

## Inquiry I: Autobiographical Inquiry into Literacy Learning (REVISED)

EDUC 629 Teaching English/Language and Literacy in Middle and Secondary Schools

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### **A Short Sketch of My Adolescent Life (Spring 2004 – Summer 2010)**

Living in an urban city, I had a very domestic, local, and home-based adolescent life. The “domestic” part explains the fact that most of my learning intake came from reading books, watching television (quite often on animation, sports, etc.) and playing music (I studied classical piano throughout my adolescent years). If adolescence were defined as at the age range between 12 and 18, mine consists of two parts, middle school (12 to 15) and high school (16 to 18) when I went to two different schools with quite different states of mind. Now looking back in retrospect, I have to say I very much appreciate the environment created by my parents for me to study, think, and grow by living in a cozy and compact household.

During my primary school years my family had been living in a special rural region, with me going to a local private school there within walking distance. It was but at the beginning of the last semester of my 6<sup>th</sup> grade when my parents purchased a small apartment in the central part of the city and had me moved there to attend a more academically competitive school in the city, in preparation for middle school. It was great intention, but I felt blue and lonesome and detached from my preceding lifestyle, in which my classmates and I were practically neighbors and lived and played together like a community. In the city, it was another story. I felt suffocated at first, to be honest, but I was fortunate to attend this

elementary school (for my last semester in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade) where the head teacher of my class and multiple classmates were so welcoming and enthusiastic in helping me fit in and make new friends and succeed in studies.

When I got into middle school I was again feeling separated, maybe because I had to part again with a group of peers I knew well (this time, for only that last semester). But a big step I took in middle was to engage in sports and physical exercises; I made a few good friends who were the “athletes” for the school, meaning that they were trained and played for competitions for the school, and learned a lot from them in physical training and sports, and, most of all, self-confidence in general. Three years later I chose (by my entrance exam score, so in some sense *earned* it) to attend another (also very good) high school in the city, parting again with my middle school friends (“again” implied by the fact that many of them continued there for high school) and taking on a new path, as an attempt to achieve my own form of independence. I lived in the on-campus dorm in the first year of high school (three years total in my high school), being around a different and unique group of schoolmates; our lives then were quite academically intensive – I remember we had nine subjects in the first year, and were quite paying attention to the test scores and student ranks – and playing basketball, which was very popular and a big deal then. Anyway, I felt I grew a lot in the

three years of high school and matured with a strong sense of citizenship and social responsibility.

### **Literacy Experience in Adolescent Journey**

As is mentioned briefly above, the components of school life in my adolescent years were indeed colorful, while the domestic nature of home life offered me plenty of “time alone”, which is solitude. I recall in Helen Keller’s autobiography book, *The Story of My Life*, Helen described being and studying alone as “the dearest pleasures” (Keller, 1996), in which she addressed specifically college experience upon the difference between *learning* and *thinking*; what it suggests is also what my experiences would agree upon, that when one (a student) is learning a certain knowledge, such as a lecture, listening and meaning-making would be essential and taking a majority of the learner’s attention and time. One who gets burdened/overwhelmed by the intake materials of information, therefore, would unlikely have time or leisure to think critically and comparatively and to relate to other types of knowledge he/she has – not that no one could do both at the same time, but just that learning does take a good bit of energy and slows down the learner on thinking and making further deductions.

To me, the small bedroom with my bed, desk, bookshelf, and a piano was the very finest, sanctuary-like place for my time after school is over. There were inspiring moments in and outside this household throughout my middle and high school years, and here I’d like to share two most memorable ones which also influenced me the most.

### **Correspondence—The “Bee-Hunting Journal”**

My middle school literature-and-Chinese teacher had this wonderful idea to launch an assignment to our class (required in the beginning) to let each of us start a notebook/journal and write something

every week to share with her; it could be a piece of short notes, reflection from recommended readings, or any creative work we come up with. My teacher read every response and wrote “follow-up” comments before each notebook was returned every week. I was drawn to this back-and-forth process with my teacher as for the first time in such as formal/serious fashion in my life. I found a sense of companionship from someone who reads my words and shares my feelings – and even gives you advice as a senior friend. For what I submitted, I started by reflections from the readings I had, and gradually began to try to review/comment about other books I read at the time, and later on some trials of fiction composition. I kept submitting this notebook until nearly I graduated, long after it ceased to be a required assignment of the class. I still remember the original expectation our teacher had on this was to let us “hunt for honey” like the bees, maintaining an inquiring mind through actively engaging in writing and corresponding. We called it the “bee-hunting journal”, translated directly from the original name of its language.

I found a pen friend in my teacher rather than feeling obliged to do another piece of homework; and, through her pen there were many great comments that touched my heart in straightforward and yet considerate ways. By the way, in real life, my teacher was not an “extrovert” but rather more reserved in her manners and speech, but through the bee-hunting journal I and my class got to know more about her, about her perspectives on what topics we as teenagers were interested in. Her friendly approach and eagerness to learn more about us truly made her one of my most memorable teachers in life.

