

# The Evolution of Chinese 007- “JINYIWEI”: From Authoritarian Sector to Charismatic Secret Agent.

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## Abstract:

The Jinyiwei, a historically significant governmental institution, holds considerable prominence as a symbol within contemporary Chinese popular culture. This study utilizes the theory of markedness to explicate the evolutionary trajectory of the Jinyiwei symbol—recognized as emblematic of Chinese secret agents. The societal perception of the Jinyiwei has undergone a substantial transformation, influenced by the rapid proliferation of Chinese movies and games. Formerly characterized by “The Marked”, the image of the Jinyiwei has progressively shifted towards “The Unmarked”.

The public's perception of the Chinese secret agent emblem has experienced a noteworthy transformation, transitioning from the negative portrayal as "hounds and butchers" to a more positive and alluring depiction as "royal agents." The rise of this phenomenon serves as a conspicuous illustration of the heteronomous inversion of conventional Chinese symbols within the contemporary digital media landscape.

**Key Words:** Secret Agent; Semiotics; Labeling Theory; Subcultures

## 1. Introduction

The Jinyiwei, a renowned clandestine organization in Chinese mythology, has garnered significant attention in numerous literary works. During the initial stages, the Jinyiwei gradually acquired a connotation closely associated with the oppressive governance of the Ming Dynasty, mostly due to the widespread circulation of relevant literary works, particularly in China's Hong Kong and Taiwan's film and television productions.

<sup>1</sup>. In recent years, there has been a gradual decline in the portrayal of traditional martial arts movies, as well as a shift towards the development of more diverse martial arts characters. This change can be attributed to the influence of Western movies and television shows, as well as the growing prominence of the Jinyiwei in martial arts narratives. The symbolic representation of martial arts films has undergone a transformation over time, shifting from its initial portrayal as a manifestation of the authoritarian court's violent military organs to its present depiction as a Chinese equivalent of the iconic "James Bond" agent. This evolution encompasses a fusion of various archetypes, including chivalrous figures, detectives, court officials, and members of the emperor's inner circle, resulting in a multifaceted and complex image.

### 1.1 The historical perspective.

Autocratic secret services have historically been associated with a plethora of malevolent actions and practices. Historically, there is a prevailing consensus that the Jinyiwei, acting as an instrument of autocratic imperial authority, instigated an atmosphere of fear through the implementation of two oppressive policies: imperial prisons and court canes. As a result, they were perceived as a formidable secret service under the sadistic tendencies Emperor, fulfilling the dual roles of relentless pursuers and merciless enforcers.

Wu Han's seminal work, "The Brocade Guards and East-West Investigate Services of the Ming Dynasty," published in *Ta Kung Pao*, on December 14, 1934, is widely acknowledged as the inaugural piece dedicated to exploring the Brocade Guards and their associated activities<sup>2</sup>. The article posits that the Jinyiwei was a distinct entity, functioning as an exclusive correctional facility and investigative unit employed by the Ming Imperial Dynasty to instill a climate of fear. Subsequently, after a thorough historical investigation and the synthesis of diverse historical literature, a discernible inclination towards partiality emerged in historical discourse regarding the Jinyiwei during the 1940s. Scholars examined various aspects of the Jinyiwei, including its composition, extent of authority, operational methods, and interactions with

Eastern and Western enterprises. They categorically labeled the Jinyiwei as a significant clandestine organization operating without causing harm. In subsequent administrations of the Kuomintang and the People's Republic of China, the Jinyiwei continued to receive unfavorable assessments, being perceived as representatives of covert political maneuvering and satire within the realm of secret intelligence. Consequently, the Jinyiwei remained associated with the perception of being a regressive secret service entity. Thus, in the initial literary compositions, the Jinyiwei, akin to the East and Westinvestigate services, manifested as a military establishment characterized by its suppressive role, fostering a predominantly unfavorable and one-dimensional perception.

