

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: a Dialectical Analysis and Reader-Response Critique

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Scholars have analyzed Ang Lee's seminal *wuxia* film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* as a transnational diasporic product with Chinese cultural subtexts that has invited wide ranging responses from global audiences, and as a feminist reading of the women warriors' identities and functions in relation to a possible narrative of empowerment.¹ I will examine the intersectionality of Ang Lee's aforementioned cultural and feminist messages by analyzing the stories of women warriors in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* in the context of historical and cultural Chinese paradigms. In particular, I will aim to show that the "comb-chasing" to "invincible sword goddess" to "flying free" arc in Jen's story can be analyzed through the framework of female empowerment; it offers, however, not a straightforward journey towards defying gender roles. Rather, it delineates that participating in a patriarchal society characterized by the rigid, discriminatory, and all-pervasive rules and expectations under the Chinese concept of *jianghu* inherently prevents oneself from achieving true agency and freedom. As shown by Jen's final leap off the Wudang mountains, the only path to escape from this process of interpellation is to withdraw from the world in pursuit of spiritual transcendence.

Finally, I will narrow the scope of global critical reactions to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* to merely the female Chinese audience; through a reader-response lens, I will analyze the unique phenomenological features of the alternate reality offered by *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, where warriors may defy gravity through *qing gong* and explore combat possibilities through representative dance-like action, and contend that the pleasure and perception of the audience are situated along a continuum of fantasy and reality. Despite the setting of the film as an alternative reality, it is nonetheless firmly grounded upon dominant social and cultural values and philosophies (Taoism and Confucianism) from both historical and modern eras of China.² The fantasy *wuxia* world thus provides a displaced site to play out real tensions between clashing philosophies and their relations to gender identity; specifically, Jen's story parallels modern Chinese women's subjugation under longstanding cultural and moral expectations of filial piety as "daughters" and "sisters" of the family or community, a struggle characterized between the Taoist desire for individual freedom and Confucius concern for communal well-being.

¹ Christina Klein, "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon': A Diasporic Reading," *Cinema Journal*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2004, pp. 18-42. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3661154; Leung Wing-Fei, "Zhang Ziyi: The New Face of Chinese Femininity," *East Asian Film Stars*.

² The "alternative reality" setting derives from not only the imaginative physical capabilities of the film's characters, but also from the fact that Ang Lee's construction of an image of China is based upon his memories, experiences, and imagination as a member of the Chinese diaspora rather than a historically accurate representation of China.

Flying and Fighting: Jen's Efficacy as a Feminist Protagonist

"I wish I were like the heroes in the books I read... I guess I am happy to be marrying. But to be free to live my own life, to choose whom I love... That is true happiness." – Jen Yu

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon offered Jade Fox (Pei Pei Cheng), Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh), and Jen Yu (Zhang Zhi Yi) as warrior women whose visual representations and plot purposes readily offer themselves to a feminist agenda; however, scholars have offered contrary interpretations to this issue. Leung Wing-Fai, a professor at University College Cork's School of Asian Studies, emphasizes Jen's physical prowess and daring expressions of female desire to assert that Jen effectively challenges gender roles, which in turn offers Jen as an international symbol of the strong female; on the other hand, Chan, an assistant professor at the National University of Singapore, argues that Lee's strategic configuration of feminist elements in the film allows for multiple alternative readings, whether Jen is empowered through agency or recommitted to patriarchal ideologies by "walking the Taoist way" and joining the lower ranks of "petty swordsmen." Neither interpretation is incorrect, as the differences between Wing-Fai and Chan's arguments may have root in the frameworks through which they are constructed: Wing Fai's interpretation of Jen's feminist function hinges on the contrast that Jen provides to mainstream Western/Hollywood portrayals of women and her non-conformity to the male gaze, while Chan's claim of ambiguity rests on more local ideological and cultural considerations of Jen's interpellation into *jianghu*. I will attempt to synthesize these approaches and offer my own understanding in a middle-ground position: while female empowerment is a proper framework with which to analyze Jen's resistance, her ultimate withdrawal from (rather than triumph over) the world provides that her actions cannot be reduced to unambiguous measures of success or failure, but rather complicates her feminist mission as she gains freedom and agency despite her transgressions and failure to alter broader societal structures.

