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The Nameless Dao in Concealment: Historical Transformations of the Quanzhen Seven Masters' Image from Antiquity to Modernity

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Abstract: The Seven Masters of the Quanzhen 全真七子 sect served as central figures during the founding phase of Quanzhen Daoism and played key roles in the sect's early development. Originally positioned as the "Northern Seven Perfected Ones" (*Bei Qi Zhen* 北七真), they were instrumental in propelling the prosperity and expansion of Quanzhen Daoism. Over time, their images subsequently proliferated across various media—including portrayals in stone inscription, painting, biography, and novel, undergoing transformations through inscriptions, paintings, biographies, and novels—transforming transmission channels from Daoist temples to stage performances and from street corners to modern screens. In the Jin and Yuan 金元 periods, Daoist biographies and inscriptions portrayed the Seven Masters as exemplary figures of Daoist practice. In folk novels and precious scrolls (*Baojuan* 宝卷) in the Ming 明 and Qing 清 dynasties, they were presented as legendary, divine immortals and distant ancestors available for narrative appropriation. In modern times—particularly due to the popularity of Jin Yong 金庸's martial art novels—they completed their universalization as Daoist cultural resources blending chivalric ethos and entertainment value. Examining the evolution of the Seven Masters' imagery, two fundamental implications emerge: First, this transformation was jointly shaped by the power structures, functional needs, and media forms of each era. Second, beneath the fluid representations from sacred patriarchs of the Jin–Yuan period to modern entertainment symbols, there is an enduring thread of Daoist transcendental consciousness.

Keywords: Seven Masters of Quanzhen; Taoism; Jin Yong

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1. Introduction

Since the latter half of the 20th century, the image of the "Seven Masters of Quanzhen" has undergone a profound transformation in terms of public perception. In contemporary popular consciousness, their physical appearances predominantly derive from screen portrayals, while their legendary deeds largely originate from Jin Yong's martial arts novels, forming a set of artistic personas marked by clear moral dichotomies.

As founding patriarchs of Quanzhen Daoism, their posthumous images initially emerged from the sect's narrative texts as ascended immortals enshrined in sculptural forms. Subsequently, these representations descended from sacred heights to secular spaces, flowing outward from Quanzhen's internal sphere into folk culture. Over eight centuries, this process formed an unbroken cultural stream. The contemporary image of the Seven Masters constitutes another temporal adaptation of this stream, and their demys-

tification from divine beings to humanized figures is neither accidental nor isolated—the driving forces behind this movement manifested early in historical currents.

Tracing the contours of this metaphorical stream, we may delineate multiple transformations of the Seven Masters' imagery across the past millennium and uncover the persistent cultural mechanisms sustaining their enduring relevance. This analytical trajectory reveals how religious symbolism maintains vitality through continuous negotiation with evolving socio-cultural matrices.

2. From Divinity to Humanity: The Millennial Transmutation of the "Seven Masters of Quanzhen" Imagery

The concept of the "Seven Masters of Quanzhen" originated from the deeds of the founding patriarchs of the Quanzhen sect. Initially, the "Seven Masters" theory was not universally accepted; an alternative "Four Masters" theory—referring to Ma Yu 馬鈺, Tan Chuduan 譚處端, Liu Chuxuan 劉處玄, and Qiu Chuji 丘處機—dominated, while Sun Bu'er 孫不二 was excluded from the group, and Wang Chongyang 王重陽 was included. The definitive consolidation of the "Seven Masters" narrative later emerged through religious texts produced during the sect's early flourishing, such as *Biographies of the Seven True Man* 七真仙傳 and *Records of the Orthodox Golden Lotus* 金蓮正宗記 (Han 2023). After the passing of the founding patriarchs, the canonical version of the "Seven Masters"—comprising Ma, Tan, Liu, Qiu, Hao Datong 郝大通, Wang Chuyi 王處一, and Sun Bu'er—gradually solidified. Since then, the collective image of the "Seven Masters" has undergone two major transformations, with three distinct phases of public representation.

2.1. The Sacred Paradigm: Constructing Quanzhen's Foundational Identity

The notion of the "Seven Masters" traces back to Wang Chongyang. In The Panxi Collection (Panxi Ji 磻溪集), published in 1186 during the Jin Dynasty, Qiu Chuji composed a poem titled *Hymn of Worldly Salvation* 度世吟, which includes the following lines:

"Spirit transcends and invades dreams, startling mortals;
Discarding my hat and canopy, I calculates (fate).
The Master dwells in the East Sea like a hidden dragon;
a horse journeys to Western Qin, transforming into a leopard."
出神入夢人驚駭，
擲蓋投冠予計較。
師居東海乃猶龍，
馬入西秦還變豹。
(Qiu 2000, p. 22)

In a subsequent annotation, Qiu recounts an incident during the summer of 1169 while traveling with Wang Chongyang "from Wendeng to Ninghai".

By the time we passed Longquan Spring, the sun's heat was slightly intensified. The master instructed us to proceed forward, while he held an umbrella behind us, about half a mile away. Suddenly, I turned back and saw the umbrella soaring into the sky… At that time, my fellow practitioner Qianyang Zi Elderly Wang (Chuyi) was in seclusion on Zha Hill at a corner of the East China Sea. The hill is 110 li from Wendeng County, and Wendeng is another 70 li from where the umbrella rosed. The umbrella was lifted at about 8 o'clock and descended at about 16 o'clock in front of Elderly Qianyang's hermitage. The handle of the umbrella bore the Taoist monastic name of Qianyang Zi 佥阳子, which was inscribed by the master. The master went to him to donate it to him. This character 'qian (佥)' is not

to be found in such dictionaries as *Lei Pian* or *Ji Yun* originally. It was a neologism from the master.

> 時邁龍泉，日氣稍熾。師令余等前，己執傘在後，距半裏許。余忽回顧，見傘騰空而起……時余法眷佥陽子王公，隱于東海隅之查山。山到文登壹百壹十裏，文登到傘起處又七十裏。傘起乃辰時，及晡墮傘陽公菴前。柄內佥陽子道號，往賜之焉。佥字篇韻本無，乃師之所撰。 (Qiu 2000, p. 22)

Notably, the character qian (佥), coined by Wang Chongyang and inscribed on the umbrella's handle, was composed of seven "ren" (人, "human") radicals. Later, *Chongyang True man Wang* 重陽王真人 from the *Records of the Orthodox Golden Lotus* narrated the following:

> "The Patriarch returned eastward to the seaside, wandering for years to teach and transform disciples. He gathered Qiu, Liu, Tan, Ma, Hao, Sun, and Wang to fulfill the number of seven golden lotuses."
>
> 祖師遂東歸海邊，徜徉數載，接誘訓化。既得丘劉譚馬郝孫王，以足滿七朵金蓮之數 (Qin and Sima 1989, p. 445)
>
> Similarly, the same biography provided the following clarification:
>
> "Such a character does not exist in standard lexicons—it was created by the Patriarch. Its seven ren radicals symbolize the number of (petals) of one golden lotus."
>
> 篇韵中本无此字，盖祖师之所撰也，字作七人，表金莲一朵之数 (Qin and Sima 1989, p. 471)

Furthermore, Wang Chongyang's poetry reflects this septenary ideal, with verses such as "Seven masters spread as one golden mat" 七子便鋪金簟 (Wang and Bai 2005, p. 122) and "azure lotus emerge from the pond forming the household of Seven masters" 池涌青蓮七子家 (Wang and Bai 2005, p. 317).

However, the "Seven Masters" theory faced contention. During Wang Chongyang's westward journey, Wang Chuyi remained behind to fulfill filial duties, leading Wang Chongyang to revise his inner circle to the "Four Masters" (Ma, Tan, Liu, and Qiu). This sparked prolonged debates between proponents of the "Four" and "Seven" theories. Only after Qiu Chuji's death, as the era of Wang Chongyang and his disciples receded into legend, did the "Seven Masters" narrative crystallize through paintings, poems, steles, dramas, and hagiographies. The verse "With hands transcendent to sages, they planted seven golden lotuses" 只憑入聖超凡手，種出黃金七朵蓮 (Qin and Sima 1989, p. 448) epitomizes this consolidation in official Quanzhen texts like *Biographies of the Seven True Man* and *Records of the Orthodox Golden Lotus*, inaugurating the first phase of their public image: sacred patriarchs of Quanzhen Daoism.

