Harry Potter, *wuxia* and the transcultural flow of fantasy texts in Taiwan

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**ABSTRACT** The global success of the Harry Potter and The Lord of the Rings franchises has become an entry point for the flow of Western fantasy texts into Taiwan, a society that, over many decades, has been a stronghold for traditional Chinese wuxia texts. While Western concepts, themes and ‘worlds’, are coming to Taiwan, wuxia, defined as fantasy in this essay, in return is making an inroad into Western popular culture. By considering local traditions, reception and consumption habits, this essay analyses the market potential for international fantasy on the island, and provides a theoretical background for understanding the dynamics of this genre in one particular cultural location.

**KEYWORDS:** Fantasy, transcultural flow, *wuxia*, Harry Potter, market, Taiwan, fandom

**Introduction**

The last century has seen a ‘fearful, often pathological search for new explanations in an increasingly incomprehensible world’ (Hetmann 1984: 39). It has been a time for finding new mythologies, rather than discarding them. Popular culture is undeniably a space, where new myths are being created; and some of these myths are at the centre of this paper.

Two British fantasy epics have dominated entertainment markets at the start of the new millennium. One tale, from the middle of the 20th century, was written against the backdrop of a world going through the mayhem of the Second World War. The other, just a bit over a decade old, celebrates its advent in an era full of buzzwords, such as globalization and post-modernism. But it is also the leading fantastic story in an epoch when First World societies pass united through eco-disasters, economic crises and a new violent trauma, the fear of international terrorism. Quasi-seamless global media coverage defies any desire to avoid using stereotypes, but modern media technology has rendered an American disaster, the terrorist attacks on September 11, a shared tragedy and horror of our time. The works in question are J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955) and J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* (1997–2007). Both their stories have been discussed as emotional resonance boards for Western audiences following the terrorist threats (Rehling 2009a). The scope of this cannot be ignored, especially since a great deal of the emotional momentum following the horrifying attacks was channelled into media productions. Joanna Bourke (2005: 391) writes:

> Fear has been one of the most significant driving forces in history, encouraging individuals to reflect more deeply and prompting them to action. Indeed, much of the human urge to creativity depends upon fear …

Yet, fear is not the only zeitgeist of the early twenty-first century, but it stands in contrast to another notion that is like a bookmark of the consumer world we are living in: the wish for entertainment and leisure. What could be more predestined to fulfil this desire than a genre
that is supposed to be escapist in nature, but which just as well can be understood as a cradle for imagination and originality? Cultural production is often seen as humanity’s buffer against the terror of threatened corporeality and imminent mortality (Bourke 2005: 389). While 9/11 may have had a lesser impact on Taiwan, the society here is no stranger to feelings of fear and insecurity, considering the natural and health disasters, earthquakes, typhoons, SARS or bird flu, and the political and economic turmoils that have rattled the island over the past decade.

Rowling’s and Tolkien’s epics belong to the fantasy genre and have often been compared. They both fall under the term ‘heroic fantasy’ (Beatty 2006), but Tolkien is generally understood as the founding father of ‘high fantasy’. Rowling’s tale, on the other hand, set in a contemporary but magical Britain, has strong links to other, non-fantastic genres, such as the classic bildungsroman or school narratives (Steege 2002), two among several ‘un-fantastic’ contexts in which the books are widely discussed. The Lord of the Rings celebrated a remarkable comeback at the same time as Rowling’s books were taking the world by storm. The first volume in the series, Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone, was published in 1997. Thus far, the books have been translated into 67 languages and, as of 2008, have sold over 400 million copies worldwide (Dammann 2008). Both the first and second instalment reached Taiwan in the year 2000 (June and December), three years after the first edition in Britain. The third and fourth volumes followed much faster and were published in June and July 2001 (Lai and Lu 2005: 48–9), mainly in the wake of the first long-awaited movie of the series. In 2007, Taiwan’s Crown Culture Corp shipped 700,000 copies of the seventh and final instalment to book stores in Taiwan and Hong Kong, a figure that exceeded the company’s total print run of 680,000 for the sixth Harry Potter book in 2005 (AAP 2007).

There are certain factors that have influenced the recent international accomplishments of these two authors: (1) the making of immensely successful movie adaptations; (2) powerful and aggressive marketing machines that sell them and their custom of branding and franchising popular stories; (3) new media, transmedia and transcultural reading and production routines; and (4) the global hype surrounding theses stories; in Harry Potter’s case, a unique and unprecedented phenomenon. While Tolkien’s work, an exceptional and influential epic at its time, has had decades to develop a high standing among scholars and fans, Harry Potter achieved a similar status in just a few years. Yet, both stories have arrived at their current position on very different roads, while embodying different values, messages, historical contexts, themes and biographies. Some people say that Harry Potter has been elevated to the level of Tolkien’s work; others argue that Tolkien’s was lowered accordingly. It is most evident that the discourse about Tolkien has changed. Authority and knowledge bases surrounding the celebrated classic have strongly moved into (online) fan communities, a move which coincides with a new self-definition or ‘outing’ of media scholars as fans, who claim expertise over literary texts as much as any other media phenomenon. Thus, it has become customary in the press and among fans to—sometimes fiercely—compare and mention both narratives alongside each other.

In particular, high fantasy literature makes for very popular reading in the West, and the cultural or linguistic complexity and depth of some works have long since found academic acclaim beyond the initial Tolkien-craze. Fantasy literature at its best redefines and redesigns cultures, beliefs, even languages, while at the same time establishing an air of historicity that is only superficially at odds with contemporary civilizations. It therefore is quite reputable to hold university courses and conferences on the genre in the West. In Taiwan, this is relatively new; so far two fantasy conferences have been held since 2007.¹ The topic-range at these events shows that the term ‘fantasy’ among the academia is still a very slippery one. However, ‘fantastic’, as discussed in this essay, is not synonymous with the French literary concept of the ‘fantastique’. The supernatural in the texts examined here is seldom meant to be ‘uncanny’ or even phenomenological; it is instrumental and part of coherent, self-
aware fantastic worlds or alternative universes. Owing to the terminology chaos, critics have suggested that fantasy is everything that is ‘sold by the publishers under this name’ (Rottensteiner 1971: 7) or is marketed as such (James 1994: 3), as a view on current fantasy marketing trends has revealed no discernible definition so far. Generally speaking, the plots of popular fantasy contain elements of the supernatural and elaborate world creation, introducing work-specific sets of rules and laws which govern each invented universe. Readers clearly recognize these worlds as fantastic but also understand them as allegorical, yet not always with the blessing of their creator. Tolkien, for example, used to refuse vehemently that his story was a Nazi allegory. There are countless fantasy subgenres that tend to overlap and blend into each other, but the three main categories are fantasy, horror and science fiction. This paper mainly deals with the first type. A lot of popular Western fantasy belongs to sword and sorcery or Tolkienesque high and epic fantasy, which is defined by quasi-mythical frames, swashbuckling heroes, drama, romance, personal battles, quests or world-endangering matters. Over the last decades, some Western writers have established themselves alongside Tolkien to form a canon of trendy works.

