



Wǔxiá and Genre Names in Mandarin: Reconciling Semantic Theories of Names into a Common Framework

Francesco-Alessio Ursini

Central China Normal University, CHINA

Qin Xie

Macau University of Science and Technology, CHINA

Yue Sara Zhang

Hainan University, Haikou, CHINA

Abstract

The goal of this paper is to offer an analysis of the Mandarin genre name *Wǔxiá*, a name usually referring to a Chinese genre of narratives involving martially skilled protagonists and heroic deeds. We show that Mandarin speakers use *Wǔxiá* across different contexts as a genre name expressing subtly different degrees of context-based content. For instance, users in on-line conversations may label any fantastic-like fiction as *Wǔxiá*, but literature scholars use it for a historically well-defined type of genre with well-established cultural themes. We generalise this analysis to names for sub-genres of *Wǔxiá* narratives (e.g., *Jiànxíá*, *Yóuxíá*), and propose that they act as hyponyms of the name *Xíá Wénhuà* ‘knight narratives’. We thus offer evidence that genre names in Mandarin have descriptive senses that allow speakers to refer to genres, and to narratives belonging to these genres. At the same time, these names display the properties of nominals, including their participation in lexical relations such as hyponymy. We conclude by discussing how our proposal supports an account of genre names that reconciles apparently diverging linguistic and onomastic theories into a unified theory.

Keywords: proper names, genre names, appellativisation, propriation, onomastic theory, Mandarin, Chinese

1. Introduction

Onomastics has investigated names for concrete entities—for example, anthroponyms for individuals (Felecan & Felecan 2014) and toponyms for places (e.g., Perono Cacciafoco & Cavallaro 2023). Researchers have also studied names for abstract entities—for example, brand names for companies (e.g., Sutisna & Rustandi 2023), and fictional entities (e.g., Raatikainen 2023), thus proposing two broad generalisations. First, abstract names have multiple uses/senses: users may refer to different facets of an abstract concept/entity via these names, in context. Second, these senses may enter lexical/semantic relations. For instance, *Apple* is a company name originating from the company’s apple-looking logo (Levy & Montevirgen 2024). Company name and common noun are related via *homonymy*, which holds when a word covers multiple unrelated senses (Murphy 2010). A question thus arises whether names may involve other sense relations.

Formal semantic and syntactic approaches answer this question positively (Cohen 2007; Longobardi 2008). According to these frameworks, common nouns can individuate concrete groups of entities, but also natural kinds as abstract categories, thus acting as proper names for these kinds. Consider for instance the distribution of *cats* in (1)–(2) (N.B. We use single quote marks to indicate glosses and/or possible senses for words under discussion):

- (1) *Cats are adorable.*
- (2) *Some cats are adorable.*

In (1), *cats* occurs as a proper name for the ‘cat kind’ as an abstract entity, and the ‘adorable’ property applies to this kind. In (2), *cats* occurs as a common noun following the indefinite article *some*. The indefinite N(oun)P(hrase) *some cats* refers to certain concrete cats under discussion. In English, this sense alternation correlates with a nominal distribution as either a common noun or a proper name (e.g. Cohen 2007; Longobardi 2008). Such cases also suggest that names can potentially display *polysemy*, which holds when a word covers multiple related senses (Riemer 2005; Murphy 2010). In (1)–(2), for instance, both uses introduce cats in discourse, but differ in the sub-type of entities they denote (‘cat kind’ in [1], ‘cat group’ in [2]).

The recent research by Ursini and Samo (2023) extends this answer to *genre names*, defined as names for narrative genres. The work studies the science fiction genre names based on the *-punk* suffix (e.g., *Cyberpunk*, *Steam-punk*). The work suggests that genre names act as a sub-type of kind names, thus preserving the descriptive sense of their non-propriation uses. This holds when genre names originate in common nouns (e.g., *Fantasy*), adjectives (e.g., *Cyberpunk*) and nominal compounds (e.g., *Science Fiction*). The work also suggests that genre names are polysemous, with constituting common nouns/adjectives providing transparent prototypical senses (e.g., *Horror* as a name and *horror* as a common noun/adjective). Crucially, this form of polysemy licenses hierarchical *hyponym* (i.e., sub-type/sub-kind) relations or *taxonomies*. For instance, *Cyberpunk* is a hyponym of *Science Fiction*, and *Science Fiction* is a hyponym of *Fiction*. Thus, Ursini and Samo (2023) suggests that genre names display the same lexical/semantic properties of common nouns.

Crucially, this work only focuses on English genre names, thus inviting the formulation of cross-linguistic research questions. For instance, several studies have observed that nominals in Mandarin and related Sinitic languages are systematically ambiguous between common noun and proper name use (Sun 2006; Li 2017). Consider *Māomī* in (3), for instance:

- (3) *Māomī hěn kěài*
 Cat very adorable
 a. 'Cats are adorable.'
 b. 'Some cats are adorable.'