This phase, synchronized with the formation of Quanzhen's religious narratives (Han 2020), spanned the Jin–Yuan dynasties until its popularization in the early Ming dynasty. Three dimensions characterize the "Seven Masters" imagery during this period:

2.1.1. Hagiographic Deeds

Accounts of the Seven Masters primarily derive from Quanzhen's official biographies. For instance, the biography of "True man Ma from Danyang" in the *Records of the Orthodox Golden Lotus* chronicles Ma Yu's life from his divine birth (foretold by Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓) to his ascension, emphasizing his enlightenment under Wang Chongyang and supernatural feats like reviving withered trees. These narratives, reverently compiled by later disciples, focus disproportionately on Ma Yu and Qiu Chuji. Yuan-era zaju 元雜劇 plays, such as *Ma Danyang Thrice Enlightens Ren Fengzi* 馬丹陽三度任瘋子, adapted these stories into vernacular dramas while retaining doctrinal themes (Lin 2015).

2.1.2. Iconographic Representations

Visual media played a vital proselytic role. Early disciples routinely commissioned portraits of their masters. Following Qiu Chuji's historic meeting with Genghis Khan, Quanzhen's imperial patronage fueled temple construction and icon production. Images of the Seven Masters appeared in temple sculptures, steles, illustrated texts like *Illustrated Biographies from the Orthodox Golden Lotus* 金蓮正宗仙源像傳, blue-and-white Yuan porcelain 元青花 (Ji 2011), and theatrical stages, forming the visual corpus for later adaptations (Han 2019).

2.1.3. Socio-Religious Status

The Seven Masters' perceived authority evolved alongside Quanzhen's political fortunes. Despite intermittent suppression, the sect enjoyed unparalleled prestige during the Jin–Yuan zenith. Emperor Wuzong 元武宗's 1310 edict canonizing Quanzhen's "Five Patriarchs 五祖, Seven Ancestors 七宗, and Eighteen Great Disciples 十八大士" epitomized its institutional power. Consequently, the Seven Masters were portrayed not as wandering immortals but as hieratic figures enshrined in grand rituals—solemn, sacred, and distanced from secular humor.

Thus, the Jin–Yuan "Seven Masters" imagery emerged as a sacred, top–down construct tightly bound to Quanzhen's institutional hegemony. Its formation relied on a triadic framework: political alliances (with Mongol rulers), religious functionality (supplying sanctity), and media apparatus (official texts and icons). As this framework shifted in later eras, so did the Seven Masters' image—a testament to the dynamic interplay between power structures, cultural needs, and representational mediums.

2.2. Legendary Folk Immortal Masters and Secularization Shift

The Jin and Yuan dynasties lasted for more than two hundred years. In 1368, Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 ascended to the throne and greatly rewarded his Zhengyi 正一 Celestial Master Zhang Zhengchang 張正常, who had supported him. In 1374, he wrote the following in the *Imperially Commissioned Preface to the Liturgical Texts of Daoist Fasting and Ritual Ceremonies* 御制玄教齋醮儀文序:

I observe the teachings of Buddism and Taoism, each with two disciples. Monks have Zen and Buddist teachings. Taoists have Zhengyi and Quanzhen. Zen and Quanzhen focus on self-cultivation and nature-nourishment, solely for oneself. Buddist teaching and Zhengyi are dedicated to transcendence, specially designed for filial piety and parental benevolence, benefiting relationships of mankind and cultivating customs. Their achievements are great.

> 朕觀釋道之教，各有二徒。僧有禅，有教。道有正壹，有全真。禅與全真，務以修身養性，獨爲自己而已。教與正壹，專以超脱，特爲孝子慈親之設，益人倫，厚風俗， 其功大矣哉。 (Song 1988, p. 1)

Zhu Yuanzhang implemented strict controls over Buddhist and Daoist institutions to maintain social stability. Within Daoism, he promoted the Zhengyi sect while suppressing the Quanzhen tradition. This religious policy led to the Quanzhen sect's gradual estrangement from imperial authority during the Ming dynasty, prompting its withdrawal into folk societies and mountainous retreats. Although this diminished the sect's former prominence, it compelled internal reforms that eliminated extravagance and corruption, reviving the ascetic purity characteristic of its foundational period. Consequently, Quanzhen Daoism became more deeply rooted among the populace.

By the mid-to-late Ming period, Quanzhen experienced a resurgence, with renewed patronage from high-ranking officials, though its primary social foundation remained among commoners. Following the Qing dynasty's establishment, the sect completely lost

imperial favor, completing its transition from court religion to a folk belief system that permeated daily life.

During this transformation, the image of the "Seven Quanzhen Masters" underwent significant evolution. Their sacred attributes diminished while legendary elements became more prominent. Portrayed initially as transcendent patriarchs in hagiographies and stone inscriptions, their narratives were reinterpreted through popular cultural forms such as operas, novels, and precious scrolls (baojuan) while generating regional religious legends and folk traditions. This process marked their symbolic descent from divine status into secular society. The evolving representations of the Seven Masters during this period can be analyzed through three primary dimensions:

2.2.1. Diverse Legends of Deeds

After their integration into folk culture, the retelling of the deeds of the Seven Immortals generally followed three main trajectories. First was the preservation of the official religious narrative, passed down from works such as the *Biographies of the Seven True Man* 七真仙傳 to subsequent generations. Later generations of calligraphers mostly followed the original records. Although the core deeds were the same as in the original stories, there were many deletions and changes to the wording and details, though the biographies of the Quanzhen Ancestral Masters were retained. For example, the Yuan Dynasty's *Continued Compilation of the Comprehensive Mirror of Authentic Immortals Embodying the Tao Through the Ages* 歷世真仙體道通鑒續編, the Ming Dynasty's *Illustrated Complete Biographies of the Arrayed Immortals* 有象列仙全傳 and *the Seven True men on the Seas* 海上七真人傳, and the Qing Dynasty's *History of Immortals in Every Dynasty* 歷代神仙史 and *Immortal Table of White Clouds* 白雲仙表 are all biographies.

The second direction of retelling the deeds of the Seven Immortals was literary and artistic creation based on the deeds of the "Seven Masters of Quanzhen", which started during the Yuan Dynasty. At that time, the Shenxian Daohua 神仙道化 (Immortal Enlightenment) drama was popular (Wang 2004). With this refined literary style, the Seven Masters of Quanzhen had already become part of everyday life in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties. The books that were passed down include *Ma Danyang Thrice Enlightens Ren Fengzi* 馬丹陽三度任瘋子and *Ma Danyang Enlightens and liberates Liu Xingshou* 馬丹陽度脫劉行首. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, novels and storytelling literature based on the deeds of the Seven Immortals began to emerge. While these texts were rooted in the *biographies of the Seven True Man*, they added many plot elements that enhanced readability and drama. Inherited from the anonymous *Biography of Seven True Immortals and Patriarchs*七真祖師列仙傳 of the Ming Dynasty, there are two complete surviving Seven True novels: *The Cause-Effect Biographies of the Seven True* 七真因果傳, compiled by Huang Yongliang in 1893, and *The History of Golden Lotus Immortals* 金蓮仙史, compiled by Pan Chang 潘昶 in 1904. As the preface of *The Cause-Effect Biographies of the Seven True* says, their creative purpose is to enlighten the world:

Last year, I returned to Sichuan from Qin and arrived at the Prime Minister's ancestral hall. I pondered deeply, delved into the deeds of the Seven True man, and obtained their essence. I spent my days drafting, and compiled them into a book called '*Seven True Causes and Effects*'. Using popular language to promote prequels, using human emotions and social situations to lead foolishness, awakening people's hearts with sin and happiness, and enlightening future generations with the subtle wisdom of the Tao, it is not helpless in persuading goodness and punishing wrongdoing.