Most popular fantasies have a strong link to the culture where they are created, even in so-called democracies, despite the fact that fantasy can be full of authoritarian thinking, conservatism, old-fashioned ideologies, questionable or ambiguous morality and problematic agendas, such as self-justice, racism or misogyny. Although only few modern readers would want to return to a feudal system, many harbour subconscious nostalgia for these worlds, thus their undying popularity. Fantasy literature can be like comfort food, rich, colourful, nourishing, good looking, and surprising; therefore readers like to return to the same formulas and tropes in these stories. Many people derive great intellectual and emotional satisfaction from reading them and thus are content to acquire the same book in new incarnations over and over again, hence the huge power of big fantasy brands and names, e.g. Terry Goodkind, Robert Jordan, *Dragonlance*, *Akira* or Jin Yong. Fantasy literature in Taiwan and China has an equally long history as in the West. Stories of knighthood and the supernatural, summarized under the term ‘wuxia xiaoshuo’, have deep roots in Chinese history, art, myth, religion and ideology. One could easily say, young Chinese readers are more aware of their cultural roots and times past than Western youths, because the *wuxia* universe is so ubiquitous in Chinese societies.

Although not all the ‘worlds’ in popular stories belong to fantasy, many contemporary media texts have recently started to ‘borrow’ world-building structures from the fantasy genre; little by little, cultish encyclopaedic discussions and treatises around all kinds of popular texts, literature, games, TV series and movies, are developing. For that to happen, Umberto Eco argues, works must come to us as a ‘completely furnished world’ (Eco 1986: 198). Henry Jenkins confirms that a text must be ‘encyclopaedic’ and contain a rich array of information, which can be drilled, practised and mastered by devoted consumers for it to become a cult artefact (Jenkins 2006a: 97). Both scholars describe precisely the dynamics and practices surrounding the *Harry Potter* story and which for quite some time have been common among Tolkien scholars. Today, grassroots *Harry Potter* experts are working with pedantry on similar scales as traditional and, hitherto, more reputable scholars have been doing for decades.

Reading habits and spaces have considerably changed over the past decade. Understanding these new pop culture worlds in their current forms requires new reading skills and new audiences. One consequence of the success of Rowling and Tolkien has been the renewed worldwide focus on understanding reading and authorship in the Cultural Studies tradition, in which ‘text’ is not limited to written language or literature, but comprises all types of artefacts, including film, fashion, music, games or practices. Film adaptations of books have turned into important envoys for marketing a genre such as fantasy overseas, because images have become powerful tools in screen-based communications of our time. From
Harry Potter and The Lord of the Rings we can see that both books and movies are marketed as equally valid depictions. If we have a selection to choose from, the decision of which text is ‘primary’ may be subjective and solely based on which text has the bigger market. Transmedia and transcultural storytelling practices lie at the heart of current new media trends, and they have found a firm base, much like forerunners of things to come, in Western fantasy products. So far, the most famous producers of these texts come from the West, and some new reading and writing concepts are not yet widely recognized in Taiwan. But it is here where Western culture industries, writers, film makers or game designers, have found an access point into Asian popular culture in return. As a consequence, after years of relative insignificance, fantastic texts, especially culturally hybrid and visual ones, have returned with force, developing new and bigger markets than ever before. Fantastic tales are adapted from all kinds of old and new sources for the screen. These films are no longer for an exclusive clientele at fantasy film festivals, but heading for international markets. New and intense visual stimuli in fantastic movies have always enticed global audiences, Taiwan’s audience included, but impressing the audience is increasingly difficult. Yet, every time a step up in technology is made, products of the fantasy genre are among the early adopters. While James Cameron’s sci-fi vision Avatar (2009) has introduced groundbreaking new 3D-effects to the cinema, we have yet to await the first non-fantastic film to be made this way. The success of Peter Jackson’s The Lord of the Rings film trilogy (2001–2003) and the Harry Potter movies (2001–2011) inspired the adaptation of a large number of other fantasy narratives for the big screen. Although fantasy is clearly gaining momentum, horror and science fiction show a similar appeal among audiences. The skyrocketing attractiveness of the genre is also underlined by a ‘vampire fad’, fuelled by Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight books (2005–2008) and films (2008–present).

For Taiwanese audiences, fantasy is one of the most popular genres, even though it is still somewhat passively consumed. Yet, there are trends that hint at a growing active audience. Fantasy video games top the bestseller lists. Games support the exploration of imaginary worlds and encourage player interactions. Taiwanese consumers are engrossed by highly escapist and adventurous fantasy products, especially in their visual form, but they are not alone with that. For that matter, a discussion of what is happening in the fantasy genre is not exclusive to Taiwan, Harry Potter or wuxia; these are merely departure points into the subject. In this paper, in view of globalising as well as localising trends, Taiwan is explored as one tiny node in a network for the global flow of fantasy texts.

Wuxia as fantasy

People in Taiwan grow up with their very own fantasy universe. This cosmos is much more prominent in Chinese societies than Tolkien’s Middle-Earth in the West. Therefore, it is questionable whether there truly is a place for Western fantasy universes in Taiwan beyond Potterverse and Middle-Earth, when the top spot is already occupied by an all-pervading brotherhood of martial artists who live in a society called ‘jianghu’ and roam the ‘martial forest’ (wulin). The answer to this question is: yes, there is!

Wuxia fantasy bears strong resemblances to subgenres in Western fantasy: sword and sorcery and high fantasy. Both the Western and Eastern fantasies are predominantly set in archaic times. Western fantasy might be set in real places and times, but not necessarily so. Wuxia nearly always stays on a fictive Chinese mainland. However, both genres draw on local myths, legends, historical events, artistic traditions, philosophies and religions, and the plots are heroic and adventurous. Wuxia is rooted in spiritual and ideological customs, for instance Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, which are widely practiced in Asia. Western fantasy is often influenced by Christian narratives, but is also open to unique or patchwork theologies. As in Western fantasy, to mention a stereotype plot, wuxia often
portrays the growing up and becoming of a predominantly male hero who is confronted with his legacy and then trained by a wise and experienced monk (wuxia) or wizard (Western fantasy) in certain disciplines of martial (wuxia) or magical (Western fantasy) nature to fulfil or discover his destiny, fight evil, or embark on a quest. Violence, war, conflict, quest, love and murder are common in both genres, as are male and female protagonists, knights, wizards, assassins, royalty, secret societies, beggars, monks and martial artists; only the last would probably be called something else in Western literature, i.e. knights, weapon masters, swordsmen, fist fighters, etc.