The sentence in (3) can be ambiguous between the two senses in (3a–b), corresponding to those attested in (1)–(2). In Mandarin, nouns can occur without determiners (e.g., *māo-mī* in [3]); they realise NPs as a general nominal category (Sun 2006). Nouns/NPs can oscillate between name-like uses referring to kinds (e.g., [3a]) and common noun-like uses describing specific entities (e.g., [3b]) (Li 2017). The senses that speakers may assign to NPs and their embedding sentences may depend only on the context of use, and not on syntactic distribution. Importantly, this fact introduces a key prediction about their interpretation. If Mandarin NPs are polysemous and categorically ambiguous, then genre names as NPs should also display these two properties, and enter hierarchical hyponymy relations/taxonomies.

The goal of this paper is to test these predictions by focusing on *Wǔxiá*, the 'martial heroes' narrative genre. We select this name because historical and stylistic studies on *Wǔxiá* narratives abound (Sun & Han 2020; Zhou 2024). However, only few linguistic studies on speakers' use of *Wǔxiá* in discourse exist (Kan & Li 2022). We thus address these research questions:

- How do *Wǔxiá* and related names function as polysemous genre names?
- What aspects of their uses are context/use-sensitive?
- How can their analysis model lexical/semantic sense relations (e.g., hyponymy) among genre names (e.g., *Wǔxiá* as a hyponym of *Xiá Wénhuà* 'knight narratives')?
- How does this evidence support the prediction that Mandarin genre names *qua* NPs express descriptive senses?

We achieve this goal by reviewing previous literature in this domain of research, motivating our focus on *Wǔxiá* (section 2). We present our data collection method in section 3, and then the results and their analysis in section 4. We study hyponym relations connecting sub-genre names *Xiānxiá* 'immortal heroes', *Yóuxiá* 'wandering heroes', and *Jiànxìá* 'sword heroes' to *Wǔxiá*, and *Wǔxiá* to *Xiá Wénhuà* 'knight narratives'. We thus show that our analysis can capture how *Wǔxiá* enters hyponym relations as a hyponym and hyperonym, and hence how these names can form complex taxonomies (section 4). We discuss how this proposal informs semantic theories of names, before concluding in sections 5 and 6.

2. Literature Review: The Debate on the Semantics of Proper Names and Empirical *Desiderata*

Several works on toponomastics propose that common nouns can become proper names and *vice versa* via *appellativisation* and *onymisation* (e.g., Anderson 2004, 2007; van Langendonck 2007; Nübling, Fahlbusch, & Heuser 2015; van Langendonck & Van de Velde 2016; Stolz & Nintemann 2024). Schematically, appellativisation holds when speakers develop uses for proper names as common nouns to describe classes of discourse referents (e.g., Harvalík 2012; David, Klemensová, & Místecký 2023; cf. *Trumps* in [4]). Onymisation holds when speakers develop referential uses for common nouns as proper names for referents (Coates 2006a, 2006b; Motschenbacher 2020; cf. *Snake* in [5]):

- (4) *All the wannabe Trumps in the world will resent this comment.*
 (5) *My name is Snake, for this mission.*

Some analyses suggest that these processes connect names and nouns as sub-types within a single nominal category (e.g., Anderson 2007; Nübling et al. 2015; Motschenbacher 2020). Other analyses propose that these processes connect nouns and proper names, but as separate lexical and grammatical categories (e.g., Coates 2006a, 2006b, 2013, 2017; David et al. 2023). Crucially, theories of generative syntax and model-theoretic semantics offer a more complex variant of the first approach. We present this view and its relevance to our study by discussing its central tenets and their extensions to Mandarin.

Generative syntax proposals propose that the structure of proper names may involve NPs of increasing structural complexity (e.g., Borer 2005; Matushansky 2008; Longobardi 2008; Acquaviva 2020). For instance, English includes bare nouns/NPs (e.g., *Jack, London*), definite NPs (e.g., *The North Sea*) and NPs including expressions of other categories (so-called projections, in generative parlance) in their structure (e.g., *The wannabe Trumps* in [4]). Therefore, these works suggest that proper names correspond to NPs that can refer to uniquely salient discourse referents, irrespective of the number of projections they combine. Instead, common nouns correspond to NPs that individuate groups of multiple referents. The status of NPs as common nouns or proper names depends on their discourse use, mediated via the descriptive senses of their constituents.

Model-theoretic semantic proposals have developed analyses to capture these patterns. Standard analyses suggest that bare NPs in English (e.g., Carlson 1980, 1989, 1992) and across languages (e.g., Chierchia 1998a, 1998b) can display referential/proprial and descriptive/appellative sense *types*. Referential sense types refer to natural kind referents belonging to the type e_k : the type of individuals e , and the sub-type of kinds k . Descriptive/appellative sense types refer to groups of entities, and belong to the type $\langle e, t \rangle$ (i.e., the type from entities to truth-values). In either case, the sense of a nominal corresponds to a logical predicate. For instance, *cats* in (1) corresponds to the predicate $\mathbf{cats}'(c)_k$ (i.e., cats as a kind); in (2), it corresponds to the predicate $\mathbf{cats}'(x)_{\langle e, t \rangle}$ (i.e., a group of discourse-salient cats). Thus, these proposals suggest that senses differ in the type of referent they select in discourse (unique kinds or common groups), but share the same descriptive content (here, \mathbf{cats}').