> 昨歲自秦返蜀，落于丞相祠堂，默思熟想，窮究七真之事，得其精微，終日草稿，編集成書，名曰《七真因果》。以通俗語言鼓吹前傳，以人情世態接引愚頑， 以罪福醒悟人心，以道妙開化後世，其于勸善懲過不爲無助。 (Huang 1999, p. 1)

Its content is more refined and fictionalized. It is based on the biographies of the Seven Masters of Quanzhen, and it includes more dramatic and conflicting plots, such as "monks used the empress's hands to poison Qiu Chuji". The language is also more vulgar and fluent, showcasing the mature novel style of the Ming and Qing dynasties. There is another literary genre, called "Baojuan", or folk singing literature, that includes texts such as *The Precious Biographies of the Seven True Celestial Immortals* 七真天仙寶傳 and *The Precious Scrolls of the Seven True* 七真寶卷. This genre is often associated with folk religion, and its creative purpose deviates from the Quanzhen Taoist tradition. The content roughly follows the *Biography of Seven True Immortals and Patriarchs*, with little deviation from the novels.

The third direction of the retelling of the deeds of the Seven Immortals was religious legends born in combination with regional characteristics, which include the many stories passed down through the joint efforts of Quanzhen believers and local people in the places where the Seven Masters of Quanzhen once arrived or on the ruins of old Taoist temples. For example, Ma Yu once preached in the areas of Fushan 福山 and Huangxian 黃縣, which gave rise to the legend of the "Danyang Shadow 丹陽影". In the preface of Xiao Wenwei 蕭文蔚's *Danyang Shadow Chronicles* 丹陽影記事, written in the Qing Dynasty, it is said that "there is an old stone on Zhiyang 芝陽 Mountain, which is as far sighted as a human shape, with overall clothing and scarves, and is said to be the immortal shadow of Ma Danyang 芝陽山有老石，遠視若人形，巾服俱齊，相傳爲馬丹陽仙影" (He and Wang 2004, p. 674). This type of legend is the most fragmented and challenging to connect, but it best showcases the deep-rooted and enduring vitality of the "Quanzhen Seven Masters" in folk narrative.

2.2.2. The Proliferation of Visual Representations Through Diverse Media

Since the Jin and Yuan dynasties, depictions of the "Seven Quanzhen Masters" multiplied in quantity and variety. Compared to the earlier period dominated by official paintings and sculptures, two significant shifts emerged during the Ming and Qing eras: an expansion of artistic creators and a diversification of creative purposes.

From the Ming dynasty onward, those producing images of the Seven Masters were no longer limited to Quanzhen-affiliated institutions or even Daoist practitioners and devotees. The pool of creators broadened to include literati scholars, folk artists, and adherents of other religious traditions. This expansion led to a proliferation of artistic media and uneven quality in execution. Alongside illustrations in biographical novels, meticulously crafted works like the *Baoshan Scroll* 寶善卷 emerged alongside crude porcelain paintings and woodblock prints found in common households (Qin 2024).

Distinct creative motivations accompanied this diversification. Unlike the reverential intent of disciples and followers during the Jin–Yuan period, Ming–Qing depictions served varied purposes: imperial commissions sought longevity through Daoist immortals, scholar-devotees created novel illustrations to enlighten the populace, and folk industries crafted statues to venerate ancestral masters. Across these divergent aims and media, the imagery of the Seven Masters evolved into manifold forms. This adaptability facilitated broader dissemination and deeper integration into cultural consciousness, transforming the Seven Masters' representations into vehicles for both spiritual and secular narratives.

2.2.3. Their Paradoxical Status as Distant Yet Intimate Figures in Popular Consciousness

Qiu Chuji passed away in 1227 and, by the Qing dynasty, over four centuries had elapsed. As Quanzhen Daoism severed ties with ruling elites and shed its identity as a lofty institutional religion, its cultural legacy underwent profound assimilation and transformation among the populace. Though temporally distant, the "Seven Quanzhen Masters" paradoxically grew more accessible in social relevance. For instance, Qiu Chuji was vener-

ated as the patron saint of Beijing's jade craftsmanship during the Qing period, embodying the sect's transition from celestial authority to earthly utility. This dual perception—rooted in historical remoteness yet enmeshed in daily life—reflects how Quanzhen's sacred narratives were reconfigured into folkloric frameworks, where reverence coexisted with pragmatic adaptation to occupational and communal needs. *The Good Karma Stele of Jade Industry Association in Baiyun Temple* 白雲觀玉器業公會善緣碑 states the following:

Keeping in mind of poor land and people in Youzhou, he (Qiu Chuji) employed the method of turning stones into jade, and tought the people on the markets with the technique of treating jade. As a result, stones from Yanjing became fine jades, tough and rough ones shined light and moisture. There were good techniques in carving ever since, and there were no worries of lack of good material for mining or engraving. Colourful treatures poured out abundantly from deep mountains and grand marshes. Jade industry was second to none in the markets of Yan, and peaple who made a living this way are more than ten thousand families. Ever since he arrived at the grand Dao, the True Man of Qiu also died in this temple. Everyone in the capital of Yan 燕 remanbers him, and comes in groups to offer their blessings on each of his birthday.

> （丘處機）慨念幽州地瘠民困，乃以點石成玉之法，教市人習治玉之術。由是，燕京石變爲瑾瑜，粗澀發爲光潤，雕琢既有良法，攻采不患無材，而深山大澤瑰寶紛呈，燕市之中，玉業乃首屈壹指，食其道者，奚止萬家。自真人大道既成，既在本觀羽化。都人思之，每至誕辰，群來拜祝。 (Li 2003, p. 733)

In summary, the legendary increase in weight and the erosion of sacredness were the main themes of the image changes in the "Quanzhen Seven Masters" in the Ming and Qing dynasties. This change was first triggered by the collapse of the structural support for Quanzhen Taoism during the downfall of the Yuan Dynasty, causing the image of the "Quanzhen Seven Masters" to change from solidification to fluidity. Second, when their stories entered folk culture, they naturally had to adapt to the diverse needs of the people, including entertainment stories, ethical education, helping the world and people, and other folk religious associations. Due to these diverse needs, the image of the "Seven Masters of Quanzhen" evolved in different forms. Finally, the media that promoted their image also diversified from official inscriptions and biographies to books, Bao Juan 寶卷, novels, folk paintings, etc. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, novels were particularly popular, and the stories of the "Seven Masters of Quanzhen" were more easily spread in this form than via poetry and biography. These elements shaped the secular immortal image of the "Seven Masters of Quanzhen" during this period.

Two points worth mentioning are that during this period, even though the "Quanzhen Seven Masters" had already stepped down from the altar of the gods and entered the secular world, they still had the status of immortals. The stories recorded in novels and biographies primarily detailed their transcendence to immortals from human beings or manifestation as immortals. At the same time, the folk dissemination of the "Seven Masters" had not yet reached the height of the "Eight Immortals 八仙". Their legends mainly highlighted how they relied on their deeds and palace relics, constantly receiving correction from the Quanzhen Taoist priests. This situation continued until Jin Yong 金庸 started writing, where the image of the "Seven Masters of Quanzhen" once again underwent a huge turning point.

2.3. Commercial Cultural–Entertainment Symbols and the Deconstruction of Consumption Paradigms

The "Seven Masters of Quanzhen" were historical figures, and the Quanzhen Taoist lineage continues to this day. Unlike the "Eight Immortals", the stories of the seven true Daoist ancestors could not be as freely transformed or circulated among the people. Nevertheless, despite various limitations, their image has continued to radiate enduring vital-

ity, even after eight hundred years. In 1957, Jin Yong began serializing *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* 射雕英雄傳 in the *Hong Kong Business Daily* 香港商報. In the sixth episode "Yading Yizhen 崖頂疑陣 (Cliff Top Mystery Array)", *Ma Yu* appeared and introduced the "Seven Masters of Quanzhen" under Wang Chongyang. Since then, seven of them have appeared successively and, in the sequel *The Return of the Condor Heroes* 神雕俠侶, they still occupy an important role in the protagonist Yang Guo 楊過's youth. Due to the popularity of two martial arts novels, the characters have also been featured on screen. One or two versions of the popular TV series, *Legend of the Condor Heroes*, have been released every decade since the 1970s. In addition, there are countless movies and other derivative works. As a result, the "Quanzhen Seven Masters" have gradually become a well-known image, especially among the younger generation. Among younger generations, most people do not encounter the Quanzhen Seven Masters through the sect itself, instead first experiencing their fictionalized portrayals in wuxia (武俠 martial arts) literature and media, which subsequently spark recognition of the historical Quanzhen tradition.

