

The passing of a legend

Tributes recall the achievements of late martial arts novelist Louis Cha, a titan of Hong Kong's media industry

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Jianghu, or “rivers and lakes”, is an imaginary world where knights, hermits and hooligans fight and coexist. The value upheld there is *xia*, a combination of courage, justice and self-sacrifice.

This world is never a hideaway from the real one. The heroes fight for the disadvantaged against evil, defend their country in wartime, and even re-examine their narrow nationalism and learn to understand the peoples and cultures that they oppose.

Their social concern is summed up as *jiaguo*, which literally means “home and country”.

What is more, the ups and downs in their love stories can be as sweet and twisted as their relationships are in real life.

The journalist-turned-novelist who created this world, Louis Cha Leung-yung, better known by his pen name Jin Yong, died in Hong Kong on Oct 30 at age 94.

Cha is probably the best-known and most widely read contemporary author in the Chinese-speaking world. His 15 novels have sold at least 350 million copies, while he also has a huge body of adaptations for TV series, films, games and animations to his name.

He was a newspaper editor who filled the pages of supplements with his first stories, and rode the success of his novels to found his own newspaper, *Ming Pao*, in 1959. Many Hong Kong writers and intellectuals published their first works in this paper, of which Cha was editor-in-chief for 30 years.

His ideals fascinated his publishers abroad more than martial arts. Christopher MacLehose, a veteran of the profession in London, published *Legends of the Condor Heroes* in the United Kingdom in February. He said, “The story he tells is part of his view and opinion. I think it's inaccurate to simply call it martial arts fiction.”

Albert Yeung Hing-on, honorary chairman of the Hong Kong Novelist Association, who was Cha's secretary at *Ming Pao* in the late 1980s, said readers can find Cha's personal values and philosophy in his novels' characters, and Duan Zhengming in *The Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils* is the one closest to the real Cha.

“Duan is a benevolent and wise monarch from Dali. He is highly skilled in martial arts. In his old age, he abdicates and becomes a monk,” Yeung said.

Cha himself sought self-improvement over fame and wealth. In his



Louis Cha reads *China Daily* while visiting the newspaper's Hong Kong office in 2005. EDMOND TANG / CHINA DAILY



A reader selects books written by Louis Cha at a display set up to honor the novelist at a bookstore in Hangzhou, East China's Zhejiang province, on Oct 31. LONG WEI / FOR CHINA DAILY

80s, he enrolled at the University of Cambridge to pursue a PhD in Oriental Studies, Yeung said.

Cha had “a bit of a stammer” but was fluent and scintillating with his writing, Yeung said, adding, “He preferred writing to talking.”

“When I worked as his executive secretary at *Ming Pao*, he wrote down the instructions on a note and passed it to me. If he thought I had done a good job, he would send me a note of praise, while seldom talking to me in the office. He treated other employees in the same way,” he said.

“Maybe that's because speaking

Cantonese made him nervous. He was most comfortable with the Jiaying dialect, from his hometown.”

Born in Haining, Jiaying, East China's Zhejiang province, in 1924, Cha divorced twice before marrying Lin Leyi in 1976.

Cha was surrounded by family members when he died at the Hong Kong Sanatorium and Hospital.

The author, who lived on Hong Kong Island for most of his life, describes in his novels the magnificent landscapes of the Chinese mainland, especially the Mongolian Plateau. Yeung said, “The scenery is

so beautiful and the writing widens our imaginations.”

Weijie Song, associate professor of Chinese Literature at Rutgers University in New Jersey, said Cha also intentionally focuses on the ethical and cultural crises in the transitions from the Song to Yuan and Ming to Qing dynasties, and explores topics including the ethnic conflict between Han and non-Han peoples, the collective memory under colonial rule, and broad and narrow nationalisms.

According to Petrus Liu, associate professor of comparative literature at Boston University, Cha's works contain an encyclopedic knowledge of traditional Chinese history, medicine, geography, cosmology and even mathematics.

Chun Chun-fai, the author of Hong Kong studies on Cha's novels, said that in the 1980s many people born in Hong Kong were studying abroad. They returned to the city to work, but knew little about Chinese culture. It was Cha's novels that allowed them to understand the spirit that Chinese society promoted and to appreciate the charm of Chinese literature.

“The novels carry Hong Kong people far from our busy daily lives. They lead us to a world of chivalry with knight-errant heroism, drawing us away from anxious, fast-paced society,” Chun said.

Cha's trilogy *Legends of the Condor Heroes* begins in 1205, just before the Mongol conquest, and ends more

than 150 years later.

British novelist Marcel Theroux told *The Guardian* of the trilogy: “I felt a slight regret that I was coming to it in my fifth decade. It would be a wonderful invitation into a lifelong enthusiasm for China, its history and civilization, its vast and chronically misunderstood presence in the world.”

The first volume of *Legends of the Condor Heroes* was published in February before being reprinted seven times. *The Irish Times* hailed it as “A Chinese *Lord of the Rings*”. The second volume is due out in January.

Copyright for the first volume has been sold to the US, Germany, Italy, Finland, Portugal and Hungary. Cha's works have been translated into English, Korean, Japanese, French, Vietnamese, Indonesian and Thai.

Ying Mathieson, publisher at ACA Publishing in London, said Cha's works resonate with a Western audience because his writing is centered on emotions such as love, anger, sadness and happiness, which are shared across every culture.

“For this reason, international readers can immediately identify with emotions depicted through his writing — even if they understand nothing about Chinese culture,” she said.

Anna Holmwood, translator of the first volume of *Legends of the Condor Heroes*, said the Mongolian setting “acts like a gateway to Western readers into the Chinese setting and historical background”.

“The Chinese people have perhaps felt that their culture has long been neglected. Now, it's a time when they can feel confident about their place in history and their culture in the world. Sometimes it's that exact uniqueness that creates the selling point.”

Cha believed in the power of words. In his last novel, *Deer and Cauldrons*, he wrote a paragraph of commentary that seemed unrelated to the story's development.

It read: “He (the hero) was just a hooligan and got most of his literary education through storytelling, which was based on the historical epics written. The knowledge was enough for him to plot and change the political scene. Throughout Chinese history so many writers wrote great, thoughtful works. The power of writing is tremendous.”

Cha lived from writing throughout his life. He started working for the *Ta Kung Pao* newspaper in Hong Kong in 1948, and began authoring the kung fu series in 1955. His works won immediate acclaim.

After publishing three successful novels, he founded *Ming Pao* in Hong Kong in 1959. In the paper's

>> PAGE 11