

LINDSAY STEENBERG

A Dream of China: Translation and Hybridisation in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

“Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is a kind of dream of China, a China that probably never existed, except in my boyhood fantasies in Taiwan.” – Ang Lee¹

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (US/Taiwan/Hong Kong/China, 2000) is Ang Lee’s affectionate art-house homage to the *wuxia* genre. Its complex plot tells the stories of three principal characters: Yu Jen (Yu Jiaolong, played by Zhang Ziyi) the aristocrat who moonlights as a vigilante, Li Mu-bai (Chow Yun-fat) the famous swordsman who would teach Jen the Wudang martial discipline, and Yu Shu-lien (Michelle Yeoh), owner of a reputable security firm, long-time friend and frustrated lover of Mu-bai. The film makes use of many of the conventions of *wuxia*: a secret Taoist manual, a villain with poison darts and the master/student martial arts relationship. The iconography of the film fits the genre as well: a stolen sword, black masks and the film’s setting in the *jianghu*² underworld of historical China. However, to categorise or analyse *Crouching Tiger* based only on these surface attributes is an oversimplification. The film is not simply a re-creation of the *wuxia* genre but a re-interpretation based on cross-cultural translations. The film contains elements of swordplay films and also of the melodrama, the Western and *film noir*.³ *Crouching*

Tiger does not offer a story belonging exclusively to ancient China, but a postmodern hybrid of Eastern and Western genres. Taiwanese-American director Ang Lee's "dream of China" scavenges elements from a global experience of cinema.

Hybridisation and Hyphenation: The Misleading Excess of Surfaces

Ang Lee has been consistently addressed by Western critical media in terms of his personal relationship to his film texts. While I do not want to offer an approach to *Crouching Tiger* limited by an auteurist perspective, I do want to address and complicate the ubiquitous assumptions which connect Lee, and his ethnic origins, to the meaning and supposed authenticity of his films. Lee uncovers the tensions of modern Asian families in films such as *The Wedding Banquet* (USA/Taiwan, 1993) and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (USA/Taiwan, 1994), and delves into the familial trials of historical America in *The Ice Storm* (USA, 1997), *Ride with the Devil* (USA, 1999) and most recently, *Brokeback Mountain* (USA, 2005). Lee also deals with families in the Jane Austen adaptation, *Sense and Sensibility* (USA/UK, 1995). In their article "Breaking the Soy Sauce Jar: Diaspora and Displacement in the Films of Ang Lee," Wei Ming Dariotis and Eileen Fung summarise the Western reception of Lee's Western historical dramas saying, "No article or interview about *Sense and Sensibility* passes without some comment about Ang Lee's difference of identity from the understood identity of the film."⁴ It would seem that Lee's ethnicity and nationality are interpreted by the West as tied to his ability authentically to tell stories about the past.

Given this attention, it is surprising that Lee's relationship (as Taiwanese-American) to his mainland Chinese historical epic has remained, for the large part, un-addressed. Western audiences and critics assume that a translation of cultures

occurs in an Asian director's perception of the Western past, but not necessarily in the same director's interpretation of the Asian past. This (inadequate) conclusion is based on a surface reading of Lee's films, which conflates ethnic background with generic experience and authorial vision: *Crouching Tiger* is seen as part of Lee's "cultural roots"⁵ and his authority over the text is naturalised because of this. In making this point I am not assuming a unified Western view of Lee's film. I am highlighting these patterns in order to consider the ramifications of an over-simplified generic reading of a hybrid text. Arguably, Lee's *Crouching Tiger* is as much a cross-cultural interpretation as *Sense and Sensibility*. Leon Hunt, in *Kung Fu Cult Masters*, supports this view in his description of *Crouching Tiger* as "Jane Austen seemingly let loose in *Jianghu*."⁶ Hunt further discusses the process of multinational hybridisation at the industrial level by describing the film as an international effort which combines

an émigré Taiwanese director, a script produced by an ongoing process of translation between Chinese and American writers, two stars and a choreographer from Hong Kong, one Taiwanese and one Mainland star.⁷

Crouching Tiger is realised through the funding and labour of several different countries. To ignore the processes of retrofit, hybridisation and translation erroneously assumes the un-fractured unity of a postmodern transnational text which is invested in subverting the mythology of wholeness and resolution. It also assumes that because the director is of a certain ethnicity, his or her text must necessarily have origins there. However, even if limited to an auteurist analysis, Lee's hyphenated identity complicates this logic.