The historical development of both genres shows further similarities, such as common roots in bygone narrative traditions. Literary origins of the wuxia genre are classics such as the Water Margin (Shuihu zhuan) and Journey to the West (Xiyou ji). In particular, the latter has been a source for supernatural elements in contemporary wuxia literature. Wang Hailin (1988) separates modern Chinese wuxia into three subcategories: stories of (1) historical occurrences and their glorification; (2) martial feats and training, exotic weapons and supernatural abilities; and (3) pure fantasy, immortals, flying swords and magic. Wang personally disdained the last one (cited in Huanzhulouzhu 1991: 7).

Today we can easily use the expression ‘wuxia’, because the term is widely known in both international literature and film circles. For the longest time, however, wuxia literature was translated as stories of Chinese knighthood (Liu 1967), which is now replaced with ‘wuxia literature’ (wuxia xiaoshuo), ‘novels of martial chivalry’ or ‘martial arts novels’ (Huanzhulouzhu 1991: 7). Jin Yong and Gu Long stress the archaic society of their novels by fleshing out a noble martial brotherhood, but their heroes resemble Western outlaws—the likes of Robin Hood more than King Arthur or Lancelot. The wuxia cosmos is a very precise location. It uses a typical language and linguistic patterns that characterize the way people communicate. Over time, this language has not changed very much. This detail can probably be compared to how Western authors establish a sense of historicity in their tales by using (pseudo-)archaic or medieval language.

The development of wuxia into fantasy is not very old. Hou Jian dates the first popular wuxia stories in the Tang dynasty (618–907) (Hou 1983: 180). In the Song epoch (960–1279) wuxia had already become a central motive in Chinese literature, was written in colloquial language and intermixed with poetry. The portrayal of martial arts in the tradition of Shaolin and Wudan wushu, today we say ‘kung fu’ to this, started in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). A new generation of wuxia authors took over in the twentieth century; most of them came from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Every child in Chinese societies knows their stories; they have been adapted numerous times for TV and cinema over the past decades and are still being retold for each new media generation with new popular actors and updated fancy technology.

In their peak, during the 1960s and 1970s, wuxia stories were first published in serialized form in Taiwanese newspapers. The authors were paid by the word, which often resulted in an erratic style, repetitions and deviations from the original plot. Gu Long, for example, merged traditional wuxia literature with detective stories and used less classical Chinese than other authors; he was also influenced by foreign literature and introduced contemporary motives into his tales, mainly in order to shed some of the historical aura of previous wuxia. Chen Mo calls his style ‘the new [or contemporary] inside the old’ (jin wei gu zhong) or ‘the foreign inside the Chinese’ (yang wei zhong yong) (Chen 1992: 222, author’s translation). His tales therefore became kind of timeless. Gu Long’s wavering between old and new, conservatism and liberalism mark him as a transitional author of the genre. Along with Jin Yong he quickly became one of the most popular writers in Taiwan. However, Chen characterizes Gu Long’s fantasies as ‘pure fairy tales’ or ‘new myth’, and denies these stories the power of being deeper parables of society. ‘They are merely “consumer cultural products” from this our epoch and can hardly become “cultural consumer products” of the next’ (Chen
1992: 251, author’s translation). Nearly twenty years later, Chen’s belief has been proven wrong; wuxia is still going strong.

The secretive and esoteric roots of the wuxia cosmos lie in medicinal and martial traditions such as acupuncture and Shaolin kung fu. Martial arts used to have an arcane and mystic flair. In ancient China, martial knowledge was considered a secret. It was passed on only to the trustworthy. Knowledge was contained in manuscripts that rulers sought to keep from the masses; therefore, they were read in secret (Needham and Yates 1994: 88). This secrecy was sustained with the rise of wushu schools such as Shaolin and Wudang. When martial arts were outlawed by the emperor of the Qing dynasty, they continued to thrive in the underground and among secret societies. Martial arts cover a wide range of psychosomatic practices that reach from meditation, breathing techniques, massage, therapeutic gymnastics to unarmed and armed combat, and even pyrrhic dance (Needham and Lu 1980: 304). Sword fighting even dates back to the Warring States period (fifth century BC). Over the last century, scientists have successfully tackled wuxia practices of qigong and acupuncture with scientific methods to see if some of the incredible, quasi-magical effects could be empirically proven. In our times, Chinese medicine has a high standing in the West. The esoteric feel of martial arts is gone; wuxia is the only place where it lives on.

The biggest success formula of wuxia stories is the description of spectacular fight scenes, the clever moves, tricks and talents of the protagonists. James Liu describes the language of fencing and fistfights as ‘pseudo-metaphysical’ (Liu 1967: 134). Jin Yong and Liang Yusheng, for example, introduced readers to countless secret fighting techniques and described movements in minute detail, even though these stances were seldom realistic. Gu Long, a master on the other end of the spectrum, was superb in describing simulated fights or ‘indescribable techniques’ (wu zhao), but most of all he was among those who exaggerated violence and combat in their works to the point of the fantastic. All these fights are surrounded by an aura of the mysterious and secretive. Each technique needs to have an esoteric, flowery name. What in Western fantasy is traded as the secret knowledge of magic, here it is the secret knowledge of martial arts. The fantastic fight descriptions often culminate in combatants using the ‘light body skill’ (qing gong), people who are super-jumping or flying. A few other common fantastic elements in wuxia are (1) people eating their opponents to take over their kung fu power, which seems to be genetically programmed into the body once it has been learned from a secret book (miji) or teacher; (2) drugs that induce deathlike states, and (3) dian xue, the art of touching acupoints (in the West better known as dim mak), which paralyzes opponents with a single touch. Many acupunctural techniques are grotesque and fanciful, such as when people die seven steps after they have taken a hit or giggle themselves to death. Moreover, fighters utilize all kinds of objects as weapons for their stances. Wuxia literature and real sports have influenced each other here, as evident when genuine Shaolin monks learn to attack with flying chopsticks for show effects. The weapons arsenal in wuxia is endless and includes musical instruments that can kill with sound. In Western fantasy, music is often likewise attributed with magical qualities. It might not be called thus, but martial arts in Chinese wuxia are ranging very close to Western concepts of magic.