The extension of these analyses to Mandarin data includes several works (e.g., Chierchia 2010; Cohen 2008; Li 2017; Dayal 2011; Zhang 2018; Luo 2022), sharing the following assumptions. Mandarin lacks determiners and specificity markers (e.g., English article *the*), but nominals usually compose with classifiers (i.e., modifier heads specifying the class of the referent that a noun introduces). One example is *māo* in *māo-mī* (cf. (3)) (e.g., Sun 2006; Li 2017; Huang, Li and Li 2009, 2017). Some studies show that a class of proper names exists in Mandarin (e.g., *Zhāngsān, Běijīng*: Wang and Holmberg 2023). Nevertheless, their structure always includes a noun followed by a classifier (e.g., *Māo-mī, Běi-jīng* 'North capital'). Classifiers, nouns and other modifiers (e.g., adjectives) form NPs with potentially ambiguous senses and referential uses in context (cf. [3]).

Model-theoretic proposals have also suggested that Mandarin NPs are inherently polysemous (e.g., Krifka 1995; Li 2017). Senses defined as referential/proprial or descriptive/appellative only emerge when NPs and sentences are disambiguated in context. Thus, *māomī* in (3) can refer to the 'cat kind' (type e_k), or to a group of cats (type $\langle e, t \rangle$), before a context disambiguates the sentence. Sub-kinds of entities can be defined via NP modification (e.g., *xiānlúomāo* 'siamese cat'). NPs can enter transparent hyponym relations (e.g. *xiānlúomāo* as a hyponym of *māomī*) (Zhang 2018; Luo 2022). Formal analyses thus suggest that Mandarin names/nominals are semantically polysemous NPs entering semantic relations. Therefore, they indirectly predict that *Wǔxiá* and other genre names should have descriptive/appellative senses entering hyponym relations.

With this theoretical preamble in place, we can address the potential senses ascribed to *Wǔxiá* in previous genre-focused literature. The debate on the properties of literary and trans-medial genres is voluminous (e.g., Dowd, Stevenson, & Strong 2006; Giltrow & Stein 2009; Bawarshi & Reiff 2010; Cohen 2017). In narratology, genres are often conceived as methods to create narrative structures (Strinati 2000; Thon 2016; Bell & Ryan 2019). Authors can create narratives according to the implicit and explicit themes and conventions that shape a genre. For the Cyberpunk genre, for instance, authors usually create narratives involving dystopic near-futures, 'cyber' technology, disenfranchised or 'punk' protagonists, and complex, non-linear plots (e.g., McFarlane, Murphy, & Schmeink 2020). The senses of genre names thus minimally describe these themes and conventions, and emerge in context via their uses (cf. Ursini & Samo 2023).

The literature on *Wǔxiá* highlights two core aspects shaping themes and narratives in this genre. First, *Wǔxiá* narratives usually feature martially-skilled protagonists that help downtrodden populations in heroic manners (Zhang 1994; Song 2006; Chen 2012; Zhang et al. 2020). Second, these narratives are entrenched in Chinese history and philosophy. They promulgate Confucian values such as respect for the law and humanitarian altruism (Han 2004; Ni 2005; Xu 2019; Liu 2024). Most works thus suggest that the gloss 'martial heroes' describes the conceptual, thematic nucleus of these narratives. Some works propose that *Wǔxiá* sub-genres focus on novels including this core plus other genre-specific themes (e.g., *Yóuxiá* 'sword heroes' [Zhang 1994; Zhang et al. 2020; Zhu 2020]). *Wǔxiá* describes this prototypical sense, but also other themes emerging in each narrative.

Linguistic works on this genre have acknowledged this semantic/conceptual prototypical sense, but analyse other linguistic aspects. Several works have analysed translations of *Wǔxiá* books into other languages (e.g., English, French). They have studied the stylistic nuances and content of culture-specific words (e.g., *Daoism*) in *Wǔxiá* books (Mok 1998; Hong 2014; Sun & Han 2020; Zhou 2024). Other works have compared

the *Wǔxiá* genre and themes with tales belonging to the ‘knight errant’ historical genre (e.g., the *King Arthur* cycle) and to stories belonging to the modern ‘sword and sorcery’ (e.g., the *Conan the Barbarian* cycle). They suggest that the *Wǔxiá* genre bears resemblances to these western genres, but also expresses culture-unique Chinese views (Wu and Li 2018, 2022; Zhu 2020). These works indirectly suggest that *Wǔxiá* carries a richer descriptive sense than the one that the basic ‘martial heroes’ gloss suggests. However, they usually do not provide further semantic analysis; therefore, our research questions must still receive answers.

Let us summarise. Toponomastic research has suggested that common nouns and names act as contiguous and interacting nominal categories (e.g., Motschenbacher 2020). Formal linguistic analyses have developed this view by treating these categories as context-sensitive and cross-linguistically flexible expressions of nominals/NPs (e.g., Acquaviva 2020). Thus, they suggest that NPs can carry descriptive/appellative senses, even when they act as reference-carrying proper names (cf. also Štekauer 2016; Nyström 2016). The literature on Mandarin NPs suggests that they can refer to kinds or groups in discourse via descriptive senses, via polysemy (e.g., Luo 2022). These facts predict that genre names such as *Wǔxiá* have descriptive senses, and that these senses refer to narratives belonging to this genre, or the genre as a kind (e.g., Kan and Li 2022). They also predict that genre names can enter hyponymy relations (e.g., *Yóuxiá* and *Wǔxiá*, *Wǔxiá* and *Xiá Wénhuà*), in virtue of having descriptive senses (Zhang et al. 2020).