Released in the same year as the postmodern box-office hit, *Charlie's Angels* (McG, USA/Germany, 2000), *Crouching Tiger* was heralded by the popular press as a ground-breaking, high-art, Asian action film.⁸ References to Lee's ethnic identity and

body of work are almost always made when reviewing the film. Likewise, many publications include brief definitions or histories of *wuxia* in their reviews, suggesting that *Crouching Tiger* is not only representative of the genre but implying that it functions as an introduction to the genre for Western spectators.⁹ Of course not all Western audiences were new to Asian cinema in 2000; however, it is a reasonable assumption that many of their viewing experiences and expectations would have been shaped by previous popular exports such as films starring Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan. In classifying *Crouching Tiger* as *wuxia*, Western reviews have encouraged a misleading consideration of the film: eliding the transgeneric and transnational elements at play in the film, assuming a unified Western audience unfamiliar with Asian cinema, and overlooking the film's postmodern innovation.

Crouching Tiger puts tension between surface and substance in its combinations of *wuxia*, the Western, and art-house melodrama.¹⁰ This is, in turn, echoed by the characters and the plot conventions unfolding in the narrative of the film. On the surface, Jen is an aristocratic lady but underneath are several other identities: rebellious daughter, lover, student and deadly martial artist. Jen's identity cannot be described without hyphenation. She is not "aristocrat" but lady-fighter-thief-student-rebel-sister-lover. The excess of this hybridisation overburdens and cracks the narrative of the film, just as the dissatisfied characters of *Ride with the Devil* and *Eat Drink Man Woman* break away from the systems that bind them.

Crouching Tiger highlights the (mis)translation between surface-structuring form and narrative subject-matter. However, its self-reflexive consideration of genre in this process is taken a step further than in Lee's previous work. The film's narrative consideration of literature, and its misinterpretation, forces the audience to be suspicious of the process of adaptation. The genre of *wuxia* and its conventional

setting of *Jianghu* are not only represented in the format of the film, but are debated and discussed by the characters. Jen claims that she was seduced by Jade Fox's (Zheng Pei-pei's) stories of *jianghu* adventures and tells Shu-lien that she wishes to be totally free like the characters of *wuxia*.¹¹ Shu-lien corrects Jen's romantic view of the honourable underworld of *jianghu* by bringing her attention to the less exciting elements of it, such as repressive social rules similar to those of mainstream society and sub-par bathing arrangements. The reality of Shu-lien's frustrated relationship with Li Mu-bai also highlights the less than romantic situation beneath the glossy surface of the *Jianghu* lifestyle. The film comments on the seductive power of these *wuxia* images, and shows them to be inauthentic.

Leon Hunt proposes that the differences of opinion regarding *jianghu* held by Jen and Shu-lien are due to their embodiment of different martial arts genre conventions. Hunt views Shu-lien as representative of the patriarchal kung fu film: "She is smart but 'knows her place;' [she is] respectful of tradition and (male) heroic codes."¹² Jen, on the other hand, is part of the swordplay genre, "defined by freedom and mobility, or at least a longing for them."¹³ These two opposing heroines (as representatives of genre ideals) fight visually for supremacy. However, an allegorical argument oversimplifies the relationship between the two women and their narrative roles. Likewise, such an argument de-emphasises the patriarchal ordering that is so much a part of both genres, despite their tradition of active women warriors, and downplays the innovation of *Crouching Tiger's* female characters. Shu-lien does not wholly accept the patriarchy of kung fu. She runs her own security company and is permitted a freedom of movement not only in the world of *jianghu* (where many marginalised people can be free of some of society's strictures), but also in more conventional social circles. Shu-lien's mobility is rarely seen in the genre. Similarly,

Jen is something more than the “swordplay queen”¹⁴ that Hunt imagines her to be. Her uncontained anger and sexuality, her unwillingness to subscribe to any ordering system, and her ultimate refusal to belong to the diegetic world (by flying off the bridge at Wudang Mountain at the film’s conclusion) contribute to a fracturing of the overall unity of the film. Shu-lien and Jen do have a close relationship to genre translation and interpretation, but theirs are roles which comment on and deconstruct rather than embody or allegorise.

