm what its demands really are, while one is still obligated to do the right thing. Thus, does the Other exist, or not? It does not exist, because it does not provide answers; but at the same time it also does exist, otherwise the subject would not ever feel pressed by its demands. One way to look at this antimony is to consider the differences between '*il n'y a pas...* [there is not]' and '*n'existe pas* [doesn't exist]' that Žižek discusses in his *Less Than Nothing*:

We should also not confuse the series of Lacan's '*il n'y a pas...*' (*de l'Autre*) with the series of '*n'existe pas*': '*n'existe pas*' denies the full symbolic existence of the negated object . . . , while '*il n'y a pas*' is more radical, it denies the very pre-essential nomadic being of specters and other pre-ontological entities. In short, *la*

Femme n'existe pas, mais il y a des femmes [the Woman does not exist, but there are women]. (2012: 798)

Therefore, 'God does not exist, but 'there are gods' who haunt us; the unconscious does not exist as a full ontological entity, . . . but it insists in haunting us' (798). That is to say, while the symbolic Other does not exist as an entity (its real Demand also does not exist, is empty), its demands and desires nevertheless haunt us. The '*il n'y a pas*' in 'there is no Other of the Other' would mean a more radical negation of its existence. It is in the same category as 'there is no sexual relation'. There is no Other of the Other, no superego, no transcendent agency that guarantees the truth. And there is certainly no conspirator behind the evil scheme of Heaven when things go wrong; at the same time, it does not mean that a conspirator cannot play the role of a superego, or of a mastermind of the Other of the Other – the subject can take up any position of the four corners in the schema L, as we have seen several times thus far.

Retribution, for whom?

In order to 'gentrify' or 'soften' the utter Otherness of the Law (Žižek 1996: 171), one comes up with external agencies to represent the moral law. If the subject can play the Other of the Other, the super-egoic Other like Xiao Yuanshan or Murong Bo, then she can certainly take up the role of the moral agency: one is but the flipside of the other. The kung fu masters are exactly such subjects, as they do presume to be representatives of the big Other, upholding justice. This explains the theme and structure of retribution in martial arts fiction, the repetitive cycle of revenge, payback time, and the debt redeemable only by blood, played out by dint of the conflation of the symbolic and the imaginary.

The kung fu masters act in the name of justice, considering themselves the instrument of the big Other, carrying out laws and punishments. Xiao Feng is no exception. When he was the leader of the Beggars' Guild and his reputation was still intact, he thought it was right to protect the Song civilians from the 'barbaric' Khitan tribe at all cost, and the lives of Khitan civilians could be dispensed without any ethical conflict. After his turn of fate, avenging his parents is all he could think of, because

revenge means getting things even and balancing the accounts: *you took my father's life, so you should pay back with your life or the life of your beloved; I have the right to collect the debt from you*. Kung fu masters are like self-appointed bookkeepers as well as executioners of the big Other. The actions they take, no matter how cruel and ruthless, are to ensure the balance of universal karma, guaranteeing that good deeds are rewarded, bad deeds reprimanded, and all adhere to the cycle. While the Buddhist notion of karma may incite hope for a better afterlife, martial arts masters are more interested in speeding things up, preferring to give the verdict in the present life².

What will it be like when it is this subject who takes the seat in corner A of the schema L? To explain this, Lacan (2006: 250) switches from the analogy of a game of bridge to the metaphor of theatre, and refers to the spot of A as the spectator's box, in which the subject has his seat. The kind of subject who takes the seat in the spectator's box, 'invisible from the stage', is the obsessive subject. But, paradoxically, it is by being 'merely the spectator' (idem: 250), seemingly 'placed on the sidelines' (Fink 2004: 27), that 'the very possibility of the game and pleasure' is constituted for him (Lacan qtd. in Fink 2004: 28). It is a double-play, or a double-dealing, for the obsessive, on both the symbolic and the imaginary levels. On the one hand, being in the position of the Other, the subject is an indifferent onlooker, who is again playing dead. He is 'dead in a sense', and keeps himself 'out of the line of fire' (Fink 2004: 27). On the other hand, he is not only involved but also enjoys the 'circus games between the two others' (Lacan 2006: 526), the heated actions of the firing line that takes place on the imaginary axis. In effect, this spectacle of a circus game is arranged by the obsessive himself for the big Other to see, even though he himself is also assuming this role. He 'puts on a show', 'addresses his ambiguous homage towards the box in which he himself has his seat, that of the master who cannot be seen [*se voir*]' (idem: 250) – or who cannot see himself, and thus cannot see his own desire.