Robert Chard sees wuxia as a ‘cultural phenomenon’ (Chard in Huanzhulouzhu 1991: 7). The discussion of wuxia in the 1970s and 1980s included controversies about the degree of the ‘fantastic’; many critics complained about the increasing ‘incredibility’ of the genre. Unlike some critics in the West, who see popular fantasy as hermetic and reactionary, Chinese critics argue almost on the contrary. Wuxia is highly respected among local academics who embrace it as the popular culture version of the great Chinese literary classics and vessel for depicting customs and traditions of Chinese society; of which some are already extinct and some are still very much alive. Only few critics dare to face the traditional value of wuxia with a critical eye. Most of them speak like Li Jia, who says
I mean, good *wuxia* can keep the spirit of fine traditions alive which might otherwise be lost in an industrial nation. Good *wuxia* can strengthen the morale of the people and therefore deserves our appreciation. (Cited in Xue 1979, author’s translation)

Chen Mo sees previous *wuxia* as ‘pure and unmixed’ stories about a heartless world of men, who only answer to the moral codex of their brotherhood. He identifies the author Huanzhulouzhu (1902–1961) as one of the first who went to the extreme of mixing ‘pure’ *wuxia* with fantastic and supernatural elements, which was later copied by the next generation of *wuxia* authors (Chen 1992: 9). Bo Yang mourns that *wuxia* does not depict real martial arts anymore, as with one gulp of magic medicine and a bite of elfish grass the heroes would jump to the sky. He complains about the change into the supernatural and that heroes, without a hair out of place, can jump from a 25 storey building without turning into minced meat, fell a thousand-year-old tree with a punch and make 180 somersaults without batting an eyelid (Bo 1979). Ye Hongsheng calls *wuxia* a ‘fairytale world for grown-ups’ (*chengren tonghua shijie*) (Ye 1992: 220). His expression sounds amazingly similar to the way *Harry Potter* is described today. The geography in *wuxia* is often real, but the mountains are always the highest, the plateaus the widest, the abysses the deepest imaginable. Literary critic Guan Yun goes on to describe *wuxia* as a ‘transitional literature’ (*guodu wenxue*), which is neither old nor new and uses colloquial (*kouyu*) and modern language inside a traditional world. In his opinion, language in *wuxia* functions like a map, and the objects it describes are the topography. ‘In fact, there is no wulin in China’ he says. Wuxia is a map on which you could not find anything (Guan 1973). In 1979, the critic Wu Mang attacked the *wuxia* genre and the author Gu Long in a series of newspaper articles. He claimed *wuxia* authors were out of touch with society, uneducated, and conservative and they would merely produce their fantastic delusions in their own private little closet (Wu 1979a, 1979b). Gu Long answered by calling Wu a presumptuous intellectual and continued to write unmoved (Gu 1979).

Wuxia stories are for Chinese readers what countless Tolkien spin-offs, King Arthur adaptations or dragon sagas are for Western readers. However, unlike fantasy in Western culture, *wuxia* presents a certain moral universe, idealism and traditionalism, which is still very much alive in contemporary Chinese societies. Chinese medicine is practised widely, hierarchical structures are still prominent in the workplace, traditional family values and role models continue to exist, *wuxia* mythology, names, places, technologies and practices, are still well-known, even if the Western stereotype about every youngster learning martial arts does not ring true. Oskar Weggel created the term ‘meta-Confucianism’ to define this kind of traditionalism in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and overseas communities (Weggel 1991: 315). The popularity of *wuxia* fiction has a unifying effect on Chinese culture and identity, but only as a self-reflective aesthetic tradition, because *wuxia* does not interfere with the social and political lives of its consumers. In addition, the genre does not change a lot; although there have been, for example, experiments with gender issues in Hong Kong films, this rather resurfaces in new ‘incarnations’ and appearances. One reason for this may be that the body of *wuxia* stories is not endlessly growing. There is no rising number of famous names as in Western fantasy. Lucifer Chu, the translator of Tolkien’s books in Taiwan, notices that Jin Yong’s popularity did not inspire a decade long outbreak of literary production, as Tolkien did in the West (*Taiwan Outlook* 2008). A finite set of canonical works is known even among Chinese who have lived overseas for generations and who still cherish the same stories, much like modern legends or fairy tales. Wuxia culture, except for tiny fragments, is not ‘lived as wuxia’ by the general public, it is only celebrated and consumed as an art form. There is only one place where *wuxia* ethics and terminology are prominent in Chinese societies; criminal societies, or triads, have long utilized loyalty codes and terminology of *wuxia* narratives for their ‘brotherhoods’.

One can only speculate if...
this last detail has something to do with the fact that, despite its great popularity in books, comics, movies, TV shows, advertising, video games, puppet shows and so on, wuxia is not considered common teaching material in Taiwan, because as an art form it is, and always has been, highly respected among scholars.

Reading and visual culture in Taiwan

New media technologies have contributed to the rising attractiveness of ‘hybrid’ text forms. Even the hold of wuxia on Asian markets pays tribute to this development. An understanding of reception habits in Taiwan shall establish what kinds of fantasy texts do have potential in this market. Reading habits are usually cultivated at an early age. While parents in the West consider reading popular fiction as both educational and recreational and believe that it can be beneficial for their child, parents in Taiwan were found to value reading not as highly as, for example, mathematics. They tend to see reading as a mere information-gathering tool. For that reason, they prefer to buy ‘language practice books’ to train their child’s reading skills rather than narrative literature to build on other cognitive abilities. Taiwanese parents still value educational accomplishments of their children above other activities (Chiu and Ko 2006). When Taiwanese kids become students, they are flooded with reading material. It looks as if students hardly find time or don’t have the nerve to read for fun at all. The problem with forced reading and pleasure reading is that both do not harmonize very well. However, people in Taiwan do read. Bookshops are many and usually well-equipped, with large sections reserved for teaching material, workbooks, science and technology. In addition, a stroll through an average Taiwanese bookstore reveals aisles of wuxia novels, cartoons and romances, easy reading material, Western and Eastern classics and contemporary fiction. The bestseller lists show numerous translations from other languages. Especially on weekends, the bookstores are crowded with people sitting on the floor or standing around reading a book without buying it. It appears that the Taiwanese love to read as much as people elsewhere. Still, some statistics and reports on reading culture in Taiwan are contradictory.7