The translation of literary tropes also has a much more spectacular and direct relationship to the fight sequences of the film. Fencing, we are told by Shu Lien, is very similar to calligraphy. It is this similarity which allows Shu Lien to see through Jen’s aristocratic identity and recognise the martial artist and thief underneath. Jen’s ability to read and write is not only a parallel to her prodigious martial artistry, it is also the means by which she learned Wudang’s secrets. Jen’s mentor, Jade Fox, was unable to read the Wudang manual she stole from Mu-bai’s master, and so was only able to learn from the diagrams—from the surface images of the martial art. Her student, Jen, was able to interpret the deeper meaning of the text and her progress and skill are much greater than those of her mentor. Literacy, and the ability to understand the meaning beneath the surface of visual spectacle, is a primary thematic concern in *Crouching Tiger*. The relationship of literacy to fighting, skill and understanding is presented visually in the communicativeness of the fighting sequences. Only those who can read the fights properly truly understand their meaning and significance. Likewise, only the critical spectator can unmask the multiplicity of identities beneath a social and gendered surface.

Time, Tradition and Place: an Excess of the Image of “China”

Issues of translation, adaptation and surface readings can also be applied to a cross-cultural reading of *Crouching Tiger*.¹⁵ Cultural theorist Rey Chow describes the ways in which the West has read, represented and studied the East, specifically China. She highlights a tension between those who eschew the analytic tools of the West in their study of Asia, and those (like herself) who are attempting to analyse the East with Western tools (in Chow’s case, psychoanalysis). Chow believes that a hybrid model is the most appropriate because cross-pollination is impossible to avoid. I share Chow’s assertion that the blurring of Western theory and Eastern subject matter is unavoidable and I approach the film with that in mind. In fact, this is an important part of the hybrid and subversive potential of a transnational film like *Crouching Tiger*, for Eastern and Western audiences alike. The genre overload created by the form and content of *Crouching Tiger* presents a space which contests and fractures unified nostalgic images of China, *wuxia* and Western action-film form by the very fact that it is all of these at once and because its narrative, its spectacle and its interpretation of warrior women challenge unified and stable notions of these throughout the film.

In terms of the Western reception and adaptation of Asia, Chow has pointed to the “othering” of China. Kwai-cheung Lo concludes that this “othering” gaze of the Western spectator erases all regional differences to create a (simulated and unified) pan-Chinese identity.¹⁶ Neither Chow nor Lo is referring, in this instance, to an outright Western racist view of Chinese culture but rather condemning the “positive, respectful, and admiring feelings for the ‘other’ ... rooted in un-self-reflexive, culturally coded perspectives.”¹⁷ This glorifying of the unified “Other”/China is a surface reading, which overvalues objects and sees Chinese history and nationality as

offering unmitigated access to an ancient truth unavailable in the West. Chow uses the example of a Western reading of the spiritual principles of Taoism which ignores its Chinese historical context and its view of femininity as negativity and silence which “allows its coexistence and collaboration with Confucianism’s misogyny.”¹⁸ A *yin/yang* symbol is not interchangeable with Eastern spirituality, just as an expertly presented drop kick cannot give audiences an experience of timeless wisdom or honour. Cinematic images of China as presented in the *wuxia* genre film are extremely vulnerable to this cross-cultural overvaluing of surface readings and objects due to their visual and spectacular natures.

This superficial reading can be found in assigning *Crouching Tiger* the label of swordplay/kung fu film. In a categorisation such as this, the iconography of the film takes precedence over all other elements. The fantastic sword or the masked vigilante comes reductively to signify “swordplay” as well as China. The metonymical function of *wuxia* iconography places it within the category which Fredric Jameson has called the “nostalgia film... or *la mode retro*.”¹⁹ Jameson’s model of the nostalgia film describes Lee’s film given its elegiac remembering of childhood genres, objects and settings. The nostalgia and pastiche of *Crouching Tiger* is akin to many other contemporary postmodern action films, among them *Charlie’s Angels* and *Kill Bill, Vols. 1 and 2* (Quentin Tarantino, USA, 2003, 2004). These films summon up the iconography and cinematic styling of past genres, Eastern and Western, the difference being that these processes are more transparent in *Charlie’s Angels* and *Kill Bill* to a Western audience who may be familiar with more of the genres and sequences being quoted. Without the frequent costume changes of *Charlie’s Angels* and *Kill Bill*, the pastiche in *Crouching Tiger* is less easy to spot,

although certainly no less important an element of the text. Like other nostalgia films identified by Jameson, *Crouching Tiger*

restructure[s] the whole issue of pastiche and project[s] it onto a collective and social level, where the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the generation.²⁰