### ***1.2 Historical Drama: "The Emperor's Assassins but Bearing the Virtue of Chivalry"***

With the oscillation between old and new ideas in recent years, the convergence of martial arts, chivalry, personal needs, and national sentiments has given rise to popular themes. The symbolic image of the Brocade Guards has transcended a singular, one-sided impression of evil and violent organs. Instead, it has evolved into an exploration of the emperor's loyalty and the complexities of black institutions. In the film "Embroidered Spring Knife," set in the Chongzhen era in Ming Dynasty, three Brocade Guards find themselves entangled in a political storm. Commissioned to assassinate Wei Zhongxian in a bid to alter individual fates amidst the bloody turmoil, the Jinyiwei's image is born out of the political upheaval of the late Ming Dynasty. The narrative space, grounded in the "above the temple" concept, diverges from traditional "jianghu" settings, delving into the official system's underbelly—the Jinyiwei, public officials tasked with maintaining order. The play navigates the moral quandaries faced by Jin Yiwei, torn between conflicting values of "loyalty" and "righteousness"<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the historical context of the Ming kingdom's waning authoritarian era adds a poignant touch of melancholy to Jin Yiwei's narrative, symbolizing the kingdom's decline.

### ***1.3 The Contemporary Generation: "Enigmatic, Potent, Royal Agents"***

As global screens embrace images of British 007, American FBI, CIA, and other secret agents, the perception of the "secret agent" symbol has undergone a reversal in public sentiment. Over more than half a century, the "007" movie series, with James Bond at its core, has depicted the timeless struggle between good and evil in over twenty films. The alluring story structure and charismatic protagonist of James Bond have found resonance in the portrayal of the guards in the modern era. The image of Jinyiwei assimilates and adapts the charisma of James Bond, downplaying the negative connotations of serving an authoritarian king. Instead, it transforms into a charismatic "macho" figure, merging the roles of the emperor's confidant and military commander. TV series like "Under the Brocade Clothes" and "Junior Brocade Guards" depict a positive portrayal of the Brocade Guards, akin to James Bond. However, in this portrayal by the modern generation, reflection on the historical significance and role of the guards has been overshadowed, depicting them more as an "ancient elite class." This imaginative portrayal often adheres to a fixed routine: cold and unsympathetic in daily life, efficient in work, impartial in handling cases, and unyielding in prisoner treatment. Yet, as the character deepens, inner tenderness, sensitivity, vulnerability, and loneliness emerge.

## **2.Method**

### ***2.1 The Theory of Markedness***

The second section of this paper will delineate the methodology employed in this study, which serves as a comprehensive framework. The semiotic reversal of "markedness" is apparent in the substantial evolution of the legendary representation of Jinyiwei.

The theory of markedness originated within the field of linguistics in the 1930s when Trubetsky, the founder of the Prague School of Phonetics, noted the reduced frequency of velar consonants due to their increased complexity in pronunciation. Initially defined as "the distinctive characteristic of the less common of two opposing elements," markedness suggests that when an asymmetry exists between two opposites, the less frequently occurring element is considered the "marked item." Despite decades of exploration across linguistic domains, markedness remains ambiguous due to the intricate nature of asymmetry between opposites. Jakobson expanded the notion beyond linguistics, integrating it into aesthetics and social studies, initiating non-linguistic discussions<sup>4</sup>. Prof. Zhao Yiheng extended the scope of markedness into

cultural studies, framing it as a semiotic study exploring common characteristics. He asserts that cultural specification is more common than language, involving opposing categories with inherent asymmetry, leading to a "positive term, middle term, dissimilar term" dynamic relationship<sup>5</sup>. This asymmetry, rooted in the existence of a hidden middle term, is biased towards aligning with the positive term to avoid labeling, a bias subject to change in the ongoing competition for the middle term. The competition for the middle term determines the cultural status of positive and negative terms<sup>67</sup>.

Every culture possesses a central or mainstream component responsible for upholding its positive reputation, subject to external pressures shaping its identity. These pressures, if insufficient, may diminish the culture's positive influence, while excessive pressure can lead to inflexibility, loss of vitality, and developmental stagnation. Two primary methods influence a positive entity: setting an example through collective lifestyle and employing cultural interpretation via propaganda and literary works. Cultures with high tolerance use explicit methods, while stringent frameworks often employ coercive means. The scope of labeled items is a measure of cultural tolerance within the "positive-neutral-negative" connection. An excessively limited scope challenges emphasizing the positive item, while an overly broad scope may label neutral content, compromising the position and impact of the positive item.