With the start of a new millennium, along with the rest of the globe, Taiwan has developed into a powerful visual culture, and it appears that from this point of view, ‘reading’ may not necessarily be the leading access point into fantastic texts anymore. This can be partly attributed to the rise of the Internet and a growing desire for technological gadgets along with their already overwhelming presence. As one of the centres of the digital revolution, Taiwan has adopted consumerism and gadgetry as a lifestyle, and is usually among the first to try out new technologies. Images play an important role in Taiwanese communication. It is unclear if this is so because Chinese people have developed a natural affinity to pictures from their pictographic written language. A look at popular pastimes in the country reveals a strong emphasis of visual content. People like going to the movies, watching TV, playing video games or shopping, and when it comes to games, Taiwan’s toy stores do not offer a great deal of ‘narrative’ material. The focus lies on ‘hands on’ action toys. Story-related or strategy board games, fantasy role-play card games or similar material is almost non-existent in the market. Adventure story games, however, do find customers on the video game market. People in Taiwan do play strategy games against others but only in video, PC and online games; in this realm, fantasy is a very common playground in Taiwan. Alongside international and classic fantasy online games, such as World of Warcraft or Final Fantasy, there are always a number of, usually short-lived, wuxia games in the top ten play lists. Television, movies and the Internet have recently taken a toll on the publishing industry in Taiwan, and consumers spend increasingly less time reading (Her 2003), it therefore can be assumed that visual and hybrid texts, such as movies and games, have a much stronger appeal than pure literary
ones. This is also plausible, when we consider one particular reading interest. Taiwanese do quite of lot of pleasure reading/watching when it comes to comics, especially Japanese manga. Huge colourful library-shops are solely devoted to this medium. Reading comics is a central leisure activity in Taiwan. Taiwanese society can be remarkably contradictory when it comes to consumption habits. While Taiwanese adults love to read and watch children’s stories or consume ‘childlike’ visual material, such as unmistakably ‘cute’ TV cartoons, movies and comics, they are apt to treat children and teenagers, and even students far into their 20s, as immature and innocent. But while Harry Potter has become reputable adult reading material in the West, special adult editions were, for example, published by Bloomsbury for that purpose, in Taiwan the books remain classified as ‘children’s literature’, both among the reading public and the academia, who tend to discuss the topic occasionally at children’s literature and translation conferences. While the films are watched by children along with their parents, the books are not really read by adults on the island. Yet, the desire to watch and consume cuteness, which is very closely related to ideals of beauty and gender in Taiwan and strongly influenced by products made in Japan (kawaii) (Garger 2007), adds an infantile touch to popular culture on the island that is worth further examining.

Concerning fantasy, it is highly probable that people on the island come in first contact with the genre through local wuxia stories on TV, in cinema, comics and novels at a very young age. What draws readers to popular texts are certain values those stories embody. Even if one could find those values in a number of tales, readers are often drawn to a specific set of texts, which are therefore elevated to a level of quasi-religious faith into the narrative universe, ‘faith that these values are good, these stories contain something of value’ (Jenkins 2006b: 18). For the longest time, the Chinese-speaking world has found those values in wuxia; it is a very strong tradition. The predominance of wuxia has overshadowed the inflow of foreign fantasy into Taiwan in the past. However, times are changing. Western fantasy movies are big blockbusters on the island and most of the bestselling fantasy books have already been translated for the local market. When it comes to reading, though, the influence on young people by Harry Potter has probably been overestimated by researchers. In many places the recent book-reading mania has turned out to be rather short-lived. Ron Charles (2007) writes:

> Millions of adults and children are reading! We keep hearing that ‘Harry Potter’ is the gateway drug that’s luring a reluctant populace back into bookstores and libraries … Unfortunately, the evidence doesn’t encourage much optimism. Data from the NEA point to a dramatic and accelerating decline in the number of young people reading fiction. Despite their enthusiasm for books in grade school, by high school, most kids are not reading for pleasure at all.

So, in Taiwan, as probably elsewhere, the book reading hype was most likely initiated by the Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter ‘movies’ and by a few people who invested time and money in propagating the genre, for example Lucifer Chu.

Lucifer Chu

Thanks to people like Lucifer Chu, translator of The Lord of the Rings series and organizer of the Foundation of Fantasy Culture and Arts, the number of translations of Western fantasy literature in Taiwan has increased. Chu’s translation has given Tolkien’s work a second life in the Chinese-language market (Lin 2002: 17). Today, a look at Taiwan’s bookstore shelves reveals a wide spectrum of international products. Interestingly enough, a look into a German bookstore reveals the exact same collection of popular fantastic fiction, as if there was a canon of international bestsellers that is now available all over the world.
Before Chu, the first Chinese translation of Tolkien’s epic in 1997 sold only a meagre 3000 copies in three years. Now, though, even China has replaced its own translation with a slightly revised version of Chu’s (Yang 2004; Phipps 2005). Chu has invested large sums of his royalties on propagating the fantasy genre in Taiwan. His story sounds unique, but Chu is a perfect representative of the initiative in today’s fandom; devoted fans like him make it a calling to introduce their favourite but alien stories to a broader audience at home. To do so, Lucifer Chu created the Foundation of Fantasy Culture and Arts and, at least for as long as the funding held out, invested money in aspiring new fantasy writers, gave out awards for fantasy art, costumes and stories and tried – though unsuccessfully – to encourage governmental institutions to fund fantasy projects. In an interview Chu confirms ‘You have to do everything from your passion … I want to have more friends who enjoy the same thing like me … I would like to have more and more people love Lord of the Rings’ (Taiwan Outlook 2008).

Lucifer Chu was lucky enough to reach a market niche with his translations, but it is doubtful that he would have been able to profit from the books as he did without Jackson’s movies. His success was not as large a gamble as he often makes it sound. With a degree in Electrical Engineering but already a background in translation and extensive game knowledge, he managed to translate all four books, The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit, in just under seven months. It was a familiarity with Western fantasy terminology, which particularly endeared him to the publishers. The previous translation had provided ‘strange terms’ which were at odds with the contemporary fantasy language Chu had been cultivating for years by playing computer games (Chu, cited in Lin 2002: 17).

In the games, there is a systematic translation for the terminology. We know what elves look like. We know how to translate ‘orcs,’ ‘elves,’ or ‘dark lords.’ Those who play fantasy games share a common knowledge and we’re able to visualize the fantasy world in The Lord of the Rings.

Most importantly, by focusing on the ‘fighting’ parts of Western fantasy stories, Lucifer Chu has embedded the fantasy genre he promotes in school talks and interviews strongly inside the wuxia tradition, or what he calls ‘traditional Chinese culture’—but unconsciously so. He openly admits of passing grudgingly over the more lyrical and thus ‘boring’ parts of Tolkien’s books in order to advance to the more action-packed ‘scenes’. It is therefore no surprise that many of his translated works belong to the ‘sword and sorcery’ category.

I kind of hate, I almost hate all those singing and poem reading kind of thing, because it’s so slow and you don’t have the temper to do that. But after they get into the war zone, everything, everybody’s fighting and it’s kind of desperate, it’s kind of like you join the crowd and you’re translating everything faster, because you want to see the next chapter. (Taiwan Outlook 2008)

Chu claims that after the success of The Lord of the Rings, people in Taiwan started to take the genre seriously, but he does neglect the impact of the Harry Potter books on the island, which, according to him, are only consumed by kids and are used by people, especially children, to learn English (Taiwan Outlook 2008).