3. Methodology and Materials

To extend the method in Ursini and Samo (2023) (cf also Ursini & Samo 2025; Samo & Ursini 2025), we operated as follows. Terminology studies distinguish among *general vocabulary*, *specialised vocabulary*, and *term* uses of words (Pearson 1998; ten Hacken 2010). General (vocabulary) uses do not hinge on domain-specific knowledge (e.g., *atom* in a casual conversation). Specialised uses occur in domain-specific contexts (e.g., *atom* in a physics lecture [ten Hacken 2015; Giacomini 2023]). Term uses occur when words express necessary and sufficient definitions only implemented in normative contexts (e.g., *atom* in legislation about nuclear power plants; ten Hacken 2018; San Martín 2022). We capture the effects of context of use on *Wǔxiá* by differentiating our data sources as follows.

For general uses, we used two corpora for data extraction. The first is the BCC corpus (BLCU Corpus Centre, <https://bcc.blcu.edu.cn>). This corpus encompasses multiple domains (e.g., newspapers, 2 billion characters; literature, 3 billion; comprehensive, 1.9 billion; dialogue, 600 million, from social media and film subtitles). The second is CCL’s modern Chinese, which includes 85 million characters (Corpus of Chinese Language, http://ccl.pku.edu.cn:8080/ccl_corpus/). For specialised uses, we compared the definitions offered in the references discussed in the previous section. For term uses, we analysed the 中国大百科全书(第三版网络版) ‘About China 3rd online version’ (<https://www.zgbk.com>) encyclopaedia. We chose this encyclopaedia because Chinese institutions use its definition for cataloguing tasks regarding written texts, movies and other visual narratives.

For corpora-based general uses, we analysed sentences according to component/feature analysis (Bullinaria & Levy 2007; Recchia & Jones 2009). We extracted words tagged as adjectives and nouns used as modifiers describing *Wǔxiá* as a genre, analysed the semantic features they ascribe to this genre, and built a list. We operated in the same manner on the definitions offered in the papers from which we extracted specialised uses. For term uses, we applied this procedure to the definition from the encyclopaedia. By comparing the data from multiple sources (two corpora, definitions in previous works, one encyclopaedia), we achieve a form of *triangulation* (e.g., Rothbauer 2008; Damico & Tetnowski 2014).

Our distributional analysis worked as follows. In sentences, *Wǔxiá* would either refer to the genre (i.e., have a kind/referential reading) or to one or more narratives in this genre (i.e., have a group/descriptive reading). In either case, this name/NP would co-occur with categories describing the features of this genre or narratives thereof. We then applied the same analysis to the names of three *Wǔxiá* sub-genres: *Xiānxiá* ‘immortal heroes’, *Yóuxiá* ‘wandering heroes’, and *Jiànxíá* ‘sword heroes’ (Zhu 2020; Zhang 1994; Xu 2015). Recent works observe that *Xiānxiá* has begun evolving into a distinct genre, perhaps closer to (western-style) Fantasy genres (e.g., Zhu 2020; Zhou 2024). Our analysis thus monitored whether this change affects how speakers connect this genre’s sense to *Wǔxiá*’s sense. We extended this analysis to *Xiá Wénhuà* ‘knight narratives’, the name for the superordinate genre for *Wǔxiá* (e.g., Chen 2010; Zhang et al. 2020). Finally, we used the feature lists assigned to each target word to analyse their hyponym relations.

4. Results

The quantitative results for the general, corpora-based uses were as follows. We found 14,669 tokens including *Wúxiá*, 9,722 tokens for sub-genre names *Xiānxiá* (554 tokens), *Yóuxiá* (4,647 tokens), *Jiànxiá* (4,521 tokens); and 110 tokens for super-genre name *Xiá Wénhuà*. Due to the size of the results, we restricted our analysis to 1,000 tokens for *Wúxiá*, 500 tokens for *Yóuxiá*, *Jiànxiá*, *Xiānxiá*, and 110 for *Xiá Wénhuà*. We extracted the features associated with each genre name: features acted as semantic types for the attested tokens. For specialised and term uses we respectively used the definitions in previous literature (23 references in total) and the definitions in the encyclopaedia.¹

For *Wúxiá*, we found 50 features across general, specialised, term uses. Table 1 summarises features' general distribution. Table 2 illustrates which features occur in three and two uses:

Table 1: Quantitative Findings for Semantic Features Attested Across Context-sensitive *Wúxiá* Uses

Feature Type	Shared with General Uses	Shared with Specialised Uses	Shared with Term Uses	Sub-totals for Feature Types
General Uses	12	4	7	27
Specialised Uses	4	10	4	18
Term Uses	7	4	24	25

We report the feature type and the number of attested features in the leftmost column. The other columns report the number of features shared amongst uses, with the diagonal cells reporting numbers of features unique to a use (e.g., features shared with general uses for general uses). The rightmost column reports the statistical significance of the number of shared features, computed via a χ^2 test. We assumed that the number of shared features among uses attained significance if it reached 95% or higher of the total. General uses could possibly share 25 features with term uses (out of 27), so if these uses shared 22 or more features, numbers reached statistical significance. The results confirmed that these numbers were not significant.