From then on, the image of the "Quanzhen Seven Masters" entered the third stage, flowing out of Jin Yong's pen and spreading in the new society for decades. At present, the image of the "Quanzhen Seven Masters" in the public's mind is very different from that in the Qizhen 七真 novels of the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China 民國. It has undergone an almost complete transformation and is still described in terms of deeds, images, and status. It is difficult to see the continuity with the above two stages.

2.3.1. Complete Fabrication of the Story

Even after the image of the "Seven Masters of Quanzhen" in the Ming and Qing dynasties entered the folk and secularized society, the deeds in their novels and Bao Juan 寶卷 still followed the Quanzhen biographies of the Jin and Yuan dynasties, and the Quanzhen biographies of the Jin and Yuan dynasties were based on the true deeds of the Seven Masters of Quanzhen, which is a continuous thread. However, in Jin Yong's writing, the Quanzhen narrative completely disappeared. The Seven Masters of Quanzhen were written as symbols, and their personalities, words, and actions were fictionalized, in line with the plot and worldview of *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* 射雕英雄傳. The original text introduces the following idea:

The founder of Quanzhen Sect, Wang Chongyang, taught Seven Masters, who were well-known in the martial arts world: the eldest disciple, Danyang Zi 丹陽子 Ma Yu, the second disciple, Changzhen Zi 長真子 Tan Chuduan, and the younger ones, as follows: Changsheng Zi 長生子 Liu Chuxuan, Changchun Zi 長春子 Qiu Chuji, Yuyang Zi 玉陽子Wang Chuyi, Guangning Zi 廣寧子 Hao Datong 郝大通, and the seventh and last disciple, Qingjing Sanren 清淨散人 Sun Bu'er, who was the wife of Ma Yu before he became a Daoist monk. Among the Seven Masters of Quanzhen, Qiu Chuji is the most famous and powerful, followed by Wang Chuyi of Yuyang Zi. He once won a bet with someone, which was to stand alone with a limp, leaning over a deep valley with his big sleeves fluttering, swaying back and forth, just to scare dozens of heroes from Shandong 山東 and Hebei 河北 (provinces), leaving them dizzy and faint, unable to lower their lifted tongues, and thus earned himself the title of "Iron Foot Immortal".

> 全真教創教祖師王重陽門下七子，武林中見聞稍廣的無不知名:大弟子丹陽子馬鈺，二弟子長真子譚處端，以下是長生子劉處玄、長春子丘處機、玉陽子王處壹、廣甯子郝大通，最末第七弟子清淨散人孫不二，則是馬鈺出家以前所娶的妻子……全真七子中丘處機威名最盛，其次則屬玉陽子王處壹。他某次與人賭勝，曾獨足跛立，憑臨萬丈深谷之上，大袖飄飄，前搖後擺，只嚇得山東河北數十位英雄好漢目迷神眩，挢舌不下，因而得了個"鐵腳仙"的名號。 (Jin 2011, p. 198)

There are seven scenes in Jin Yong's novels where the "Seven Masters of Quanzhen" appear, including Qiu Chuji's appearance on a snowy night in *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*, Ma Yu's surprise formation and retreat of *Mei* Chaofeng 梅超風, the Seven Masters of Quanzhen's confrontation with Huang Yaoshi 黃藥師 in the Tian Gang Beidou Formation, Yang Guo's admission to the Quanzhen Sect in *The Return of the Condor Heroes* 神雕俠侶, Hao Datong 郝大通's accidental killing of Sun Popo 孫婆婆 in law, Qiu Chuji's reprimand of Yang Guo, and Jin Lun Fa Wang 金輪法王's provocation of the Seven Masters of Quanzhen. It is clear that this narrative is not even loosely based on legendary events but is entirely a fabrication by the novelist to add color to the story. Therefore, Jin Yong's "Seven Masters of Quanzhen" deviated from the seven true narratives passed down for hundreds of years by previous generations.

2.3.2. The Portrait Depicts the Transition from the Mountains to the Martial Arts World

After Jin Yong, the image of the Seven Masters of Quanzhen was developed by illustrations in martial arts novels and the screen appearances of actors. In accordance with the images introduced in previous generations of Qizhen novels or scrolls, the Seven Masters of Quanzhen still dress as Taoist priests and try their best to match the behavior of Quanzhen Taoists. However, there is a crucial difference that cannot be ignored—in all versions, the "Quanzhen Seven Masters" carry a sword. These swords were only added in Jin Yong's martial arts stories. This represents the identity of the martial arts world, rather than the status of immortals, and indicates that the "Seven True Sons" are on one side in the struggle and no longer the masters of mountain and forest cultivation.

2.3.3. The Entertainment Symbols in the Eyes of the Audience

Due to the popularity of Jin Yong's martial arts world, the sacred and legendary folk immortals in the image of the "Quanzhen Seven Masters" were squeezed into a corner. Today, when people talk about the Seven Masters of Quanzhen, they are seen as no different from the Jiangnan Seven Monsters 江南七怪. They are only treated as characters in novels, and their fictional plots are discussed. In contemporary perception, the "Seven Quanzhen Masters" no longer occupy their traditional roles as revered patriarchs or pragmatic immortals tasked with spiritual salvation, quests for transcendence, or ethical instruction. Instead, they exist solely as literary constructs within fictional universes. What captivates audiences now are their dramatized relationships with other fictional characters, while few engage with the millennial religious legacy underpinning their historical significance. In the twelfth episode of *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* 射雕英雄傳, titled " Kanglong Youhui 亢龍有悔 (the Bursting Dragon has some regret)", Huang Rong 黃蓉 said, "Quanzhen Sect? Well, there is a Daoist surnamed Qiu, a Taoist surnamed Wang, and one surnamed Ma, all of whom are ox nosed Daoists. I observe they are just as common. They engage in physical battles with others, and then get poisoned or injured within just three or two moves. 全真教？嗯，有壹個姓丘、壹個姓王，還有壹個姓馬的，都是牛鼻子道士，我瞧他們也稀松平常，跟人家動手，三招兩式，便中毒受傷 (Jin 2011, p. 398)". This narrative position is unprecedented in previous biographical novels and projected onto readers and audiences.

From the perspective of Jin Yong, his selection of the "Quanzhen Seven Masters" was accidental. However, the transformation of their image inevitably entered the current third stage. In the second half of the 20th century, with the change in social systems, an increase in industrial capabilities, and the arrival of the information age, the folk structure that supported the image of the previous stage no longer existed. Instead, a wave of commercial society emerged, significantly reducing the mystique of religion and causing it to no longer occupy people's daily thoughts. In this context, the image of the "Quanzhen Seven Masters" introduced to popular culture will inevitably face a demand for commercialization

and be interpreted in entertainment media such as novels, movies, anime, short videos, and online literature. Then, the new social structure, functional requirements, and intermediary infrastructure will naturally shape it into a suitable image.

Throughout history, the image of the Seven Masters has undergone thorough deconstruction. Having descended from divine status to secular prominence in earlier stages, they are demoted further: from celestial beings to flawed mortals. They exhibit human emotions such as joy and anger, engage in conflicts and schemes, and harbor personal biases and allegiances. Since the post-Jin Yong era, their cultural utilization has persisted unabated over the past decade. For instance, the 2013 film *Stop Killing Order* 止殺令 dramatizes Qiu Chuji's epic westward journey to persuade Genghis Khan 成吉思汗 and cease mass killings. The ongoing comic series *The Outcast* 一人之下 (2015–present) incorporates the Quanzhen Longmen sect into its narrative. Meanwhile, short videos and online literature have exponentially amplified direct and adapted references to the Seven Masters. In these works, "Quanzhen" increasingly functions as fragmented cultural–entertainment symbols, surpassing even Jin Yong's wuxia adaptations in their secularization, signaling the irreversible divergence of the Seven Masters' image from its religious origins.