Jen is a dynamic character whose strong will and physical skill are tested in her struggle to escape rigid external expectations as the daughter of a wealthy governor and subject of an arranged marriage. Her firm resistance and rebellion against the inflexible role she is designated to play in the patriarchal society can be demonstrated by the evolution of her control (or lack thereof) over herself and her freedoms. I will examine three key events in Jen's story — the comb-chasing scene, the "invincible sword goddess" scene, and the final scene in which she flies free, to explore these developments. The incorporation of the imposed feminine duties (i.e., obligation to take part in an arranged marriage) as obstacles in her search for independence and freedom symbolizes a broad resistance to traditional gender roles. However, Jen's story diverges from the conventional, linear narrative in which a female protagonist gradually empowers herself and overcomes systemic barriers through a dialectic with societal structures — locally, Jen fails to uplift herself in this manner; broadly, she fails to dismantle or even reform the sexist and heteronormative traditions of *jianghu*. Although her pursuit of personal freedoms through the development of her roles, first as Lo's lover, then as the lone "invincible sword goddess," allow her to temporarily escape from her original identity as a governor's daughter, her eventual decision to leap off the Wudang mountains and forgo the opportunity to fulfill the aforementioned identities demonstrates that none of her modes of being (lover, warrior, or daughter) offered her true agency. Each path was poisoned by the omnipresent, deep-rooted

gender expectations in *jianghu* during the Qing Dynasty. Thus, Jen's only way to escape these chains was to literally fly free, as seen in the movie's conclusion, which may either represent her death or her spiritual transcendence.

The comb-chasing scene, a flashback that introduces Lo and the bandits, functionally serves as the first time Jen is able to escape her role as governor's daughter. The sequence begins as the camera pans to Jen, trapped in the vehicle in which she is transported, a shot that likens Jen to a prisoner in a jail cell; in this *mise-en-scène*, the rectangular window is placed in a larger rectangular frame, creating layers of barriers as perceived by the audience. As the violence and battle between bandits and soldiers ensue, Jen jumps into the action and chases after Lo on a horseback. The camera follows Lo and Jen on a high-speed, action-filled sequence in their duel, juxtaposing heavily with the inflexibility of Jen's fixed position and minimal interaction with space in the previous *mise-en-scène*. Jen then displays her physical prowess in largely hand-to-hand combat, thus displaying a vast and sudden increase in her power as she temporarily escapes from her "daughter" role and becomes Lo's lover. However, the nature of her newfound freedom and control is transient: soon, her old life intrudes upon her as the governor's soldiers close in, and she is forced to return from the desert.

Later, Jen's decision to flee her arranged marriage and roam the countryside as a lone warrior represents the height of her resistance to her expected place in society (her encounter with the bandits was largely accidental, whereas her decision to flee her marriage was characterized by agency). In parallel, her physical skill and personal freedoms also grow to a maximum, as shown by the "invincible sword goddess" scene in which, using the Green Destiny, she defeats numerous other martial artists at an inn with ease. Yet, even in a displaced location, operating as a lone and anonymous figure, she is unable to start afresh and abandon her old identity. In particular, she is reminded of her arranged marriage as "Phoenix Mountain Gou" declares his name in her presence. Furthermore, inquiries about the Green Destiny tie her back to her interactions with Li Mu Bai, and the egotistical remarks from Monk Jing reflect the continued prevalence of martial arts as a stereotypically masculine practice.

The aforementioned limitations of Jen's lover-to-warrior arc as an attempt to escape her role as governor's daughter are resolved in the final scene of the film, in which Jen jumps off the Wudang mountain, echoing the idiom 心诚则灵. The idiom reflects the legend of a man who jumped off a cliff but survived, a story that Lo had previously told Jen in the desert; thus, it explains that purity of heart is crucial in fulfilling one's wishes. Rather than become an official Wudang disciple and rekindle her relationship with Lo, Jen flies free because she recognizes the limitations of her warrior and lover identities. Specifically, becoming an official disciple at the Wudang mountain would make her complicit in the Wudang's traditional discrimination against women, and her love for Lo may turn out to be restrictive or unfeasible as their love affair in the desert depicted; in essence, her background will always remain a core part of her. With this understanding, Jen flies into the clouds and returns to a state of purity, echoing the idiom and cleansing herself of the poisonous complexities of the physical world. While it is up to the viewer's interpretation on answering whether Jen transcends or dies after jumping off the cliff, her liberation and empowerment through this final act of agency are evident.