As stated in this article's epigraph, the film recalls memories of a mythic Chinese past as presented through the stories of childhood. The nostalgia in the film is not for China or the *wuxia* genre itself, but for an experience of both in combination, and this is expressed through the film and by the characters directly. Jen longs not for the realities of *jianghu*, but for her experience of that place through childhood adventure stories. *Crouching Tiger's* status as a transnational hybrid object representing the Eastern past to a Western audience shifts Jameson's definition from the "emergent ideology of the generation" to the supposed ideology of a nation, China. Lee's nostalgia for a combination of history and genre runs into problems in the translation, where Western readings can conflate and confuse the surface of place, history and genre. In such a case, nostalgia becomes not only a process of appropriating a lost history, but rather an appropriation of the iconography of another culture.

The film is open to criticism from theorists such as Chow for just such a spectacular presentation of China, Chinese iconography and Chinese history. According to Chow, China can be fetishised as representative of a spiritual spectacle or a tradition existing outside time, thereby offering greater access to truths seemingly forgotten in Western modernity. In this way, China becomes a fetishised "Other" and, in some respects, functions as if it were a genre itself. "China" becomes generic shorthand for a timeless spiritual place where warriors can fly and enlightenment is

attainable through violence. Just as Jen is seduced by Jade Fox's tales of the *jianghu* underworld, the Western spectator is seduced by the symbols of *wuxia*/China and their illusion of unity.

This seduction, however, is incomplete and in those moments where the film departs from *wuxia*, the spectator's gaze is disrupted. This is most significantly accomplished by the characterisation and function of *Crouching Tiger's* non-traditional warrior women. Petulant and playful Jen is very different from Yang Hui-chin (Xu Feng) in King Hu's classic *A Touch of Zen* (Taiwan, 1969). Hui-chin's martial adventures begin because of injustice and corruption beyond her control, whereas Jen has engineered her situation by stealing the Great Destiny sword. The women of *Crouching Tiger* are permitted agency and self-awareness to a much greater extent than their earlier *wuxia* counterparts.

Fighting the “Deadly China Doll” Syndrome: “Excesses of Womanhood”²¹

Lo's analysis of the female martial artist considers that the popularity of the Asian warrior woman in Hollywood may come at the cost of the feminisation of the Asian man.²² The feminising of China itself and the crisis of Chinese masculinity in cross-cultural interpretations is also a matter of concern to Hunt, Anne Ciecko and Rey Chow, among others. Piling signifiers of femininity onto those characters who are marked as “Other” by their ethnicity distances them further from the power of virile white masculinity. As examples, all of these theorists emphasise the lack of love interests for Asian men in action films produced for Western release. Ciecko, commenting on the Hollywood films of John Woo, describes this trend in terms of genre: “By rendering his star sexually unthreatening and literally ‘generic’ and even parodic, Woo enables Western audience identification... that elides race.”²³ Ciecko

concludes that this removal of the Asian man's sexuality allows the "white, male, young"²⁴ audiences of the West to accept the Asian action hero more readily, since they do not need to be threatened by his sexuality. This is not exclusive to the films of John Woo, as can be seen in the chaste Western crossover films of stars such as Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon* (Robert Clouse, Hong Kong/USA, 1973), Chow Yun-fat in *The Replacement Killers* (Antoine Fuqua, USA, 1998) and Jet Li in *Kiss of the Dragon* (Chris Nahon, France/USA, 2001).