In his doctoral dissertation, *A Study of the Religious Narratives of Quanzhen Patriarchs*, Han Zhangang briefly discusses cultural–entertainment works featuring Quanzhen patriarchs in modern and contemporary eras. He contends that while Jin Yong was familiar with the traditional Seven Trues' hagiographies, his attitude lacked reverence and he significantly advanced the deconstruction of these figures, transforming them from celestial immortals into flesh-and-blood mortals (Han 2020). This study fundamentally concurs with Han's assertion, yet adopts a more constructive perspective: Jin Yong's approach to the Seven Masters lacks the veneration characteristic of traditional Daoist biographers, but it is by no means predominantly mocking or derisive. Beyond the crowd-pleasing theatrics, Jin Yong's portrayal remains decidedly affirmative. Across two epic novels—*The Legend of the Condor Heroes* and *The Return of the Condor Heroes*—he designates the protagonists as disciples of the Seven Masters, meticulously crafting their speech, attire, and martial arts with a distinctly Daoist sensibility. Stripping away plot-driven characterizations imposed by narrative exigencies, one discovers undeniable affinities between these literary constructs and their ancient archetypes.

Surveying the historical evolution of the "Seven Quanzhen Masters" imagery reveals a clear pattern: their representations consistently morph to align with shifting sociocultural environments. Crucially, each transformation precipitates a dramatic expansion in their cultural reach. This adaptive uniqueness—rare among literary or artistic archetypes—constitutes the deepest rhizome sustaining the enduring vitality of their symbolism. Their malleability reflects and actively participates in the dialectic between tradition and modernity, as well as sacred memory and profane reinvention.

3. Passing on the Torch: The Taoist Centric Essence Amid Diverse Images

In the more than 800 years from the 12th century to the 21st century, the image of the "Seven Masters of Quanzhen" has undergone two major transformations and exists in three different states. In this long period of evolution, increasing numbers of people participated in the narration of images, and the scope of image dissemination has also become wider. However, the cultural resilience of this set of changing images is due to the unchanging parts deep within them. The image of the "Seven Masters of Quanzhen" has been constantly used by creators from ancient to modern times. Regardless of how they intentionally or unintentionally deconstruct and change this traditional image, they cannot strip its most vital roots: in the visible layer, this refers to the ritual of Quanzhen Taoism. In the hidden layer, this is the transcendent consciousness of Taoism.

3.1. The Philosophical Foundation of the Seven Perfected Ones' Cultivation and Quanzhen Doctrine

The Seven Masters of Quanzhen, as the first-generation disciples of Wang Chongyang and founding patriarchs of the Quanzhen tradition, inherited their core cultivation theories and doctrines from him, although these evolved through individual interpretations. Broadly conceptualized, their practice centered on the "dual cultivation of nature (xing 性) and life (ming 命)" as the method to attain transcendence—a state of spiritual and corporeal liberation from worldly constraints as celestial immortals. This pursuit adhered to the principle of "authentic inner practice (zhen gong 真功) and outer conduct (zhen xing 真行)", which inherently generated their moral commitment to "delivering all beings through salvation" (jishi duren 濟世度人).

"Dual cultivation of nature and life" constitutes the core of internal alchemy (neidan 內丹) theory. As an inheritor of the Zhong-Lü Internal Alchemy tradition (Zhong-Lü neidan dao 鐘呂內丹道), Wang Chongyang embraced its axiom: "Cultivating nature alone while neglecting life—this is the primary ailment of spiritual practice." 只修性，不修命，此是修行第一病。(Lü 1992, p. 180). Following his restructuring and innovation of these doctrines, he transmitted them to the Seven Masters of Quanzhen. While "nature" and "life" defy simplistic definitions, "nature" broadly denotes the original mind (benxin 本心), true essence (zhenxing 真性), or spirit (shen 神); "life" encompasses vitality, essence (jing 精), and vital energy (qi 氣). Quanzhen prioritizes "nature cultivation first, life cultivation second" (xian xing hou ming 先性後命). Cultivating "nature" involves "recognizing the mind to perceive one's true nature" (shixin jianxing 識心見性). Wang Chongyang distinguished the "profane mind" (fanxin 凡心) from the "original mind" (benxin 本心)—an innate, serene, and empty core obscured by the fluctuating profane mind. Realizing this immutable original mind, synonymous with true nature, is the foundation of practice. Yet, this realization is not the ultimate goal; the culmination lies in achieving "marvelous integration of form and spirit" (xingshen jumiao 形神俱妙) through holistic dual cultivation. Following mental refinement is engagement in "life cultivation" (minggong 命功): refining essence into qi, merging essence and qi into spirit, and then refining the spirit to return to emptiness (lianshen huanxu 煉神還虛)—a process likened to internal alchemical firing within the bodily crucible, progressing from the "three treasures" (sanbao 三寶; jing, qi, shen) toward primordial unity.

A defining Quanzhen feature is the supremacy of "nature cultivation" over "life cultivation", termed "nature-dominant, life-subordinate" (xing zhu ming fu 性主命副). This manifests in the Seven Masters' systematic renunciation of desires to attain mental stillness. Practically, it materialized as "ascetic trials" (kuxing shilian 苦行試煉); namely, deliberate bodily hardship to temper the mind. Five prevalent methods emerged: begging (qitao 乞討), distant wandering (yuanyou 遠遊), enclosed meditation (zuohuan 坐環), battling sleep demons (zhan shuimo 戰睡魔), and combating worldly entanglements (da chenlao 打塵勞).

Guided by this framework, the Seven Masters dedicated their lives to ascetic practice, culminating in the Daoist ideal: liberation from material attachments, unity of form and spirit, and transcendence beyond the mundane.

Building upon the theory of "dual cultivation of nature and life" (xingming shuangxiu 性命双修), Wang Chongyang further established the principle of "dual perfection in practice and conduct" (gongxing shuangquan 功行雙全) through the complementary dimensions of "authentic inner practice (zhen gong 真功) and outer conduct (zhen xing 真行)", ultimately actualizing the ideal that "When practice and conduct reach perfection, one attains complete authenticity and transcendent immortality. 功行雙全，全真而仙". These concepts may be understood literally: zhen gong denotes inner cultivation (neigong 內功)—the genuine practice of self-refinement—and zhen xing signifies external engagement

(waixing 外行)—authentic interaction with the world. Thus, we can discern their doctrinal significance: zhen gong imposes requirements for personal cultivation, while zhen xing dictates behavioral standards for Quanzhen adepts in societal contexts—extending beyond ascetic practice to encompass "cultivating benevolence and virtue, aiding the poor and suffering, harboring intent to rescue those in distress, guiding the virtuous toward Daoist practice, prioritizing others over oneself, and acting selflessly toward all beings" (Jin 1988, vol. 23, p. 697).

Ideologically, this reflects Quanzhen's "harmonization of three teachings" (sanjiao heyi 三教合一), integrating Confucian ethics of societal benevolence (ren 仁) with inner spiritual cultivation. Consequently, the Seven Masters—though pursuing personal transcendence—embodied "delivering beings through salvation." As noted earlier, even during Quanzhen's Jin–Yuan inception, popular "divine transformation plays" (shenxian daohua xi 神仙道化戲) like *Ma Danyang Thrice Enlightens Ren Fengzi* 馬丹陽三度任瘋子 dramatized this salvific mission.

Thus, we can discern the foundational essence of the "Seven Quanzhen Masters" archetype: Quanzhen's internal alchemy theory, the moral imperative of universal salvation, and the Daoist transcendent ideal. Historically, all narratives about them orbited these three pillars. In Jin Yong's novels and contemporary cultural productions, these elements recede from prominence but persist as a latent substratum transmuted from explicit doctrine to implicit cultural DNA.