Lively game, mortified desire

For a subject who cannot see himself, Bruce Fink adapts the four-corner schema into a three-legged one:

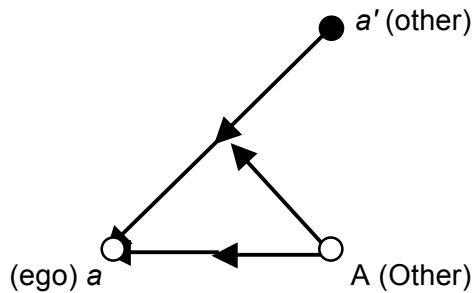


Fig. 2. Three-cornered Schema L (adapted from Fink 2004: 27)

On the one hand, Xiao Feng is blindsided by the retributive actions and consequently falls prey to the super-egoic fathers Xiao Yuanshan and, beyond him, Murong Bo. On the other hand, the engagement with imaginary second-guessing with the opponents are there to keep Xiao Feng busy, so that he does not have to face his own desire, or the fact that his desire is already made mortified, due to the inconsistency of the Other itself.

The best arena to illustrate the intense but unnecessary imaginary game is the bloodbath in Juxian Mansion (Jin Yong 1978, chap. 19). Xiao Feng accidentally causes Ah Zhu a serious injury, and thinking himself partially responsible for Ah Zhu's injury he ventures to go to Juxian Mansion to seek medical help from the well-known Doctor Xue, nicknamed 'Foe of Death God', who at the time is organising the 'heroes' forum' with other eminent martial arts figures at the Mansion. The forum's purpose is to get together as many kung fu good fellows as they can, converse over Rivers and Lakes affairs, and most importantly, form a united line against Xiao Feng's Khitan malevolence (by this time almost everyone has heard of the murders that Xiao Feng supposedly committed). It is needless to narrate the ruthless battling between Xiao Feng and the rest of the heroes at the forum. There can only be a possible outcome: many will die, including Xiao Feng, who would have been killed at the final stage of the chaotic fight were it not for the rescue from his father.

In *Demi-Gods* the division of Good/Evil, a fundamental set-up for martial arts genre and other genre writings, is transformed into the 'division of Hu/Han' ('Hu' refers to all foreigners and has the connotation of being uncivilised), as the title of the novel's

Chapter 19 says. The Han-Chinese gallants and adepts on one side, Xiao Feng the Khitan barbarian on the other, each presumes justice to be on its side, both ending up stuck in the imaginary dramas: when both presume the licence to kill, it is difficult to tell which is the good or the evil, since one is but the alter ego of the other. For Xiao Feng's subjectivity, the spectacle of bloodshed in the Mansion 'consists in showing that [the subject] is invulnerable'; for it is 'important to show how far the other – the small ego, who is merely his alter ego, the double of himself – can go' (Lacan qtd. in Fink 2004: 28). Juxian Mansion is no other than an arena of egos, vicissitudes of Xiao Feng's ego. The bursting out of his indignation, pride, and 'barbaric' impulse resembles the mechanism of resistances and defensive moves that one displays when facing the analyst, or any other who is imputed to be one's alter ego or double³. In Juxian Mansion, Qiao Feng is trapped in his assumptions about who he is and what he is like in the eye of the others. What he struggles to gain is in no different to what his opponents are aiming for: it is all about winning and losing, about getting even, showing off one's martial arts skills, and dealing with biases and prejudices.

For Qiao Feng there is a sole purpose to the imaginary interaction he partakes in with Lead Brother, his father, or anybody who has done him wrong: 'showing that he is invulnerable', as Lacan says. The need to appear invulnerable and invincible springs from the need to hide the fact that he is, in truth, vulnerable. He invests in the activities developing upon the imaginary relation of *a-a'*, while knowing only too well that they will cost him dearly. What other outcome does he expect upon meeting hundreds of rivals in Juxian Mansion? 'Didn't I make a fool of myself in front of everybody by my stubborn decision of risking myself for Ah Zhu?' he wonders to himself (Jin Yong 1978, chap. 19). Even so, he cannot do otherwise, because by engaging himself in the lively game, Qiao Feng is at the same time staying out of the firing line, avoiding confronting where his tragedy really lies.

Lacan calls this subject an obsessive: an obsessive is 'an actor who plays his role and assures a certain number of acts as if he were dead' (qtd. in Fink 2004: 28). In view of the structure of the obsessive subjectivity, Qiao Feng/Xiao Feng is indeed already dead. The subject 'has, in some sense, killed in advance the desire in himself; he has, so to speak, mortified it' (Lacan qtd. in Fink 2004: 28). And the purpose of taking up the

seat of the Other and faking death is only to stay invisible, according to Fink. It is to hide the fourth player further away, or even to make it disappear, to the extent of collapsing into the place of A (Fink 2004: 27-28; see figure 2).