Distorted *wuxia* Physics and Realistic *jianghu* Norms: a Reader-Response Critique

In response to Jen's story, its feminist possibilities, and its implicit cultural commentary, Western audiences have generally offered their praise; however, scholars have pointed out that Chinese (including those in the diaspora) audiences' response has been characterized more by ambivalence: on the one hand, the Chinese audience celebrated the success of a film with unique Chinese subtexts in Hollywood and the global market; on the other hand, some Chinese viewers offered anti-Orientalist criticism and charges of inauthenticity.⁴ Nonetheless, it is important to understand the short-term phenomenological and long-term emotional impact of the film on a particular subset of the Chinese audience — Chinese women — the demographic most likely to resonate with Jen and the women warriors' purposeful struggles at the intersection of gender and culture.³

Constructing a reader-response lens for our analytical purposes requires a deeper understanding of the *wuxia* world that the viewer vicariously experiences in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. In the *wuxia* world, the physical skills of the warrior protagonists are amplified, in some cases completely disobeying the laws of physics: they may float through air with *qing gong*, balance on bamboo trees with ease, and wield weapons with inhuman reaction speeds while engaging in beautiful dance-like combat. Although the warriors express immense freedom and power over the physical world, they are simultaneously confined within the rigid and stringent social and cultural codes of *jianghu*. In addition to the patriarchal hegemony and firm class structure of the oppressive government-constituent dynamic that the Qing Dynasty creates, the master-pupil relationship and the individual-family/individual-clan relationship further provide a distinct stratification of positions of power in *jianghu*. The disciplinary master-pupil relationship necessitates the total submission of the pupil to the master (and by direct association, adherence to the master's values, philosophies, and understanding of martial arts), whereas the individual-family/individual-clan relationship derives from the Confucius emphasis on one's obligation to others. Most importantly, the moral code of spoken and unspoken rules that *jianghu* martial artists follow supersede all other responsibilities — martial artists must act with "friendship, trust, integrity" in order to survive in *jianghu*. For instance, Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai refrain from consummating their love in order to honor the death of their mutual friend.

Situated within these burdensome social obligations and institutional restrictions, the fantastic action-based sequences provide a unique phenomenological experience that forces the audience's perception along a continuum of fantasy and reality. The fantasy aspect empowers and enables the viewer, eliciting a visceral response as they visually and auditorily experience the *qing gong* and fighting scenes. On the other hand, the sociopolitical conditions of martial artists in *jiang hu* draw immediate parallels to the viewers' own internal tensions as they navigate life in the context of modern economic and social trends in China. Indeed, the fictional

³ Kenneth Chan, "The Global Return of the Wu Xia Pian (Chinese Sword-Fighting Movie): Ang Lee's 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon,'" *Cinema Journal*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2004, pp. 3-17. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3661153.

master-disciple and martial artist-clan relationships of *jianghu* (connections that Lee explores through the potential discipleship of Jen under Li Mu Bai and the prestigious Wudang clan) may be read as allegories to the established system of respect and compliance that the Chinese must show to individuals in positions of power (teachers, elders, executives, leaders) and to larger organizations (political parties); however, they retain enough discrepancies such that the viewer may still disassociate themselves from their reality while subconsciously internalizing the problematics of *jianghu's* structures.

China's modernization and globalization encompass trends that may further contribute to comprehending the reader-response mechanisms at play. Beginning in the late 1970s, the economic reforms and liberalization of China have necessitated the mass emigration of young women (and men) to cities, where they toil at factories year-long and leave behind the children and the elderly of their original homes. This widespread phenomenon of a separated and broken family (妻离子散) disregards the long-standing tradition to care for the elderly forces children to grow up independently. Moreover, the importation of Western ideals of individualism as a result of globalization and an increased emphasis on the Taoist way of pursuing personal freedom has further shifted cultural values away from the Confucian sense of obligation to the family and community.

It is within these two developments that Lee inserts filial piety (孝), the Confucian practice of respect and loyalty to one's family, in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, as Jen seeks independence and freedom despite her obligations to filial piety and other Confucian values. Thus, Lee turns these patriarchal moral traditions into productive guilt: in the midst of the broken family phenomenon and prevalence of young people's inclination for independence and freedom, the modern Chinese viewer cannot fulfill the expectations of filial piety and instead feels as though she has betrayed the moral codes instilled within them through thousands of years of heritage. Lee's word to the wise and purposeful elicitation of guilt serves as a valuable step to re-imagining the paths that Chinese women should undertake at a pivotal point in China's modernization and globalization process; Jen's simultaneously displaced and grounded character provides a lens that the Chinese woman may interrogate to seek a balance between the (at times) clashing philosophies of Taoism and Confucianism, the Eastern emphasis on filial piety and Western focus on individualism, and the shifting gender roles in tandem with these developments.

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