Drawing on the theoretical work of Julia Kristeva, Chow draws attention to the ways in which Western representations feminise the Asian "Other." She describes the "othering"/feminising process as being part of an exchange of looks which puts China in the position traditionally occupied by the objectified woman within the classical Hollywood cinematic apparatus. Chow points to the problems in Kristeva's arguments, primarily their reinforcement of the notion of China as "absolutely 'other' and unknowable;"²⁵ she concludes that "[t]he seductiveness of this metaphysics of feminising the other (culture) cannot be overstated."²⁶ *Crouching Tiger* resists this feminising or asexual representation of Chinese men in its unflinching presentation of Chinese men as complex sexual and romantic subjects. First, there is the relationship between the desert bandit, Lo, and the swordswoman, Jen. Lo and Jen's relationship is revealed in flashback and introduced by a lengthy fight sequence. This fight sequence not only provides part of Jen's history, but shows that she and Lo are equals, as signified by their matched martial skills. Lo is not an androgynous fighter, feminised by his lack of complex adult sexuality as in Chow's worst-case scenarios. While Lo's martial skills are indeed formidable, it is his role as Jen's lover that is the most significant in the film. Lo is the only character in the film truly to come close to understanding Jen's insatiable anger. He alone understands and respects her intense

need for freedom. Mu Bai is similarly represented as an unrequited lover, whose sense of honour will not allow the consummation of his relationship with Shu Lien. Mu Bai and Shu Lien's frustrated love affair is presented as the central tragedy of the film.

These two worthy members of *jianghu* are presented as fighting alongside one another, as an equal partnership. Lo and Mu Bai's equal partnerships with women and roles as lovers defy the typical asexual portrayal of Chinese masculinity described by Kristeva and Chow.²⁷

Crouching Tiger's representations of Asian womanhood also resist the "othering" and "feminising" of Chinese cultures by Western spectators and cinematic practices. These women, through their violence and their central position in the narrative, fracture gender binaries that would divide East and West, active and passive, self and other, masculine and feminine. Hunt worries that "[t]he Chinese action heroine is... vulnerable when crossing cultural and geographic boundaries; specifically to what I shall call 'Deadly China Doll' syndrome."²⁸ He claims that the woman warrior can, too, often "be appropriated as exotic fetish in the Western Orientalist imaginary."²⁹ The deadly China doll is endowed by the western spectator not only with martial ability, but with an "excess of womanhood."³⁰ According to Hunt, these excesses are located in the female characters' appearance and their combination of martial violence with passive and demure mannerisms. Not only are *Crouching Tiger's* female characters far from passive, they also blur the boundaries of masculine/feminine and active/passive through their assumption of central narrative roles. While one can only speculate as to why a Western spectator might fetishise an Asian cinematic character, this much is certain: as complex central subjects, Shu Lien and Jen are much more than deadly beauties.

Like other transnational and postmodern action films, *Crouching Tiger* also brings self-reflexive attention to the processes of objectification. However, where *Charlie's Angels* uses an exaggeration of femininity as a route to subversion, *Crouching Tiger's* characters demand self-conscious questions about objectification directly.³¹ *Charlie's Angels* features a sequence in which the Angels go undercover in a massage parlour called Madame Wong's House of Blossoms. This sequence plays on the Deadly China doll syndrome, exaggerating exploitative and fetishised images of Asian womanhood. While the song "Turning Japanese" plays, the Angels romp about in stylised and revealing versions of Chinese dress, complete with black wigs and extra eyeliner. By overloading the Angel's bodies (only one of whom is Asian) with signifiers of femininity (and "Asian-ness") the film draws the spectator's attention to the stereotypical and artificial nature of these signifiers. Using a similarly self-reflexive strategy, *Crouching Tiger* places demands on its spectators by having Jen ask Mu-bai the extremely direct question, "Did you come here for the sword or for me?" The boldness of this question and the gesture by which she almost seems to offer her body, certainly breaks with *wuxia* conventions.³² However, this question does more than break convention or taboo; it is arguably aimed at the spectator: "did you come to the cinema for the kung fu or to see a beautiful young Asian girl? Or, perhaps, for you, one spectacle relies on the other?" This singular moment not only draws attention to the fetishisation of women and of Asia but, likewise, to the distinct combination of both that formulates the Deadly China Doll.