3.2. The Enduring Internal Alchemy Framework Amidst Transformation

Within Jin Yong's martial arts literary universe, the foundational identities of the Seven Quanzhen Masters remain unchanged: they persist as the seven principal disciples of Daoist patriarch Wang Chongyang, constituting the core leadership of the orthodox Quanzhen Sect within the martial arts world. Jin Yong crafts differentiated characterizations for each, with three figures receiving nuanced portrayals aligned with their historical prominence. Qiu Chuji is portrayed as the most formidable martial artist, epitomizing fiery chivalry, emphasizing his impassioned valor. Ma Yu possesses secondary martial prowess; his tranquil demeanor most authentically embodies Daoist cultivation in speech and conduct. Wang Chuyi is characterized by steadfast integrity, labeled the "Iron-Footed Immortal" (Tiejiao Xian 鐵腳仙). The remaining four—Tan Chuduan, Liu Chuxuan, Hao Datong, and Sun Bu'er—primarily function as functional supporting roles. Collectively, they achieve exceptional combat efficacy through the "Celestial Dipper Formation" (Tiangang Beidou Zhen 天罡北斗陣). While their representations largely remain positive, they simultaneously exhibit sectarian biases endemic to the martial world and remain perpetually entangled in conflicts in the martial arts world. Within this character constellation—divergent from historical prototypes—we first discern how Quanzhen's internal alchemy (nei dan 內丹) framework significantly informs their martial philosophy.

As mentioned noted in the *Legend of the Condor Heroes*, when the Seven Masters of Quanzhen are introduced, a quote is cited that emphasizes Wang Chuyi's title as the "Iron footed Immortal 鐵腳仙." It was said that he once won a bet with others and stood with a limp in front of a deep valley, his sleeves fluttering, to display his abilities. After this paragraph in the original text, another sentence explains that "He lived in the cave for nine years, practicing diligently. Qiu Chuji also greatly admired his martial arts. He once gave him a poem, including such phrases as 'Stand facing the sunshine during the hottest summer days, sleep hugging snow during the coldest winter days', describing the depth of his inner strength 他洞居九年，刻苦修練，丘處機對他的功夫也甚佩服，曾送他壹首詩，內有'九夏迎陽立，三冬抱雪眠'等語，描述他內功之深" (Jin 2011, p. 198).

In history, Wang Chuyi 王處一 did indeed undergo nine years of rigorous cultivation. He successively lived in seclusion in Yanxia Cave 煙霞洞 in Kunyu Mountain 昆嵛山, and Yunguang Cave 雲光洞 in Tiecha Mountain 鐵槎山. He was also known for standing alone on a cliff and being known as the "Iron footed Immortal". Quanzhen emphasizes the cultivation of the mind 心 and nature 性, which often requires asceticism and cultivation (Wu and Wang 2013). In Jin Yong's martial arts stories, this tradition is reflected in the story of the origin of Wang Chuyi 王處一's martial arts skills. In fact, this discourse on "asceticism and trials" was passed down through several changes over thousands of years. In the biography of Quanzhen's founder, *Records of the Orthodox Golden Lotus* 金蓮正宗記, this ideal is described as "… begging for food in Ruchuan… then walked onto the bridge, silently sitting, seeking nothing when hungry or thirsty, remaining unchanged by the cold or heat. If someone feeds him, he eats; if not, he does not. 乞食于汝川……遂往橋上，默然靜坐，饑渴不求，寒暑不變。人饋則食，不饋則否" (Qin and Sima 1989, p. 475). In the drama *Ma Danyang Thrice Enlightens Ren Fengzi* 馬丹陽三度任瘋子, there are instructions to "fetch 500 barrels of water in the morning, 500 barrels of water at noon, and 500 barrels of water when it is late. Pulling up the wheel tackles, leaning against the balks, digging the beds, working hard, enduring hardships 早晨打五百桶水，日中打五百桶水，天晚打五百桶水。繳轆轤，偎隴兒，撥畦兒，打勤勞，受辛苦" (Ma 1999, p. 47). In the Seven Masters novel *The Cause-Effect Biographies of the Seven True* 七真因果傳, this ideal is written as "Senior Brother, how can you speak of hardship? The word 'hardship' is a test for us practitioners. If we cannot bear hardship, how can we practice 師兄何言辛苦，這苦字乃是我們修行人的考證，受不了苦，焉能修行" (Qin and Sima 1989, p. 125). Jin Yong may not have been aware of it, but when he mentioned the "Seven Masters of Quanzhen" in the novel, this refined Taoist practice naturally followed. Even the "*Twenty Four Pithy Formulae of Golden Pass Jade Lock* 金關玉鎖二十四訣" (Jin 2011, p. 199) taught by Master Ma Yu 馬鈺 in Zhu Cong 朱聰's later speech is derived from the application of *The Golden Guan Jade Lock Technique of Chongyang Zhenren* 重陽真人金關玉鎖訣 and *The Twenty Four Techniques of Danyang Taught by Chongyang Zhenren* 重陽真人授丹陽二十四訣. This ideal is also consistent with the historical biographies that often require the Seven Masters of Quanzhen to master or comprehend Wang Chongyang's theory of life skills after mastering their sexual skills.

This demonstrates Jin Yong's selective adoption of the Seven Perfected Trues' internal alchemy framework centered on the "dual cultivation of nature and life" (xingming shuangxiu 性命双修). When Jin Yong wrote the martial art of "Innate Skill 先天功", he naturally emphasized "Innate Qi 先天一氣", and his Quanzhen Sect's internal skill particularly emphasizes the mind, which is more in line with the true Quanzhen. When Ma Yu 馬鈺 taught Guo Jing, he said, "When thinking is steady, emotions are forgotten; when body is given up, qi flows; when mind is dead, the spirit is alive; when yang is strong, yin disappears 思定則情忘, 體虛則氣運, 心死則神活, 陽盛則陰消" (Jin 2011, p. 176). Zhou Botong 周伯通 sighed with emotion about Wang Chongyang, saying, "He said that when I learned martial arts, I became obsessed and was too persistent, dismatching the Taoist principle of tranquility and inaction… Even if I devoted my whole to diligent practicing, I would never reach the pinnacle 他說我學武學得發了癡，過于執著，不是道家清靜無爲的道理……就算畢生勤修苦練，終究達不到絕頂之境" (Jin 2011, pp. 569–70). Such portrayals constitute an unconscious assimilation of Quanzhen's core practice—"recognizing the mind to perceive true nature" (*shixin jianxing* 識心見性). Crucially, they inadvertently preserve Quanzhen's foundational logic of "nature dominating, life subordinate" (*xing zhu ming fu* 性主命副). By equating martial obsession with "the profane mind obstructing the Dao" (*fanxin zhang dao* 凡心障道), the narrative asserts that martial mastery ultimately requires transcendence through mental purification—an unmistakable reflection of Quanzhen's religious philosophy.

Nevertheless, Jin Yong's appropriation manifests significant conceptual distortions. Two illustrative examples include Wang Chuyi's historical cave-dwelling asceticism—epitomized by the verse "facing summer sun at noon, embracing winter snow in sleep"—is reduced to a legendary display of martial prowess. This simplification obscures the religious essence of eradicating the profane mind through ascetic trials. The technicalization of cultivation theory transmutes "recognizing the mind to perceive true nature" into operable internal energy formulas like the *Twenty Four Pithy Formulae of Golden Pass Jade Lock*, partially diverging from internal alchemy's metaphysical depth.

As noted previously, however, wuxia novels in contemporary commercial contexts differ fundamentally from premodern doctrinal literature. Jin Yong leverages religious aesthetics to construct his narrative world, yet subordinates this to popular literature's demand for "humanized characters." When the Seven Masters are compelled to embody jianghu vendettas and sectarian strife, their religious sanctity inevitably yields to narrative imperatives. Paradoxically, precisely because Jin Yong instrumentalizes Quanzhen doctrine as semiotic resources rather than proselytizing it, the tradition's core tenets persist within their characterizations. This unintended fidelity testifies to the profound integration of Quanzhen's philosophical essence with the archetypal identity of the Seven Masters.

This metaphorical transformation has also grown in many games and immortal 仙侠 novels that have emerged in the past decade. Whenever the story involves the Seven Masters of Quanzhen, their practice settings are often based on the internal alchemy (nei dan 内丹) system. From the creator's perspective, this is because the practice theory of Quanzhen's dual cultivation of form and life has vitality and appeal. As foundational prototypes that inspire creative adaptation, the Seven Masters remain embedded in these works—even after their fictional images are reimagined.