When a prominent spokesperson for the fantasy genre in Taiwan like Lucifer Chu outlines his fantasy concept for the island, he broadcasts a clearly market-oriented perception of the genre. First, his understanding of fantasy is strongly connected to educational concepts and ideologies in Taiwan, and his desire to inspire innovation and creativity in young people, especially ‘young kids’. His open plea for creative freedom and repeated attacks on government policies and his engagement in the MIT Open Courseware project all hint at an understanding of fantasy as a tool or doorway into creative freedom and—most importantly—into
new markets for Taiwan. When asked, if Taiwan is an expanding market for fantasy novels, Chu answers:

Actually, it’s a very big market for imagination and creativity. So, I think if our government or people in Taiwan can catch the train, it will be a very, very big chance for us to join the main culture. (Taiwan Outlook 2008)

Chu is a fan who turned pro or in other words a ‘Big Name Fan’. He may be the only spokesperson for popular fantasy in Taiwan, but his ambition reaches way beyond an entertainment genre. He is trying to activate and connect local online game and fan cultures to the buzz of the international scene or what he calls the ‘main culture’. Chu is Taiwan’s very own Henry Jenkins; it therefore comes as no surprise that he once met Jenkins and exchanged ideas with the famous and iconic American media scholar, who reported this encounter in his blog (Jenkins 2010)—an interesting meeting of an academic fan (aca-fan) and a fan scholar (Hills 2002), very typical for the recent closing of age-old chasms between fandom and academia on understanding and shaping popular culture. According to Chu, the ‘main culture’, which the Taiwanese government and companies both largely fail to notice, is a ‘young’ culture, but not a youth culture, and clearly in connection to international fan communities who want to have something to do with the shifting exploitation of stories and fictive worlds from popular culture in societies on a global scale.

Fantastic stories and universes are at the core of the biggest fan cultures today. Taiwan itself is a big market for fan collectibles. Current fan practices include a small but growing community of cosplayers (otaku) who meet at national game and comic conventions. These meetings harmoniously bring together a colourful crowd of fans from different fandoms and hobbies. There is, for example, an intense dynamic between the multiple photographers at these events and cosplayers who dress up like characters from a broad range of local and international fantasy online and video games, Japanese and Korean anime and manga, Taiwanese high-speed wuxia puppet television shows (Pili budaixi), and Western fantasy and science fiction films, such as Star Wars or Avatar. Taipei has become one of the world’s shopping centres for otaku props and collectibles.

Experts have pointed out that most Taiwan otaku are still in the consumption stage, which means that they mostly consume rather than produce or create. In fact, they show a strong preference towards Japanese cultural commodities. (Hsu 2008)

In many interviews, Lucifer Chu, who is often called ‘otaku king’ by his admirers, points out the flaws in Taiwan’s educational system, the lack of governmental encouragement and funding, the misguided emphasis on the economic future in the computer and IT business, the high market potential of fantasy products and its educational value (Taiwan Outlook 2008). This does not sound like he is talking about the introduction of narrative concepts or themes to local audiences, but more like he favours the cultivation of fantasy ‘brands’ in Taiwan. If this is the case, people like Lucifer Chu are well versed to keep an eye on the Harry Potter franchise.

**Harry Potter’s appeal**

Although Lucifer Chu is clearly a figurehead in Taiwan’s fantasy circles, in his passion for Tolkien he does not only undervalue the strength and global impact of the wuxia tradition, but he also fails to notice the importance of the Harry Potter franchise and how it does not quite fit into his desired thematic force for the fantasy genre in Taiwan. Parts of Chu’s theories are kind of unhinged by the global success of ‘Potterdom’; by dismissing Rowling’s books as English teaching material and children’s literature and for being accused of propagating
witchcraft in the past, Chu neglects some major trends in worldwide fandom and dynamic forces that have also informed the success of the Lord of the Rings books and films in Taiwan.

International fantasy is travelling the world on a multimedia, multi-text and multi-product level, in books, films, games, toys, websites and even music. In Taiwan, the last and final instalment in the Harry Potter series, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows (2007), was sold from cardboard boxes alongside shampoo and underwear in convenience stores. Harry Potter has become a product to ‘our convenience’. The books are mega-sellers, a brand that everybody needs, just as much as underwear. What we do with it, if we really read and reflect on it, is secondary. It is disputed if actual reading habits have something to do with the market success of this story (Charles 2007). ‘Without question, Harry Potter has become a figurehead of our time’ (Rehling 2009b: 249) and everybody from Jerusalem to Johannesburg seems to be familiar with the series. We can now study it like a textbook example for globalization.

Since we cannot solely place the popularity of Harry Potter in Asia inside access points of wuxia culture or fantasy standards people like Lucifer Chu propose, other factors must come into play. The international success of Harry Potter indeed seems to be a phenomenon. British literary critic Colin Manlove calls it ‘fantastic “soap”’, because the reader is ‘perpetually interested in what will happen to them [Harry and his friends] next, however trivial-seeming the occasion’ (Manlove 2003: 188). Lai Wei-ching and Lu Meng Chuan’s research in Taiwan seems to support Manlove’s arguments. They conclude that Taiwanese readers pick up the books out of continuous curiosity for the plot (Lai and Lu 2005). Somehow, readers from various cultures have found access into a typically British story. Although it is contemporary, the world it depicts is full of deeply conservative ‘Thatcherism’ (Westman 2002). Yet, it is also enthralling, a story about someone average changing into something outstanding and depicting very human, often subconscious, desires that people harbour in inhumane or impersonal circumstances. Fantastic stories have always existed and fulfilled this role in societies. We are still trying to make sense of something like Harry Potter in our world though. The strong cultural tint of the story is clearly not an obstacle to non-Western readers. To apply a distinction by Koichi Iwabuchi, Harry Potter has a culturally distinctive ‘fragrance’ in contrast to cultural goods that are essentially ‘odourless’, meaning, bearing few traces of their cultural origin (Koichi 2002). These days, the fragrance or exoticness of a cultural product does not hamper its popularity. On the contrary; audiences increasingly start to embrace cultural fragrance and therefore do not need intense localising of texts in translations any more, except, in translation theory it is still believed that a story can only become likable in a different cultural context, if adjustments and connotations are made. Therefore, Professor John Nguyet Erni from the Department of Cultural Studies at Lingnan University in Hong Kong puts an emphasis on the localisation of Harry Potter in China through the language of the Chinese translation, which draws on China’s own tales of ghosts, magic and martial arts (Erni 2008: 141). It is hard to say if Taiwanese readers are just hopping on the bandwagon of a media hype or do feel ‘real’ and not manufactured enchantment and emotional connection to the story. Interestingly, the mainland Chinese translators notice ‘some elements of Chinese wuxia (martial arts) novels, in terms of supernatural powers and the fight between good and evil’ in the books (People’s Daily 2005). Yet, while a high fantasy like The Lord of the Rings could easily be connected to wuxia by Chinese viewers and readers, it is questionable if the few Asian ‘items’ in Harry Potter, dragons, ghosts, a Chinese girlfriend, fights and such, can really be seen as a ‘ticket’ into the fantasy for Asian readers, as even Henry Jenkins supposes (Jenkins 2006a: 174). Such a broad appeal must come from somewhere more substantial.