Contemporary culture induces the resurgence of symbols, notably the portrayal of Jin Yi Wei, a clandestine organization bridging martial arts and court martial arts. This enduring representation undergoes ongoing reinterpretation across various media platforms, incorporating Chinese elements like attire, architectural structures, administrative frameworks, and martial arts techniques in gaming, cinema, and design.

### **3. The Manifestation of JINYIWEI Elements in modern culture**

#### ***3.1 Expression of Jin Yi Wei Elements in Film and Television***

In contemporary portrayals, cinematic and televised productions have elevated the characterization of Jinyiwei, emphasizing the nuanced contradictions inherent in the prestigious roles of court officials serving under an authoritarian imperial regime. The selection of guards as representative figures in contemporary martial arts films aptly encapsulates the defining features of 21st-century domestic martial arts cinema. Departing from conventional portrayals with predictable attributes, these films embrace multi-dimensional aesthetics, infusing themes of love, affection, and friendship into character depictions. In the film "The Embroidered Spring Blade," the three main characters, devoted to the king and nation, find their loyalty tested in a ruthless political conflict against Wei Zhongxian, the oppressive regime's leader. Their position as Brocade Guards within the imperial court grants them influence but poses a substantial obstacle to personal aspirations, delving into themes of devotion, betrayal, and the inescapable entrapment of life. This exploration encompasses various themes, including the social standing of the guards, the deceptive nature of reality, power struggles within the bureaucratic system, and the antagonists' cunning machinations, collectively conveying a sense of longing for personal identity and subtly critiquing societal norms.

The Chinese television series "Under the Brocade Clothes" unfolds the narrative of a male protagonist holding a prestigious position as a brocade guard. However, his actions result in the tragic slaughter of the chief minister Xia Ran's entire family by the emperor. The female protagonist, an orphan of the Xia family, complicates their love with the blood feud between their families. The male protagonist's dual roles as a brocade guard, functioning both as a lover and a butcher, introduce a central contradiction permeating the entire narrative.

Beyond cinematic productions and television dramas, video games provide a significant medium for innovative representations of the Jinyiwei symbol. Wuxia and immortal games consistently represent a distinctive facet of Chinese culture in domestic game themes. Traditional martial arts online games aim to construct idealized "rivers and lakes," enabling players to experience justice and retribution. Recently, an upsurge in video games centered around the historical theme of Jinyiwei, such as "Soul of Glory" and "Codename: Jinyiwei," prominently features the Jinyiwei as a central character within the narrative.

#### ***3.2 Manifestation of Jinyiwei Components in Design***

The attire of the Jinyiwei, meticulously crafted and inspired by Ming Dynasty establishments,

adheres to well-defined categorizations and dress regulations. The surge in film and television dramas centered around the Jinyiwei has sparked growing interest among young consumers, particularly in elements like the flying fish pattern and its associated accessories. These components have found popularity within the community of ancient costume enthusiasts. The clothing of the Jinyiwei showcases unique design elements steeped in historical significance, distinguishing them from other official attire during the Ming Dynasty. While similarities exist with other official clothing of the era, the distinct features of Jinyiwei attire have captivated contemporary youth, making it a focal point in modern clothing design. Initially designated as the emperor's guards and ceremonial attendants, the intricate ornamentation of their attire earned them the appellation "Jin Yi Wei," symbolizing the grandeur of imperial authority.

The contemporary adaptation of ancient components, such as the flying fish costume and the embroidered spring sword, has gained popularity among the younger generation, emerging as a prevailing style.

The design evolution of the flying fish costume, a distinct symbol of the Jinyiwei, encompasses various innovations across stylized costumes, modern attire, ancient-style garments, games, and doll designs. These adaptations have garnered positive reception from users. A burgeoning emphasis on individuality and cultural significance in clothing is evident among consumers, who also weigh the compatibility of garments as a crucial factor in their purchasing decisions. Incorporating traditional clothing elements into contemporary fashion trends serves to accentuate design elements within a clothing series and enhances overall aesthetics when paired with other everyday wear.

In recent times, flying fish clothing has gained popularity among young people, effectively enhancing coordination between garments and other daily attire through the extraction and innovative utilization of key aspects. Design-wise, traditional elements transcend the creative confines of thematic works, showcasing inventive uses of classic aspects and resulting in notable design achievements. From a market perspective, this design approach has the potential to stimulate increased interest in traditional components and culture, acting as a bridge between tradition and modernity, thereby invigorating the consumer market.