3.3. Convergence and Divergence in the Ethics of Universal Salvation

If Jin Yong's adaptation of Quanzhen's internal alchemy theory manifests discernible transformations requiring scholarly excavation, the resonance between the Seven Trues' ethical ideal of "universal salvation" (*jishi duren* 濟世度人) and *wuxia* narrative conventions proves strikingly evident, albeit integrating through a dynamic interplay of friction and fusion.

The bedrock of Quanzhen thought lies in the "harmonization of three teachings" (*sanjiao heyi* 三教合一). Within this synthesis, the Confucian ethos of worldly engagement is prominently embedded in the Seven Masters' imagery. "Universal salvation" constituted their perennial philosophical stance across historical narratives. When transposed into Jin Yong's *wuxia* universe—predominantly orchestrated by Confucian-inflected chivalric morality (*xiayi guan* 侠義觀)—these ethical frameworks catalyzed profound mutual reinforcement.

Foremost is the concept of "delivering beings" (*duren* 度人). This motif, ubiquitously celebrated in premodern Seven Masters narratives—from Wang Chongyang enlightening his disciples to their subsequent salvific acts—formed an unbroken thread from Yuan-era *zaju* to Qing novels. Jin Yong perpetuated this tradition. In Chapter 5, "Drawing Bow at Condors 彎弓射雕" of *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*, the protagonist Guo Jing, struggling with martial training, encounters an unknown, gray-bearded Daoist:

Guo Jing scratched his head in bewilderment. Suddenly he prostrated himself, kowtowing dozens of times. The Daoist laughed: "Why kowtow to me?" A surge of emotion overwhelmed Guo Jing. Seeing the Daoist's compassionate countenance—as if meeting a kinsman—he burst into tears: "I… I'm too dull… I keep failing at martial arts…" … "Since destiny connects us", the Daoist said, "I shall impart methods for breathing, sitting, walking, and sleeping… Before sleep, empty your mind of all thought. Then lie sideways, breathing

softly—let no soul stir inward, no spirit wander outward.” … Nightly, Guo Jing meditated atop the cliff. Strangely, though taught no combat techniques, his agility grew steadily.

> 郭靖摸頭騷耳，不知如何是好，忽地撲翻在地，砰砰砰不住磕頭，一口氣也不知磕了幾十個。道士笑道：“你向我磕頭幹什麼？”郭靖心裏一酸，見到那道士面色慈祥，猶如遇到親人一般，似乎不論什麼事都可向他傾吐，忽然兩滴大大的眼淚從臉頰上流了下來，哽咽道：“我我……我蠢得很，功夫老學不會。”……“總算你我有緣，我就傳你一些呼吸、坐下、行路、睡覺的法子”……“睡覺之前，必須 腦中空明澄澈，沒一絲思慮。然後斂身側臥，鼻息綿綿，魂不內蕩，神不外遊。” ……郭靖夜夜在崖頂打坐練氣。說也奇怪，那道人並沒教他一手半腳武功，然而他日間練武之時，竟漸漸身輕足健。 (Jin 2011, pp. 170–75)

This encounter—an anonymous guide delivering enlightenment amid crisis—faithfully replicates the archetypal “deliverance narrative” inherited from earlier traditions.

Second is the ideal of “benefiting the world” (*jishi* 濟世). Since ancient times, Qiu Chuji (a prominent Taoist master) has been enshrined in legend for journeying thousands of miles westward to persuade Genghis Khan to cease his massacres—an act that has long been associated with the Daoist ideal of universal salvation. In the book *Records of the Orthodox Golden Lotus*, the following story is recorded:

At that time, Emperor Genghis was still sieging the Sultan country whiling not conquering it yet, and Liu Zhonglu, the imperial envoy, introduced Master (Qiu) to him. The emperor received him and said, “You did not answer any other country’s calling upon but came here, even though here is over ten thousand miles away. I greatly appreciate it”. Qiu answered, “I, who is from mountain and field, rose upon your imperial decree. It’s accomplished by Heaven, instead of human labor”. The emperor bestowed him food. When Qiu finished eating, the emperor asked, “What elixir of eternal life does the true man have to offer me, after taking such a long journey?” The master said, “I just have a way of hygiene, but have no medicine for longevity. The emperor appreciated his honesty. Therefore, he summoned Qiu everyday. Qiu thus advised the emperor to reduce killing and extinguish hobbies and desires, adding up to thousands of words from the beginning to the end. Yelü Jinqing (Yaluy Čučai) was just appointed as a valet, and recorded Qiu’s words as the “*Records of the celebrated meeting under the dark wind*”, which the emperor believed and adopted. The emperor asked Zhen Hai (Čingqai): “What title can we use to call this True man? “And Zhen Hai replied, “Some people respect him as a father or magister, some call him a true man, and some call him an immortal.” The emperor, saying, “From now on, we can call him immortal”.

> 是時，成吉思皇帝方守算端國未下，宣差劉仲祿乃以師見，帝勞之曰：“他國征聘皆不應命，遠逾萬裏而來此間，朕甚嘉之。”對曰：“山野奉诏而起者天也，非人力之所爲也。”上賜之食，食畢問曰：“真人遠來，有何長生之藥以資朕乎？”師曰：“但有衛生之道，而無長生之藥。”上愛其誠實。由是，每日召見，即勸之少殺戮，滅嗜欲，前後數千言，耶律晉卿方爲侍郎，錄其言以爲《玄風慶會錄》，皇帝皆信而用之。問鎮海曰：“真人當以何爲號？”鎮海奏曰：“有人尊之曰父師者， 有曰真人者，有曰神仙者。”上曰：“從今已往，可以神仙號之。” (Qin and Sima 1989, p. 468)

From the public perspective, narratives of transcendent beings (chaotuozhe 超脫者) delivering the afflicted bear striking affinity with chivalric storytelling (xiayi xushi 俠義敘事), thus curating greater cultural longevity. The 2013 film *An End to Killing* (Zhisha Ling 止殺令) revitalizes this lore, attesting to the enduring legacy of “universal salvation” within the Seven Masters’ archetype. Jin Yong similarly incorporates this tradition, not through direct narration but as character backstory for Qiu Chuji—projecting him into narratives of national salvation. At the start of *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*, Qiu single-handedly bat-

tles Jin soldiers to rescue descendants of loyal ministers, including the protagonist Guo Jing. Later, during the Xiangyang crisis, the Quanzhen Sect repeatedly aided Guo in defending the city. Even as secularized mortals, the Seven Masters retain their worldly salvific impulse within wuxia frameworks.

Nevertheless, this representation diverges from traditional narratives in two key aspects. The first difference is ultimate aims: Daoist "benefiting the world" serves as "merit accumulation" (jigong leixing 積功累行) for transcending samsara (lunhui 輪迴), whereas wuxia frames it as an immanent duty of "relieving the imperiled and aiding the distressed", culminating in earthly justice. The second difference is methodology: Quanzhen prioritizes moral transformation, while wuxia elevates violent retribution—a fundamental dichotomy between "exhorting goodness" and "eliminating evil".

Transplanted into the wuxia cosmos, the Seven Masters inevitably conform to its narrative laws, acquiring attributes divergent from their prototypes. Crucially, Jin Yong avoids depicting them as treacherous villains or ambitious warlords. Instead, they pursue martial ideals through Quanzhen's mind-cultivation path while upholding salvific ethics. Even entertainment-driven plot devices thus organically stem from the archetype's foundational ethos.

Thus, even as deconstruction dominates contemporary representations of the Seven Quanzhen Masters, we can still discern the persistence of their symbolic lineage. Their image should not be dismissed as mere reductive commercial icons severed from Quanzhen's religious narratives. Instead, the archetypal essence embedded within their imagery continues to permeate the collective subconscious, operating beyond conscious recognition. The enduring appeal of the Seven Masters across historical epochs stems from their profound aesthetic resonance—their capacity to evoke transcendent aspirations, regardless of representational metamorphoses. Even as their forms mutate, they remain semiotic vessels for humanity's timeless yearning to transcend the mundane, a quality that ensures their cultural vitality amid perpetual reinvention.