The bloodshed in Juxian Mansion on the other hand also confirms Xiao Feng's status as a tragic hero: 'it is an honour to be guilty', says Hegel (Zupančič 2000: 173). Xiao Feng can no longer claim he is innocent and guilt-free, that all the wrong doings are done by others, or the Others of the Other, namely his father and Murong Bo. Xiao Feng himself, a stubborn and impulsive barbarian, is to blame for the loss of Han lives that he has vowed to protect but ended up killing at the Mansion battle. But what makes him a tragic hero is more than his untamed temperament or personality – that will be too imaginary and lack the dimension of the real.

The national Thing

The voice of conscience and the sensation of an all-seeing gaze of the Other, as we have discussed, are but representations of a 'false transcendence', of the Other of the Other or the superego underside of the Other. Their function is to screen us from what we really cannot cope with, the 'true transcendence' of the pure Law and the 'Otherness of the Imperative' (Žižek 1996 171). Under the imaginary relation, 'under the neighbour as my semblable, my mirror image, there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, a Thing that cannot be 'gentrified'' (Žižek 2005: 320). 'In order to render our co-existence with the Thing minimally bearable, the symbolic order *qua* Third . . . has to intervene' (idem: 321). Even someone like Qiao Feng/Xiao Feng, who is unsure of his surname and who has failed both demands of loyalty and filial responsibility, will still have no choice but to obey the pure Law: no matter who he is and what has happened to him, he still just has to do his duty as a *xia*. The emptiness of this ethical call is far more terrifying than the perverse game of cat and mouse that the external agencies play with the subjects. An Other that is characterised or imaginised into an obscene godly creature is still the better of the two evils. Life will still be easier when one can blame everything on the capricious 'Ruler of Heaven' (*Laotianye*), a Chinese by-name for such an Other, accuse it of 'knowing well what our duty is but

concealing it from us' (Žižek 1996: 171), and lament that 'Fate plays on us all' (*zaohua-nongren*), as the Chinese saying goes.

In his Seminar III (1993 [1955-1956]), Lacan draws the schema L to explain the dialectic between the analyst and the analysand. The psychoanalytic scene is first and foremost an ethical scene. By playing the dummy, stepping into the seat of the Other, what the analyst does is not to provide a signifier that can hang things together for the patient and in so doing to assure the patient that everything will be fine. What the analyst does instead is to speak from the point of a crossed-out Other, a point that gives no guarantee. The analyst 'authorizes himself in the sense of being fully responsible for what he refers to as his duty, without any guarantee from the big Other' (Žižek 1996: 169-70). This 'without any guarantee' is the common ground for all ethical acts that follow the categorical imperative of *Do your duty!*. While the injunction is seemingly issued from the Other in its seat of the theatre box, the imperative is enigmatic: 'Do your duty!': 'Your duty is to do your duty': 'Your duty is... (silence)'. It is a saying that is half-said (*mi-dire*), an utterance emptily enunciated, for its importance is in the act of saying it rather than the content (which can thus be tautological or contradictory). It is then up to the subject 'to translate this injunction into a determinate moral obligation, and left with uncertainty; the subject never knows if he has "got it right"' (idem: 169).

The ethical Thing in martial arts fiction, following Žižek's arguments above, can be phrased as 'Do your duty as a hero or *xia*'. How does one achieve that? That is what Jin Yong never stops asking in his novels. While Jin Yong searches for answers, and indeed sometimes provides them, they can only be half-answered, half-said. In *Demi-Gods*, Qiao Feng/Xiao Feng is primarily portrayed as a charismatic martial arts adept who bows to no one and fears no adversary. But at the same time he ranks *zhong* or national loyalty (to the Han-Song Empire) above all values and is deemed a hero by his active devotion to the nation⁴. However, as we have been discussing, once the suspicion of his non-Han identity is raised, the duties and values that he adheres to become ambiguous and less than absolute. And the injunction from the Other *qua* Third, the symbolic tenet *Be loyal to your country!* itself turns into the Other *qua* Thing: the ethical Thing in *Demi-Gods* is the national Thing.

As previously mentioned, the opposition between Good and Evil, a common theme in the martial arts genre, is transformed into that between Hu (all foreigners) and Han-Chinese people in *Demi-Gods*. For Qiao Feng/Xiao Feng, the inconsistency of the big Other firstly denotes the impotence of the Other in guaranteeing the truth and justice. Secondly, the inconsistency is a matter of a constitutive split within the Other, and that split is what allows for the conflict between the loyalties towards Han and Liao Empires, between the two fatherlands.