Table 2: Sample List For Features Attested in Three and Two Uses of *Wúxiá*

Feature Type	<i>Wúshù</i> 'Martial Arts'	<i>Xiáyì</i> 'Heroism'	<i>Liúxíng</i> <i>Wénhuà</i> 'Popular Culture'	<i>Zhōngyì</i> 'Loyalty'	<i>Cáomǎng</i> <i>Yīngxiónghé</i> 'Public Heroes'	<i>Jiānghú</i> '(The) Martial World'
General Uses	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Specialised Uses	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Term Uses	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

We report the features attested in all three uses and the first two features attested in two-use cases.¹ We discuss the features occurring in only one use via figure 1.

Table 2 shows that features *Wúshù* and *Xiáyì* define the prototypical senses for the three uses. The other two prototypical features are *Liúxíng Wénhuà* and *Zhōngyì*: four features are attested in each use. Thus, the name *Wúxiá* describes a genre and narratives about martial arts, heroism, popular culture, loyalty themes, via features describing these themes. *Cáomǎng Yīngxiónghé* 'public heroes' and *Jiānghú* '(the) martial world', two of the total 11 features, instead show that less prototypical senses may connect communities of use in a nuanced manner. For instance, speakers in conversations (i.e., general uses) and researchers of the genre (i.e., specialised uses) both describe *Wúxiá* narratives and genre as involving public heroes. Compilers of the encyclopaedic definition instead converge with speakers in associating martial world themes to this genre and narratives, and thus the corresponding features to *Wúxiá*'s sense. The features that only occur in one-use contexts offer some interesting patterns that we illustrate via the word cloud map in figures 1 and 2. Features in red represent general uses; features in blue represent specialised uses; features in purple, term uses. We used the online resource WordClouds to generate the figure (<https://www.wordclouds.com>).

these aspects being *Liyí Liánchí* ‘ethics’ and *Chúbào Ānlíang* ‘societal ideals’. Overall, communities of use may have different views of the features describing *Wǔxiá*. Our semantic map hence reflects how these perspectives jointly form *Wǔxiá*’s sense.

We can now turn to the analysis of the three names *Xiānxiá*, *Yóuxiá* and *Jiànxiá*. For each name we also extracted the features defining their senses across contexts. We then analysed the existence of hyponym relations as follows. If a word *a* is a hyponym of a word *b*, then both words can describe the same entities, but the word *a* describes a more specific type or sub-kind of the word *b* (e.g., Cruse 1986, 2004; Riemer 2010; Murphy 2010; Jezek 2016; Ursini & Zhang 2025). For genre names, we have hyponym relations if these names describe more specific sub-genres than *Wǔxiá*. This holds if they share some features with *Wǔxiá* (i.e., they describe *Wǔxiá* narratives) but also include genre-specific features. We present each list of features in tables 3, 4 and 5:

Table 3: List of Features for *Xiānxiá* ‘Immortal Heroes’

Feature Type	<i>Wǔshù</i> ‘Martial Arts’	<i>Chángshēng</i> ‘Immortality’	<i>Dào</i> ‘Taoism’	<i>Qíng</i> ‘Romance’	<i>Rújiā Sīxiǎng</i> ‘Confucian Beliefs’	<i>Zhōngguó wénhuà</i> ‘Chinese Culture’
General Uses	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Specialised Uses	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Term Uses	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes

We attested three three-use features, four two-use features and 27 one-use features. We only report key features for the analysis of the semantic relations.¹ Thus, *Xiānxiá* includes the features ‘martial arts’, ‘immortality’, and ‘Taoism’ forming its sense, and belonging to the field of Confucian philosophy (Zhang et al. 2020; Shi and Tang 2024); features *Wǔshù*, *Chángshēng*, and *Dào* are attested in each use. Communities defining general and specialized uses also use the *Qíng* ‘romance’ and *Rújiā Sīxiǎng* ‘Confucian beliefs’ features. Crucially, the three-use feature *Wǔshù* connects the senses that *Xiānxiá* and *Wǔxiá* express: both kinds of narratives/genres involve ‘martial arts’ themes. Furthermore, features *Dào* and *Chángshēng* describe more specific features of the *Xiānxiá* sub-genre not attested in the sense list for *Wǔxiá*. Term uses introduce the feature *Zhōngguó wénhuà* ‘Chinese culture’, describing this sub-genre as a specific type of ‘culture’ (i.e., *wénhuà*), as in the case of *Wǔxiá*. Overall, *Xiānxiá* emerges as a name of a ‘martial, heroic’ narrative genre also including fantasy/supernatural themes (e.g., ‘immortality’, ‘Taoism’). However, this genre shares *Wǔshù* and a few other features with *Wǔxiá*’s prototypical sense; speakers in general and specialised uses still conceive these genres as semantically connected. *Xiānxiá* acts as a subtly defined hyponym of *Wǔxiá*.

Let us now turn to the analysis of the sense for *Yóuxiá* via the feature list in table 4.