One explanation for Harry Potter’s Asian success is that it deals with education. It is a tale about a type of school that is so much more inspiring and exciting than anything we could ever have in reality. In the West, kids may crave for the books because they help them
compensate for flaws, threats and difficulties at their own schools. But school life in Taiwan is even harsher than in the West. The Taiwanese high school system is work-intensive, full of pressure and punishment, which in a way locates Hogwarts much closer to a Taiwanese than, for example, a German school, especially when corporeal punishment is involved. The British boarding school system even bears resemblance to the jam-packed study plans of Taiwanese kids, who are additionally burdened with cram schools, home schooling and evening classes. Hogwarts is not a haven, not a safe place, let alone secure from violence and cruelty, but it is a world where children learn to live with evil and to fight against it. Friendships, personalities, memories and problem solving skills are developed here. Magic is instrumental and it has to be learned and practised not unlike real school subjects. Like mathematics or chemistry it can be acquired from textbooks. Self-study, research and homework for Harry, Ron and Hermione are as diverse as for any real kid. On the other hand, everyday routine at school is magical, and Harry’s initial fear of entering a new school is soon replaced by curiosity. For Western readers, Harry Potter is evidently a less alien story and often triggers extreme feelings of comfort and satisfaction, especially among Westerners outside Britain, who have idealized the British Isles as a place of cosiness and nostalgia from movies and literature consumed in the past. The special feelings of comfort, I assume, which in Harry Potter’s case are also triggered by the Christian overtones of the narrative, are therefore a culturally distinctive reading mode that may or may not apply to Asian readers.

John Nguyet Erni has conducted a study of the Harry Potter effect in Shanghai. He was particularly interested in the local consumption of a transnational text and the acquisition of new symbolic capital. He sees the magic in Harry Potter as instrumental to fulfilling the desires of consumption, which in modern China are perceived as both ‘enchanting’ and socially ‘liberating’ (Erni 2008: 140, 151). The magic in Harry Potter, so Erni says, works in the same way commodities in our world work. Harry offers to Chinese readers an image of their own changing and ‘re-enchanted’ society, creating something that Erni calls ‘magical capitalism’ (Erni 2008: 140–141). He writes that it is no accident that so many Chinese youth who are brought up in an enchanting environment of relative wealth and consumption, pampered by parents that have to adhere to the one-child policy, strongly identify with Harry, the boy wizard. Monetary power is considered a means to provide a good life for the family, a life full of status symbols and brand names (Erni 2008: 148). In China, even the mere knowledge about brands has importance in society now, and knowing about Harry Potter is seen as a sign of literacy and understanding of the West. Consumerism, so Erni continues, has served to re-enchant Chinese social lives, as opposed to the West, where modernism is rather perceived as ‘disenchanting’. He describes how Harry Potter embodies a magical cultural vitality, which finds in urban Chinese youth culture an audience that is already ‘poised for a global identity through complex modes of mass consumption’. In Shanghai, so Erni maintains, Harry Potter hit right into the development of a solid consumer middle class (Erni 2008: 139–140). Conveniently, so Wang Jing confirms, this development is rather apolitical. People just insist on ‘participation in the democratic consumption of leisure culture’ (Wang 2001: 73). According to Erni’s study, China has become a very self-conscious consumer society, which particularly enjoys the ‘parody’ of capitalism in Rowling’s work in light of a ‘previous Maoist legacy of classlessness’ (Erni 2008: 149). The situation in Taiwan is somewhat different from China, and it is doubtful that Erni’s theories are entirely applicable here, where, surely, consumerism has its hold, but it is set in a much more experienced and relaxed consumer culture and a much more open political and social climate. However, on one thing Erni and Lucifer Chu do agree; a discourse has been set in motion on both sides of the Taiwan Strait ‘about a certain re-discovery of the power of imagination of children and youth thought to have lost all creativity as a result of conspicuous, numbing consumption’ (Erni 2008: 150). Still, in some ways, both Erni’s and Chu’s findings are applicable to the
power of the fantasy genre in Taiwan. To continue their efforts, I propose that, in light of rather active transformative fan practices, a much more thorough understanding of this supposed ‘numbing consumption’ in Taiwan is undertaken, for example by applying Daniel Miller’s findings on ‘material culture’.

Conclusion – A sign of the times

Many theorists are left in a struggle, coming to terms with our rapidly changing media environment. The real world has moved beyond mere interactivity. Audiences are craving for new worlds to explore. The Internet has opened us to vast opportunities for exploration, creativity and knowledge. The demand for ever more complex entertainment products has risen; contentment with simplicity and predictability, as in generic wuxia or Western high fantasy, has ebbed away. Storytelling has become the art of world building (Jenkins 2006a: 114). Popular culture is creating new and exciting myths and legends in a postmodern age for an ever-growing multicultural audience, in which stories and cult phenomena are experienced differently, but no less intense, in diverse cultural spaces around the world (Jenkins 2006a: 104–115). Stories are ever more individualized according to personal needs and interests. ‘Consumption becomes production; reading becomes writing; spectator culture becomes participatory culture’ (Jenkins 2006b: 60). Some of these fan practices have of course reached Taiwan, too. There are plenty of spoofs and imitations, in Taiwan unanimously called ‘kuso’ (e.g. gao), in self-made videos, pictures, music and other texts on YouTube and similar sites, and animated discussions about fan-made artefacts. We have finally arrived in the age of a truly ‘active audience’. Our new myths are cross-cultural pastiches of ancient myths, or in Joseph Campell’s words, the ‘monomyth’ (Campbell 1993 [1949]). They will be the ones to create our hero stories of the future (Campbell and Moyers 1988). The goals of today’s creative artists will be ‘not so much preserve cultural traditions as to put together the pieces of culture in innovative ways’ (Jenkins 2006a: 121). These forces behind creating new worlds hope to make worlds like Hogwarts or Middle-Earth priority destinations for our imagination (Jenkins 2006a: 126). While in the 1990s we were still under the general impression that popular culture was getting Americanized, this perception has already passed. The old fear of cultural imperialism needs to be reconsidered in times of rapid flows of images, ideologies, ideas and knowledge across national borders. This multidirectional flow of cultural goods around the world has rather lead to more diversity, than uniformity of pop culture artefacts. Jenkins uses the term ‘pop cosmopolitanism’ to refer to the ways transcultural flows of popular culture inspire new forms of global consciousness and cultural competency (Jenkins 2006b: 155–157).