Qiao/Xiao Feng's dilemma, the split subject's freedom

Fink's modified version of the schema L is a three-cornered diagram with S 'truncated' (see Figure 2 above). As the obsessive subject, Qiao/Xiao Feng endeavours to stay out of the line of fire, the result of which is that he ceases to exist. Nonetheless, it is not so much that Qiao/Xiao Feng stops existing when he tucks his being away, as that Qiao/Xiao Feng only *starts to really exist* as a subject when he finds out God is dead, the Other doesn't exist. For Lacan, subjectivity emerges only when he is in the act of asking questions:

the question of the subject's existence arises for him, not in the kind of anxiety it provokes at the level of the ego, . . . but as an articulated question – 'What am I there?' – about his sex and his contingency in being: namely, that on the one hand he is a man or a woman, and on the other hand he might not be, the two conjugating their mystery and knotting it in symbols of procreation and death.
(Lacan 2006: 459)

Xiao Yuanshan's re-appearance brings Qiao Feng the deadly sign that mortifies his desire: he is no longer just Qiao Feng, but Qiao/Xiao Feng. The question of existence of Qiao/Xiao Feng is not 'Am I woman or man?' Rather the question is, 'Am I a Khitan or Han?' The real reason behind the futile combats and unnecessary sacrifices of lives, is Qiao/Xiao Feng's powerlessness when facing 'the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness', the national Thing 'that cannot be 'gentrified'' (Žižek 2005: 320) and

remains forever Other, and crossed out: $\%$. The realisation of the radical Otherness signals the emergence of true subjectivity: \exists the barred S is the algorithm for the subject in Lacanian theory. From Lacan's schema L, to Jin Yong's schema L, only two extra strokes are needed. S becomes \exists , and A becomes $\%$. The crossed out subject corresponds to the barred Other.

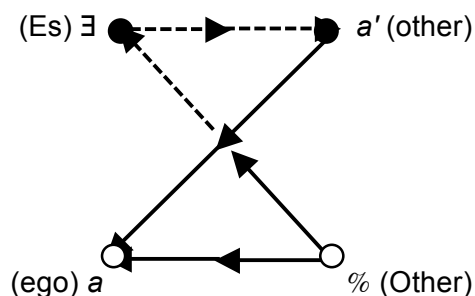


Fig. 3. Schema L with the split S, and split A

The unfathomableness of the radical Other is indeed terrifying; however, its abyssal emptiness is also what makes an answer possible: the cruel forced choice of 'Han or Khitan' at the same time promises 'absolute freedom, autonomy and responsibility' (Žižek 2005: 309). As long as one acts, one is responsible, and dutiful, as the subject.

And then Qiao/Xiao Feng acts by ending his life when forced to make a choice between the two loyalties to his two fatherlands when the Liao army is battling with the Song people. Is his death a sacrifice for nothing? Or is it an imaginary trade-off for a few years' peace between the two empires? Does it achieve anything if years later the Liao will still send troops to invade the Song? If it is a death for nothing, can we still see him as a hero? It is $\%$ that allows us to ask questions regarding the subject Qiao/Xiao Feng. And perhaps we are now a little more ready to answer these questions after having reviewed the vicissitudes of Lacan's big Other.

Notes

¹ Lacan (2006: 462) draws out the schema R as a spin-off of the schema L with a couple of extra dimensions, one of them being the trio of I (ego ideal), M (mother) and P (*père*; name-of-the-Father) of Ideal Ego-Mother-Father.

² The Sadean subject is also one that performs the role of the big Other. The Sadean subject sees it as his duty to supervise the process of Nature and act on its behalf. As far as he is concerned, the more death and destruction the better, as this gives birth to the new. This is how the Sadean subject believes Nature functions.

³ Portrayal of a 'barbaric' tribe is a common trope in the martial arts fiction, a genre that is centred upon the master signifier of 'Chineseness'. The 'barbaric' qualities of a non-Han tribe include robustness, genuineness, dislike of lies, and therefore impulsiveness. Such an antagonism between the central civilisation and other 'tribal' people is a regular set-up of other genre writings like the westerns or sci-fis.

⁴ In *The Giant Eagle and Its Companion*, one of the half-said answers to the ethical call is Guo Jing's motto, 'To be a grand *xia* is to put one's country and people first (*weiguo-weimin, xia zhi da zhe*)' (Jin Yong 1976, chap. 21 and 22:). Guo Jing is at the position of leading the Han people to withstand the invasion from the Mongolians. For the national cause he is willing to sacrifice his family life, or even lives of his children.

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