In the utilization of traditional Jinyiwei attire, two primary initiatives centered around innovative design and application are currently prominent. The first initiative aims to provide a design reference for contemporary costumes, incorporating historic costume parts as supplementary components to enhance the overall design theme and serve a modifying function. These garments lack overt attributes commonly associated with traditional costumes, employing subtle design features that allude to the appropriate components of traditional attire. Typically worn in everyday routines, this attire comprises a collection from diverse prominent fashion labels. The primary focus is on the theme style of the traditional dress, fully showcasing its concept, style, and distinctive characteristics, complemented by modern aspects in fabrics, accessories, and intricate details. This form is frequently observed among certain designer brands, predominantly in the production of haute couture garments.

A fundamental inquiry revolves around identifying primary and secondary aspects within traditional and modern paradigms. "Ink Sang" collection School of Design and Fashion of Zhejiang University of Technology draws inspiration from the Jin Yiwei Flying Fish Clothing, aiming to cater to young consumers by incorporating popular suit elements and transcending age and occupation barriers. The designs ingeniously merge suit structures with collar, sleeves, and skirt pleating elements found in the Jin Yiwei Flying Fish Clothing appliqué style, resulting in innovative designs featuring narrow sleeves, pipa sleeves, and pleated skirts. The clothing design of Jinyiwei incorporates original symbols, such as the depiction of flying fish, blended with contemporary fashion aspects. The design process involves deconstruction, splicing, and other approaches to achieve fusion design, creative application, and practical design implementation. By incorporating the components of the Jin Yiwei flying fish attire, popular costumes can reflect traditional Chinese culture, allowing for the extraction of fundamental aspects that facilitate the preservation and advancement of traditional culture.

## **4 The process of delineating the transformation of Jinyiwei**

### ***4.1 Changes in the political environment bring about symbolic flips***

Serving as a symbolic embodiment of imperial authority, the Jinyiwei inevitably faced criticism from the general populace subjected to the oppressive rule of the feudal empire. Post

the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1937-1945) triumph, the Kuomintang government veered towards establishing a one-party dictatorship, ushering in an extensive white terror regime marked by heightened surveillance and repression by the Secret Service. Notably, the cultural and intellectual circles bore the brunt of scrutiny during this period, with academic literature subtly conveying the implications of realpolitik. Scholarly discourse on the Jinyiwei, a secret police organization, predominantly adopted a top-down evaluative approach during this era, resulting in an inherently pessimistic portrayal in academic and literary compositions.

The establishment of the People's Republic of China marked a significant turning point, diminishing the relevance of preceding articles. In the pre-21st century era, historiography faced inertia hindering the eradication of negative assessments surrounding the Brocade Guards. In recent times, the study of the Brocade Guards has experienced a resurgence, particularly in the 21st century. A new cohort of scholars emphasizes examining the dynamics of imperial power and its influence on the Brocade Guards, exploring their historical role through the lens of control and restraint exerted by imperial authority. Jin Yiwei's flawed political practices are attributed to the exercise of imperial authority in the allocation of legislative, executive, and judicial powers, resulting in personal volition as the governing principle. The North and South Zhenfu Si's fundamental nature lies in imperial power's political maneuvering, suppressing the bureaucratic hierarchy's ability to provide effective checks and balances. This novel thesis has influenced numerous film and television works during the New Wave, highlighting the Jinyiwei's lack of agency and vulnerability to imperial authority, redirecting public animosity towards the "commanders" rather than the "enforcers."

With the in-depth development of reform and opening up, China has transitioned into a consumer society marked by abundant materials.<sup>8</sup> Symbolic values have become a common goal pursued by the public, with the qualities associated with the modern portrayal of Jin Yi Wei, such as their position in the power hierarchy, beautiful attire, wisdom, courage, civil service within the system, and direct loyalty to the highest state authority, taking center stage<sup>9</sup>. This depiction aligns with the cultural needs of contemporary young consumers seeking novelty, uniqueness, and differences. The portrayal of Jinyiwei as a "gray character outside of the imperial court" not only satisfies the contemporary youth consumers' demand for novelty and uniqueness but also holds aesthetic value in the context of foreign cultures, recognized by society<sup>10</sup>. Entertainment Enterprises, through industrialized production, packages Jinyiwei symbols for IP upgrades, and the film and television industry presents them on stage through cultural performances.