Table 4: List of Features for *Yóuxiá* ‘Wandering Heroes’

Feature Type	<i>Bàolì</i> ‘Violence’	<i>Wǔshù</i> ‘Martial Arts’	<i>Wùshí</i> ‘Pragmatism’	<i>Xiáyì</i> ‘Heroism’	<i>Yóumù yǒngshì</i> ‘Nomadic Warrior’	<i>Yì wénhuà</i> ‘Justice Culture’
General Uses	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Specialised Uses	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Term Uses	No	No	No	Yes	No	No

We attested four two-use features and 32 one-use features.¹ The sense of the sub-genre *Yóuxiá* includes ‘violence’, ‘martial arts’, and ‘pragmatism’ features, as its stories are often set in morally ambiguous and down-to-earth settings (Song 2024). We lack clear-cut prototypical (i.e., three-use) features, but have four two-use features: *Bàolì*, *Wùshí*, *Wǔshù*, and *Xiáyì*. Two features also appear in *Wǔxiá*’s general and specialised uses (*Wǔshù*), and general and term uses (*Xiáyì*). The hyponym relation between *Yóuxiá* and *Wǔxiá* is weaker, because not all communities agree on what counts as a prototypical *Yóuxiá* narrative. Notably, *Yóuxiá* and *Xiānxiá* only share the *Wǔshù* feature that connects them to their hypernym: their senses thus describe these as distinct sub-genres. Also notably, *Yì wénhuà* ‘justice culture’ connects this genre’s sense to those of the other two sub-genres, via its ‘culture’ component.

Consider now table 5, for Jiànxia.

Table 5: List of Features for Jiànxia ‘sword heroes’

Features	Jiànfǎ/jiànshù	Xiáyì	Zhōngyì	Dào	Jiùshù	Wúshù	Chóngjiàn wénhuà
Uses	‘Swordsmanship’	‘Heroism’	‘Loyalty’	‘Taoism’	‘Redemption’	‘Martial arts’	‘Sword worship Culture’
General Uses	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Specialised Uses	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Term Uses	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes

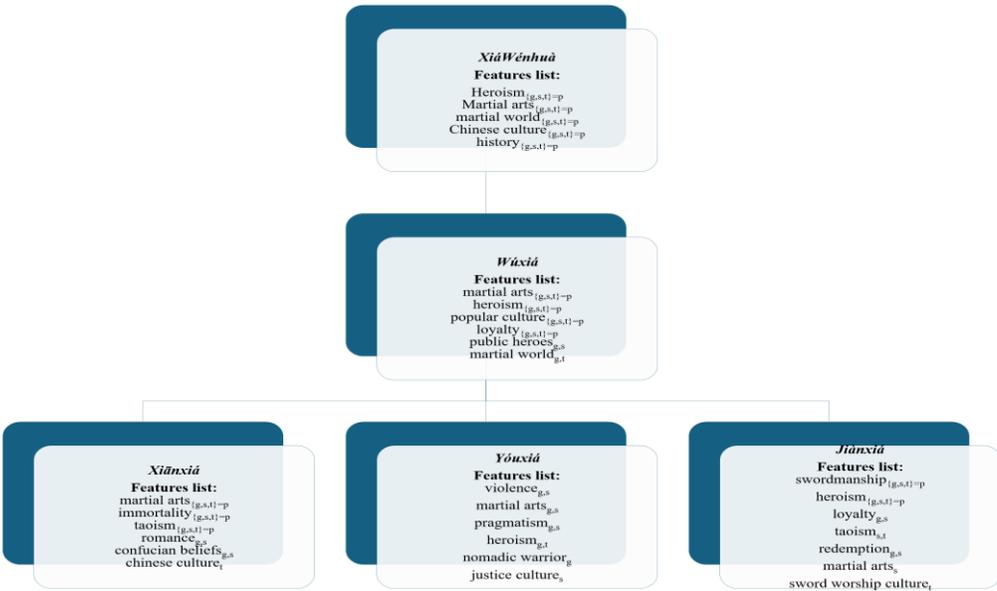
We attested two three-use features, six two-use features and 14 one-use features.¹ For Jiànxia, features Jiànfǎ/Jiànshù ‘swordsmanship’ and Xiáyì ‘heroism’ define the prototypical sense describing this genre. Xiáyì connects Jiànxia to Wǔxiá via a hyponym relation for general and specialised uses. Instead, Wúshù ‘martial arts’ creates a semantic connection only for specialized uses. Scholars writing on this genre (e.g., Xu 2015) suggest that the Wúshù and Xiáyì features define Jiànxia, Xiānxia, Yóuxia as sub-genres of Wǔxiá; the descriptive senses of these names confirm this view. Zhōngyì and Jiùshù are two of the two-use features defining Jiànxia and its sense. Instead, Dào appears in specialized and term uses for Jiànxia, and Xiānxia. Jiànxia and Xiānxia thus share these and the ‘martial heroes’ feature. Notably, Chóngjiàn Wénhuà ‘sword worship’ operates as a culture-based feature for this sub-genre, thus connecting the sense of this sub-genre with those of the other two sub-genres.