**“Martial Heroes” Fictions** There is a genre of Chinese fiction which is referred to as the “martial heroes” fictions (“Wuxia”, 2021) and is focused on the adventures of martial artists with stories set in

the time of ancient China. The genre has its root back in the 300-200 BCE with the *youxia* tales, literally meaning “travelling martial artists”. But to my knowledge, the more “modern” novels of this kind were signified by several classic works in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and works sprung up thereafter. The most famous and versatile works in this genre to this date should no doubt be those by the author Louis Cha Leung-yung, better known by his pen name Jin Yong or 金庸. He was initially a journalist, at some newspaper site in Hong Kong in the 1950’s. Then someday a colonist author in his company needed to take a leave from his ongoing series on the newspaper, and needed someone to substitute-write for him to continue the series. Then Jin Yong was asked to be his substitute writer. That is how Jin Yong officially started his fiction-writing journey and career in this genre; later, he wrote as a colonist himself for his first book, and then many other subsequent works through about the year of 1975, when he decided to call an end of this writing. His fictions had become worldwide popular to the Chinese-speaking communities and people, and at the core of its success, besides the romance, entertaining elements, and historical insights enclosed, was its fulfillment of a kind of “adult fairytale” for its readers. What’s equivalently important is the themes and moral principles in his books which are very authentic and positive, and even primitive, with a strong sense of responsibility defending moral identities and social justice—in those ancient, lawless world.

My “affair” with this martial heroes genre began when I randomly picked up one of Jin Yong’s novels from the bookshelf of my aunt’s (a while later, I realized it was his last and perhaps the most acclaimed work). This book consists of five volumes practically, a relatively long fiction. But as I followed the storyline in that peculiar and interesting time of the history under Kangxi Emperor of the Qing Dynasty (from 1661 until

1722), and the protagonist’s footsteps, I never got bored; in fact, I found something from reading the book, something I never had tasted before in any forms of life—it was, first of all, a fantasy in the ancient setting, which provides you a unique experience while reading it; but what’s on top of that was that the narration technique of the novelist was so crafty that it made the story and events so vivid, as I as the reader was completely absorbed into the plot and was actually very excited.

I remember reading another classic work by Jin Yong during winter break one year, at home, and the book contains multiple storylines with eccentric, emotional, sad, and rejoicing moments and all kinds of characters. The book’s title was *Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils*, the plot of which was set at a transitional turmoil of time between multiple military powers in ancient China (roughly speaking, between the Liao and Song dynasties). The major of the three protagonists, who had a multi-cultural identity and background, ended the book by sacrificing his life (he stabbed himself) in *exchange* for a conditional promise of his emperor that he would never invade the other country during the rest of his lifetime. Such character is relatively rare in Jin Yong’s or anyone’s books, of course, but the theme was sustaining in his works with an expectation to alleviate the conflicts and differences between ethnic groups, such as between the nomads in the north, tribes from the west, and the people lived in the “central” and southern part of ancient China who self-conceived as the “mainstream” cultural group of the country.

### **Critical Analysis in Retrospect: On Literature’s Teaching Moral Ethics**

Looking back, today I think I was very lucky (although a little premature also) to reach books with such kind of high-mindedness, even that they were fictions and inherently for entertainment. I, a hopeful and hot-blooded teenager, admired many

of these protagonists as heroes, for truly they did many things impressive, all of which fulfill this notion of *Xia*, which means in Chinese-speaking language “the life art of a martial hero”. Jin Yong is not the only novelist I had read in this genre, but he is definitely the most representative of it all; in his own words written in some book’s preface, he wrote that he considered the spirit of *Xia* means to be able to **help others while sacrificing one’s own benefit**. In modern psychological terms, this might be phrased as a type of “self-sacrificing altruism”, which would essentially be rare to find and relatively hard to develop for any young adult, especially if the society is not at a time when empathy is pervasive and when chivalry is not too popular. However, somehow this high moral spirit (or maybe an ideal) was carved into my young soul, and together with other good virtues I was taught and picked up they formed the backbone of my morals as I grew towards adulthood; later in college I really had become a courageous, warm-hearted person who was passionate to help others and push my own boundaries academically for high pursuits (there were some limitations and dark sides in the stories of this genre, though, which we would omit here for simplicity—it was far from perfect, like many other literature works). Last but not least, I’d like to point out that there were disadvantages in learning morals and growing up

in this way, mainly because of the mismatch in social settings between what’s in the story and what’s in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries’ modern times.

Such formation of moral ideals and models from fictional characters and themes could certainly, and intuitively, be generalized to the teaching moral ethics and virtues by literature. Traditionally, teaching moral ethics and the abstraction of them “literally” to young students has the major disadvantage that it was not vivid or real enough and thus being uninteresting (Aoudjit, 2012), because the morals themselves are an oversimplification of what they really are in societal life or in practical forms. In other words, morals and virtues are more “lived” than “told”; and if we were to tell children such a thing or a story, we would like to tell a good one, especially since morals and virtues are fundamental building blocks of one’s character. As suggested in Dobrin’s (2016) blog article, a moral education is “less than half-complete” without being exposed to subjective life experiences, and that is where literary fiction could join in to fill in such gaps of a “simulated experience” for the growing youths – so that in an amorphous way they are able to stand in another man’s shoes, to taste a different culture and time in history, and even to understand the emotional/moral dilemmas that another person would face.

#### References

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