It seems to be just the right time for foreign fantasies to come to the island of Taiwan. After all, we are all facing great challenges in coping with new global business partners, foreign manners and customs—in short, the unknown. The Taiwanese have travelled through wulin, Middle-Earth and the Potterverse, they are comfortable in virtual reality and cyberspace, and they are now prepared to go beyond. Can any fantasy world be stranger than what we are dealing with right on our desktops at the present? In a manner of speaking, people who consume fantasy are used to making sense of ‘difference’, even if it would go too far to say that reading and watching popular fantasy can prepare us for interacting with genuine foreign cultures in international business and communication, but theorists are currently trying to analyse and apply values and strategies found in informal learning and fan communities for business purposes. There are two areas merging, the desires we are living out in fiction and the objectives we harbour in real life. Lucifer Chu locates the value of the fantasy genre in Taiwan partly within a general understanding of ‘creative freedom’ for young people, and desires to replace old business systems with young ones (‘old people do not really understand the market out there’), to locate ‘cultural innovation’ in the
freedom of career choice and to make one’s dreams come true. These goals are not necessarily located outside financial opportunities. Chu proposes business strategies based on the Korean model, which includes financial government support of the games industry for instance. He also suggests the international marketing of Asian ‘fighting culture’ through action figures or the recruitment of movie stars for promotion purposes, but he accuses China of already having hijacked the market ahead of Taiwan: ‘We had our chances to control the whole fantasy genre in Taiwan and China, but not any more’ (Taiwan Outlook 2008). Even though Chu talks about ‘genre’, clearly he does not discuss key concepts that have been at the core of traditional discourses about fantasy: religions, mythologies and ideologies. But he is not alone with this new understanding of fantasy as a genre. Harry Potter and The Lord of the Rings were just the beginning and there is presumably more to come. Harry is just a sign of the times. There are more ‘global stories’ in the making and some of them will be ‘old’ stories, which will be retold in new ways and to new audiences. It is interesting to find out if we will reach a point when the ‘gaps’ these stories are filling in our lives, are the same across different cultures. On one thing fans like Lucifer Chu are right, there is no ‘culture shock’ when people encounter fantasy, there is nothing alienating in strangeness, and neither is there when we travel through the Internet, not anymore. Online and in fiction we are moving through foreign cultural spaces with ease. But if multiculturalism and cross-cultural communication mean we are reducing understanding to knowledge about artefacts, languages, customs and techniques we have acquired from exercises on the Web and navigating through artificial worlds, then the nature of future cultural consciousness is still unrefined and will need further analysis. We need to find out if surfing the Internet and playing games can really replace first-hand cultural experience.

Currently, Taiwan is stepping into the global flow that is changing our fantasies. For decades people on the island were content with a fixed fantasy world with clear rules. Now our realities have changed, as have many rules that govern our lives. New skills and strategies are needed to make sense of what is happening and how to survive and be successful. Adaptability, creativity, open-mindedness, curiosity, all these are characteristics people need to cultivate. It is not enough to know your tools, to know your vocabulary, so to speak; you need to be able to use it in new and unfound ways. You need—to continue the metaphor—to be able to write your own story with it. Our new found openness to the fantasies of other cultures might be an unofficial training tool for that matter after all. As the last couple of years have shown, cultural curiosity is by no means a one-way-road. West and East are equally hungry for new fantasies. Unauthorized English wuxia translations now circle the Internet, and Western fans readily soak up these stories. Japanese manga and anime have huge international fan communities and wuxia stories are being written in English and outside Asia. In addition, wuxia and fantasy are so far the only realms where Chinese language is entering Western vocabulary.

The points are set, the access is there, and the skills are being developed. The outlook for Western fantasy in Taiwan is good; but the wuxia universe is just as far from dying. It is highly probable that both genres will travel even farther, merge in more and more ways and that new narratives will be created. There is a power in the common fantasies of the everyday lives of people around the world, and the current trend of adapting Western fantasies for Asian markets and vice versa pays tribute to this.

Notes

1. The conferences were held at Dong Hwa University, Hualien ‘The 1st Formosa International Conference on Fantastic Literature’ (2007) and the ‘2009 International Conference on Fantastic Literature and the New Rhetoric: The European Legacy’. With the exception of my own paper, none of the topics at either conference was particularly interested in fantastic traditions and literatures in Taiwan or popular practices.

3. June 2010, the top 50 highest grossing films in the world contain 35 fantastic movies, cartoons not included. Three statistical websites offer similar film listings with only minor differences. The categories are as follows: Fantasy (17); Science fiction (13); Superheroes (5); Cartoon/animation (10); Other (5) (Box Office Mojo n.d.; IMDB n.d.; Wikipedia n.d.).

4. For example Janny Wurts’s Wars of Light and Shadow series (1994-present).

5. For example ‘guess-finger drinking games’ (Liu 1992).

6. For further references on this topic, see Rehling (2005).

7. A poll by Net and Books among 1750 adults in Taipei, Kaohsiung and Taichung discovered reading to be unpopular in urban Taiwan. Nearly 40% of the respondents had not read a single book in over a month (People’s Daily 2001). Then again, a more recent study reports that college students in Taiwan do quite a bit of pleasure reading: freshmen read about 1.5 hours, juniors about 1.8 hours daily. In comparison, this is more than college students read in the USA, which is estimated to be between 2.5 to 4.75 hours per week (Chen 2007: 642).

8. NOP World reported that in worldwide comparison Taiwanese spend the most computer/Internet time (12.6 hours/week) for non-work related purposes, followed by Thailand (11.7) and Spain (11.5). Taiwan ranks seventh place (18.9 hours/week) in TV watching, but ranks third from the bottom (5 hours/week) in reading, in contrast to the top of the list, India (10), Thailand (9.4) and China (8) (NOP World 2005).


10. BNF or Big Name Fan is mainly used in fandom of fantastic genres or comic books. BNFs are well-known among peers and may even have fans of their own.

11. A Harry Potter spoof video, a crossover between Hong Kong gangster movies, The Matrix and Harry Potter, was uploaded by hajime10 (2010) on YouTube. A kuso discussion forum can be found at Bahamut (n.d.).

12. For instance, L.G. Bass’s The Outlaws of Moonshadow Marsh, the Sign of Qin (2004) or Cindy Pon’s Silver Phoenix: Beyond the Kingdom of Xia (2009).

13. For ‘shiftu’ (or sifu) in Kung Fu Panda, or ‘dong ma?’(‘Do you understand?’) in the Firefly TV series.

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Special terms

Akira アキラ
Bo Yang 柏楊
chengren tonghua shijie 成人童話世界
dian xue 點穴
dim mak – see: dian xue
dong ma 懂嗎
e gao 惡搞
Gu Long 古龍
guodu wenxue 過渡文學
Huanzhuolouzhu 還珠樓主
Jianghu 江湖
jin wei gu zhong 今為古中
Jin Yong 金庸
Kawaii かわいい
kouyu 口譯
kuso – see: e gao
Li Jia 李嘉
Lucifer Chu 朱學恆
Miji 密笈
Author’s biography

Petra Rehling is Associate Professor in the Department of English at Da-yeh University in Taiwan. Over the past decade she has published several articles on the Harry Potter phenomenon. Petra Rehling’s research interests include media and cultural studies with a strong focus on popular culture, television and new media. In Germany, her book on Hong Kong cinema, Schöner Schmerz – Das Hongkongkino zwischen Traditionen, Identitätssuche und 1997-Syndrom (2005), is considered as one of the few standard works on the market.

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