We complete this analysis with Xia Wénhuà ‘knight narratives’. Consider table 6:

Table 6: List of Features for Xia Wénhuà

Features	Xiáyì	Wúshù	Jiānghú	Zhōngguó wénhuà	Lìshǐ
Uses	‘Heroism’	‘Martial Arts’	‘Martial World’	‘Chinese Culture’	‘History’
General Uses	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Specialised Uses	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Term Uses	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

We attested 15 three-use features, nine two-use features, and 36 one-use features.¹ The five features listed in table 6 define the prototypical sense of this genre: they occur in general, specialized, and term uses. Among them, Xiáyì ‘heroism’, Wúshù ‘martial arts’, Jiānghú ‘martial world’, outlined the basic contours of these ‘knight narratives’. Xiáyì is the soul of the knight narratives, Wúshù is the craft and path of practicing Xia, Jiānghú is an unofficial social network that governs the conduct of Xia. Zhōngguó wénhuà ‘Chinese culture’, and Lìshǐ ‘history’ highlight two significant characteristics of these narratives. Xia Wénhuà names as genre whose prototypical features seem also to form the senses of Wǔxiá and Xiānxia, Yóuxia, and Jiànxia. These facts entail that a sequence of hyponymy relations, a minimal taxonomy, connects these genre names across uses, as we show in figure 3.



Features correspond to those from tables 1–6. Sub-scripts (e.g., *popular culture*_g) represent which contexts of use include each feature (*g*=‘general’, *s*=‘specialised’, *t*=‘term’, *p*=‘prototypical’ (i.e., the features forming a prototypical sense). See also Ursini & Samo (2023) for discussion on this representational system.

The figure shows that *Wénhuà* ‘narratives’ connects the three sub-genre names with *Wúxiá* across general uses. These names describe genres and narratives that qualify as ‘knight narratives’ (i.e., narratives that *Xiá Wénhuà*, *Wúxiá* also describe) for speakers in general contexts (e.g., conversations). This fact holds whether the specific sub-types are ‘heroism culture’ (*Yóuxiá*), ‘Chinese culture’ (*Xiānxiá*), or ‘swordsmanship culture’ (*Jiànxiá*). Therefore, these names establish hyponymy relations with *Xiá Wénhuà*, the ‘knight narratives’ genre name, or (sub-)types thereof. These hyponym relations thus hinge on prototypical (i.e., context-universal) features *Xiáyì* ‘heroism’, *Wúshù* ‘martial arts’, and *Jiānghú* ‘martial world’, because they jointly describe a prototypical ‘martial heroes’ sense. Across contexts of use, however, genre-specific features establish the specific senses/uses of each genre (e.g., *Jiànfǎ*/*Jiànshù* ‘swordsmanship’ for *Jiànxiá*). Our taxonomy therefore captures hyponym relations but also sense differences among these genre names.

Now that we have offered a semantic analysis of *Wúxiá* and the hyponym relations it can form, we can answer our research questions as follows.

- *Wúxiá* and related names function as genre names via their polysemous ability to describe and refer to these genres and their constituting narratives;
- Senses and their features can be context/use-sensitive. Prototypical features occur in each context/use, but more peripheral features occur in two or one contexts/uses;
- Features establish hyponym relations among *Wúxiá* and *Yóuxiá*, *Xiānxiá*, *Jiànxiá* (i.e., sub-genre names), and *Wúxiá* and *Xiá Wénhuà* (i.e., super-genre name). Thus, genre names form taxonomies via hierarchical hyponymy relations;
- Mandarin genre names are inherently descriptive, though referring to genres (as narrative kinds) or to groups (of narratives) via polysemy, as per predictions.

With these research answers in place, we turn to our discussion.

5. Discussion

We believe that our results offer four key contributions to the inter-disciplinary debate regarding proper names and their semantic properties. First, we confirm model-theoretic views of Mandarin NPs as names having referential uses, however mediated via descriptive senses (e.g., Krifka 1995; Li 2017; cf. also Chierchia 1998a, 1998b, 2010; Cohen 2008). We also contribute a novel view on the debate regarding the relation between common nouns and proper names (cf. Anderson 2004, 2007; van Langendonck 2007; Nübling, Fahlbusch, & Heuser 2015; van Langendonck & Van de Velde 2016; Stolz & Nintemann 2024). Since Mandarin nominals are syntactically ambiguous by potentially distributing as nouns or names, they also are semantically polysemous by potentially having appellative or onymic sense types. Although our data only cover some genre names, the analysis potentially applies to all Mandarin nominals. It thus confirms that these two processes can connect different uses of potentially distinct nominal categories (cf. also Harvalík 2012; David, Klemensová, & Místeký 2023; Coates 2006a, 2006b; Motschenbacher 2020). Our novel view can thus also connect currently non-communicating frameworks.

Second, we have shown that the senses associated to these genre names include semantic features as key components that vary across contexts of use. This result is consistent with Terminology approaches that also analyse words' senses as context- and use-sensitive (e.g., Pearson 1998; ten Hacken 2010, 2015; Giacomini 2023). Our innovation lies in showing how one can use feature component analysis (cf. Bullinaria & Levy 2007; Recchia & Jones 2009) to determine differences in use among context-sensitive senses. We also innovate by showing how we can identify prototypical senses that names like *Wǔxiá* always express across contexts (cf. ten Hacken 2018; San Martín 2022). In our analysis, genre names have senses that are context-sensitive but nevertheless related.