At one time, the handsome and charming imperial agents were manipulated and packaged by forces from all sides and returned to the contemporary era with a brand-new posture. Although the contemporary secret agent symbols have been symbolically constructed to varying degrees, they have been politically recognized by the government and have enriched the aesthetic needs of the public<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, in the new cultural context of tolerance, the Jinyiwei, as a character with a paradoxical martial arts temperament, strives for the aesthetic and emotional inclination and recognition of the middle term. This is manifested in the fact that with the social and ideological liberation and the influx and integration of foreign trends and cultures, the role of Jinyiwei has gradually changed into a charming and attractive "macho" image<sup>12</sup>. Along with the modern society, the advantages of working within the system are gradually highlighted, the standardization of Jinyiwei is shaken and began to gradually try to integrate the positive items for the flip, Jinyiwei from "evil" to "charming" evolution is enough to see this flip process. In addition to the change in social cognition, the rise of subculture also provides a certain external soil for the labeling reversal of Jinyiwei.

#### ***4.2 The rise of subcultures***

The term "subculture" was initially introduced by Milton M Gordon, an American sociologist, who utilized it for the reclassification of national cultures, categorizing them based on diverse social elements such as race, economy, religion, and region<sup>13</sup>. In the realm of cultural semiotics, a subculture is essentially the antithesis of a culture that strongly defines itself as a positive entity—a "non-culture" marked by markedness. Throughout cultural development, these dichotomies undergo a shift in status as the middle term evolves. As contemporary culture matures into the so-called 'postmodern,' the once-marginalized labeled item may undergo a reversal, resulting in a cultural shift<sup>14</sup>.

In cultures promoting elitism, prevalent during mature cultural phases, media expressions are typically formal, rigorous, and positive<sup>15</sup>. Propaganda and praises of ancient officials, for instance, focus on virtues such as cleanliness and love for the people, while agents serving imperial power without moral constraints are labeled as foreign elements. Conversely, in contemporary culture, the visual depiction of violence and struggles serves as an outlet for emotional stress release<sup>16</sup>, appealing more to individuals grappling with the pressures of modern society. The image of the guards seamlessly blends audience imaginations of the underworld and the court, incorporating elements of chivalry and confinement, fancy attire, and regal robes. The amalgamation of these qualities, along with the portrayal of power centers, palace secrets, and societal supremacy, has garnered increased viewership for works centered around the theme of guards.

Furthermore, parallels can be drawn between Jinyiwei and British MI6 agents. Agents and spies are not respected professions in most countries, but the UK has managed to turn the popular perception around. As literary works featuring agents gained popularity and film and television publicized them, Western agents transitioned from being disliked to assuming a neutral or even positive image. James Bond's transformation into an undisputed positive figure with personal charisma upon introduction to the domestic audience exemplifies this shift. The differing attitudes towards authority in China and the West contribute to distinct interpretations of similar symbols in cross-cultural communication<sup>17</sup>. The West's glorification of authorities shapes the Chinese public's cognitive schema, representing a form of political communication favoring Western ideals<sup>18</sup>.

## 5 Conclusion

Over time, the perception of the Jinyiwei has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from a negative connotation to a positive one. Originally perceived as sinister "hounds and butchers" representing the Chinese secret service, it has now evolved into a portrayal as glamorous and charming "royal agents" in the public eye. This shift in the Jinyiwei's image can be attributed to the resurgence of national style and the influence of youth subculture. Incorporating narrative strategies akin to MI6 agents and integrating elements from emerging subculture trends, such as cyberpunk and meta-universe, positions the Jinyiwei to disseminate its intellectual property identities on a global scale.

It is crucial to consider the appropriate decontextualization of text in the current phase of symbolic construction for effective global dissemination. Japan's narrative approach in promoting its samurai and ninja symbols to international audiences serves as a valuable reference point in this regard. The challenge of globalizing the symbol of the Jinyiwei, encapsulating elements of secret agents and martial arts from both Western and East Asian cultures, remains an area requiring further exploration within the industry.

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