3.4. The Transcendent Consciousness Embodied in Heroes and Immortals

In the 25th episode of *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* 射雕英雄傳, titled Huangcun Yedian 荒村野店 (Wild Village Shop), when the Seven Masters of Quanzhen formed the Tian Gang Bei Dou Formation, Ma Yu 馬鈺 started and ended with six people in the middle reciting one sentence each. A poem was composed this way, and many versions of movies and TV dramas have utilized this unique plot device. The poem reads as follows:

> I have lived in a mobile home for almost a decade, (and) I run like a lunatic all day long with my hair uncombed.
>
> Chongyang Zi under Asiatic apple Pavilion, Taiyi Immortal in Lotus Leaf Boat.
>
> Nothing can be separated from the virtual shell, (but) some people can comprehend what was like before his birth.
>
> A smile without restraint when going out, clouds in West Lake and moon in the sky!
>
> 壹住行窩幾十年，蓬頭長日走如顛。
>
> 海棠亭下重陽子，蓮葉舟中太乙仙。
>
> 無物可離虛殼外，有人能悟未生前。
>
> 出門壹笑無拘礙，雲在西湖月在天！
>
> (Jin 2011, pp. 866–67)

This poem was composed by Cheng Yuanzhang 成元章 of Wucheng 蕪城 in the Qing Dynasty for Taoist Hu Daoxuan 胡道玄. The last line of the original poem was "East Lake 東湖", and Jin Yong 金庸 changed it to West Lake 西湖 to fit the scene. It should be said that

the aesthetic style of this poem is vastly different from the plot of the book at that moment in the story. When the Seven Masters of Quanzhen recite the poem, it is in the midst of a wild shop at night, and the atmosphere between the enemy and the masters is tense: Mei Chaofeng, who is just behind a door, is about to start a war. The poem is also closer to the poetic introductions of martial artists when they appear—similar to storytelling and singing—intended to elevate the character's style rather than convey the immortal path. However, even though the Seven Masters of Quanzhen in the plot did not engage in the pursuit of immortality through cultivation, this poem still praises their graceful demeanor. In other words, Jin Yong does not exaggerate the strength of their martial arts. Writing this poem means he was attracted by the extraordinary aesthetic when choosing such a group of images, and this is the inseparable idea contained in the image of the Seven Masters of Quanzhen mentioned in the previous section.

Moreover, the context of Quanzhen in Jin Yong's book implies this tendency. For example, Quanzhen's supreme martial art, "Innate Skill 先天功", has no descendants to learn it except for Wang Chongyang, nor is it related to the protagonist. From beginning to end, it only serves as a contextual background, more like a symbol representing the unattainable pursuit of Zhou Botong and Quanzhen's Seven Masters of Quanzhen.

Wang Chongyang himself is even more symbolic: he is portrayed as the most important person in the world and a symbol of the pinnacle of martial arts. However, he never appears, existing only through stories recounted by others, which closely resembles the style of fairy storytelling. Jin Yong wrote martial arts novels, in which immortals are naturally absent. In this worldview, he treated Wang Chongyang in such a way to preserve some of his untouchability, and this sense of mystery and legend is exactly what immortals need. In fact, in discussions about the on-screen appearance lines of the Seven Masters of Quanzhen, there are often voices criticizing a version of the martial arts style for being too strong and lacking in diversification, which shows the audience's psychological identification with the Seven Masters of Quanzhen as cultivators.

Distinct from internal alchemy theory and salvific ethics, transcendent consciousness operates as a subtler presence manifesting not through specific plot devices but synthetically across narrative textures. Wuxia fiction, fundamentally centered on human struggles, naturally precludes divine beings. However, two observations prove critical: the genre's core aesthetic lies in transcending corporeal limits and rupturing worldly constraints, constituting a secularized expression of transcendence. Amidst the jianghu's human conflicts—populated by villains, heroes, and schemers—the Seven Masters embody a Daoist transcendent aesthetic, a role neither contradictory nor diminished.

If we look at those lively scenes, it is inevitable that the "Quanzhen Seven Masters" are unrecognizable. However, if we try to set aside Jin Yong's religious narrative and view the image of the Seven Masters of Quanzhen from an aesthetic perspective, it is not difficult to see its continuity alongside that of the historical Seven Masters of Quanzhen. Thus, the collective subconscious yearning for Daoist transcendental consciousness constitutes the core reason for the public's acceptance of the Seven Masters of Quanzhen. Examining Jin Yong's deconstruction through this lens reveals it to be more akin to peeling away an outer shell—while the exterior may be removed, the essence remains fundamentally intact. As part of the evolving imagery of the Seven Masters, their contemporary transformation from divine archetypes to human figures continues in the same historical trajectory as their secularization during the Ming–Qing dynasties. These metamorphoses, spanning different eras, ultimately flow through the same undercurrent of Daoist soteriology that has persisted for centuries.

Transcendence remains Daoism's axial principle. Thus, regardless of representational shifts, the Seven Masters' imagery perpetually orientates toward this ultimate ideal. For

contemporary consumers of cultural–entertainment products, despite temporal transformations and intensified commodification waves, the yearning for transcendence persists as an enduring constant.

Examining Jin Yong's creative process necessitates a question: what did he seek when appropriating the Seven Masters archetype? Certainly not their physiognomy—historical portraits and statues already permitted artistic license—nor their deeds—his narratives required original plots. Rather, he appropriated precisely the philosophy of internal alchemy practice, the moral framework of universal salvation, and, most profoundly, the Daoist transcendent consciousness. These three pillars anchored the Seven Masters' identity. When transmuted into wuxia protagonists, these conceptual inheritances were transplanted organically into their new literary embodiment.

In the first episode of *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*, "Fengxue Jingbian" 風雪驚變 (The Wind and Snow), Qiu Chuji made his first appearance, which was also the first time Jin Yong wrote about these characters of the Seven Masters of Quanzhen. He wrote, "That person wore a bamboo hat and a straw rain cape, covered in white snow all over his body, and had a long sword slanted on his back. The yellow silk strip on the handle of the sword flew left and right in the wind, the wind and snow suffusing the sky. He strode alone with extraordinary courage 那道人頭戴鬥笠，身披蓑衣，全身罩滿了白雪，背上斜插壹柄長劍，劍把上黃色絲條在風中左右飛揚，風雪滿天，大步獨行，氣概非凡" (Jin 2011, p. 16). At the end of the chapter *Changchun True man Qiu* 長春丘真人 of *Records of the Orthodox Golden Lotus*, it is said that "The Nine Returning Sand was refined in the Panxi River, and he is the leading writer in articles on Tao-De. The Three Islands have a date, and he is a supposed to go, and to this day, phoenix birds and cranes are whooping and resting in the clouds. 磻溪煉就九還砂，道德文章第壹家。三島有期應去也，至今鸾鶴唳棲霞" (Qin and Sima 1989, p. 470). These are actually similar yearnings and appreciations.

4. Conclusions

The millennia-long evolution of the image of the "Quanzhen Seven Masters" carries an inherent historical inevitability. The underlying reason for this evolution lies in the triadic framework—power structures, functional needs, and media matrix—that has constantly reshaped their image through shifting historical periods. Following each transformation, this archetype consistently merged with its era's most prevalent literary genres and narrative paradigms, thereby generating renewed vitality in the story. At its core, the enduring Quanzhen cultivation rituals and Taoist transcendent ideals embedded within the "Seven Masters" imagery have survived temporal erosion. Their persistence relies not on fixed forms of representation but, instead, on the implicit transmission of core values that continue to facilitate symbolic metamorphosis within contemporary contexts. From this perspective, the deviation of the "Seven Masters" imagery from orthodox religious narratives in cultural–entertainment works may not require rectification, nor does its deconstruction necessarily pose existential threats. As Laozi老子's *Daode Jing* 道德經 reminds us, "The Tao remains hidden and nameless" 道隐无名 (Rao 2012, p. 102). Liu Xie's *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* 文心雕龍 further illuminates that "Words achieve lasting resonance through literary grace—this truth really stands verified" 言以文遠，誠哉斯驗 (Liu 2012, p. 372). Such is the objective law governing the dissemination of cultural symbols across epochs.

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