From the first and second point, we can also confirm the following fact. Speakers in general conversations, and scholars via specialised publications or encyclopaedic (term) definitions use *Wǔxiá* as having a prototypical sense referring to martial heroes' narratives and their genre. However, less prototypical uses involve themes such as Confucian values and humanitarian altruism, among others (Zhang 1994; Song 2006; Chen 2012; Zhang et al. 2020; Han 2004; Ni 2005; Xu 2019; Liu 2024). Context-sensitive uses and features thus seem to operate as a continuum of polysemous perspectives about what narratives/genres may qualify as *Wǔxiá*. We conjecture that a more in-depth analysis may shed light on whether some features refer to genres' enduring properties (e.g., 'martial heroes' being the temporally stable prototypical sense of *Wǔxiá*). However, we leave aside an exploration of this topic for future research, due to length requirements.

Third, we have shown that via this context-sensitive feature analysis, we can also model hyponymy relations among these genre names/nominals. Our innovation lies in two aspects. First, we have shown that standard lexical semantic analyses (e.g., Cruse 1986, 2004; Riemer 2010; Murphy 2010; Jezek 2016; Ursini & Zhang 2025) can also include features that constitute senses. We then have shown that context-sensitive sense variation operates at the finer-grained level of features: speakers may associate subtly different senses to genre names across contexts. Second, we have shown that this analysis can apply to common nouns and also to proper names, in the nominal domain. Our first, second and third discussion points show that various strands of the grammar and semantics of nouns, nominals and proper names are interwoven.

We observe that our analysis holds because of the hierarchical nature of these hyponym relations: *Wǔxiá* is a hyperonym of *Yóuxiá*, *Xiānxiá*, *Jiànxiá* and a hyponym of *Xiá Wénhuà*. We also note that the hyponym relations holding between *Wǔxiá* and its hyponyms, in particular *Xiānxiá*, display nuanced properties: these names share prototypical features, but less prototypical features differ considerably in content (cf. also Zhu 2020; Zhou 2024). However, these findings suggest that general and specialised/term uses underline the current conceptual connections among these genres. Speakers still use *Xiānxiá* as a name describing a sub-genre (i.e., hyponym) of *Wǔxiá*, and also use *Yóuxiá*, *Jiànxiá* as hyponyms/sub-genres of *Wǔxiá*.

Fourth, we have shown that Mandarin genre names are inherently descriptive, due to the syntactic and semantic properties they have as Mandarin NPs (Sun 2006; Li 2017). Our innovation lies in connecting this result to an ampler debate regarding the properties of proper names, common nouns and nominals across languages. We have shown that in Mandarin these categories may require a single onymic grammar to account their properties, and thus a single semantic account merging referential/onymic and descriptive/appellative functions into polysemy networks. At least for this language and its genre names, the positing of separate but communicating nominal categories in grammar seems not empirically justified.

6. Conclusions

The goal of this paper has been to show that *Wǔxiá* and related genre names in Mandarin can be polysemous by referring to genres or narratives thereof but have descriptive senses. This polysemy stems from the flexible grammatical properties of Mandarin nominals, which distribute as NPs in sentences and can thus either qualify proper names or common nouns. The paper has shown that one can identify the descriptive senses of *Wǔxiá* and other genre names across general/conversational contexts, specialised contexts involving scholarly research, and encyclopaedic/term contexts. Via this analysis, one can show that these names stand in hierarchical hyponym relations, as proper members of this language's lexicon. The paper thus offers an innovative view regarding proper names and their linguistic views. However, we leave open the question of how this view may extend cross-linguistically.

Notes

1 Readers interested in viewing the data corpus with examples and supplementary discussion are invited to contact the corresponding authors and/or use the following link: <<https://osf.io/ahqfg/>>

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Notes on Contributors

Francesco-Alessio Ursini is a research professor at Central China Normal University (CCNU), Wuhan, China. Francesco-Alessio works in theoretical and experimental linguistics, and focuses on spatial categories (e.g., adpositions, case morphemes) and platial categories (e.g., place names). This research is conducted on Romance, Germanic, and Sinitic languages, often with a formal typological perspective.

Qin Xie is an assistant professor at Macau University of Science and Technology with 15 years of teaching experience in higher education. She holds a Ph.D. in Communication Studies from Macau University of Science and Technology and an MA in Linguistics from Hunan University. Dr. Xie has published various articles in professional journals and conference proceedings. In recent work, she has begun investigating the morpho-syntactic and lexical properties of Chinese toponyms, as well as spatial and platial categories, focusing on the Greater Bay Area.

Yue Sara Zhang is currently a lecturer of linguistics at Hainan University, Haikou, China. Her research interests lie in spatial words, discourse grammar, and grammaticalization. The research on spatial words focuses on Cantonese and Mandarin. In her recent works, she also focuses on language ecology and education planning, given the background of the Hainan ethnic group.

Correspondence to: Dr. Qin Xie, University International College, Macau University of Science and Technology, E-mail: qxie@must.edu.mo