The women of *Crouching Tiger* not only resist fetishisation, but also each attempts to create breaks in the patriarchal system in a different way. The strange and tragic history of Jade Fox, Jen's mentor and the film's villain, is presented with melodramatic exaggerations of sentimentality, unlikely reversals and elements of a

revenge story structure. Jade Fox murdered Li Mu-bai's master because he would sleep with her but not teach her. She is angry at a system which provides Mu-bai with his martial expertise but would deny her instruction because of her gender. She steals the *Wudang* manual, learns from its diagrams and passes her knowledge on to her aristocratic charge, Jen. Jade Fox, played by former swordplay star Zheng Pei-Pei, violently attacks the patriarchal order which denies her education: she poisons her *Wudang* lover and lives as part of the *jianghu* underworld. Jade Fox's attempt to fight free of patriarchy is the least successful of all the women in the film, as she is betrayed not only by the men who would take advantage of her and refuse to teach her, but by her own student. A future in which she and Jen are truly free of male strictures is denied to her not only by men, but by Jen herself.

Hunt describes Shu-lien as bound by patriarchal tradition, as speaking for a masculine-centred version of kung fu genre cinema, but Shu-lien's character—and her relationship to genre and structure within the film—is more complex than that of mere spokeswoman. She is not bound by the role of love interest or sidekick to the action hero. Shu-lien is an active agent in the diegetic world set up by the film. She is a professional, contributing member of society, well respected by her peers. She is also one of the few characters of the film, male or female, who successfully operates in both *jianghu* and mainstream, legal society. Her hybrid nature as a bridge between these two worlds allows her a unique opportunity to comment on the limits and borders of each category. She also embodies an “intermediate” class in the film, as she does not share in Jen's aristocratic privilege (or strictures) and is still distanced from the illiterate world of Jade Fox or the police detective and his daughter. Shu-lien comments on the gritty day-to-day aspects of *jianghu* while other characters romanticise it as a place of freedom and swordplay. She also cautions Mu-bai that

Jen's world of the aristocracy has different rules from theirs. This is reinforced by the hierarchal privileges afforded to Jen by her Manchurian identity. Shu Lien demonstrates an awareness of the differences separating her from Jen on the social ladder.

Upper-class Jen is at the centre of the film. All conflict is because of her, whether from her theft of the Green Destiny sword, her flight from her marriage or her refusal to become Mu Bai's student. Jen is angry at the systems which attempt to confine her—be they the underworld of *jianghu*, the school of Wudang, or the upper world of the aristocracy. She is unfocused and irrational, with unclear motivations. The only consistency in Jen's character is her rejection of patriarchal rules. This rejection is absolute. Mu-bai claims that this obstinacy and unwillingness to be trained will result in her becoming a "poisoned dragon." It is unsurprising that Jen would be suspicious of Mu-bai's offer given her knowledge of Jade Fox's experience with *Wudang*. The generic conventions of *wuxia* dictate that the central character, in this case Jen, should be taken in hand by a wiser representative of the old order. Through their collaboration, a new order can be formed or the old order reformed. However, Jen refuses any kind of order, new or old.

Jen also rejects one of the most standard tropes of narrative cinema: the convention which would see her fixed as part of a happy or tragic heterosexual couple. While Jen's sexuality is explored, she will not leave one marriage for another, refusing Lo, whom she loves. Instead she refuses marriage altogether, violently fighting containment by any ordering system. Jen fights Mu-bai, Shu-lien, Lo and an entire restaurant full of gang members. She attacks those who would harm her or help her indiscriminately and she delights in the power and movement that her fighting affords her. Jen's fate at the conclusion of the film is her most enigmatic refusal to

obey the rules. During the desert flashback sequence, Lo tells the story of a young man who wished for the health of his parents and so jumped from the mountaintop where he floated away, content in the knowledge that his wish had been fulfilled. At the ending of the film, with Mu-bai and Jade Fox dead, Jen throws herself off the top of Wudang Mountain. Her wish and her fate are left ambiguous. Did she wish to restore Mu-bai to life, in order for him to happily marry Shu-lien and teach her Wudang secrets? Did she wish to return to the hedonism of the desert with Lo? Or did she wish for her teacher, Jade Fox to return to life? Given the fractured nature of Jen's identity over the course of the film and her inexplicable violence, the spectator is at a loss to assume that any outcome is more probable than another.

Jen's jump from Wudang mountain is her final refusal to be considered under genre or gender tropes. A happy ending would have lives restored and marriages performed; a tragic ending would see Jen learning her lesson only for it to come too late. Neither happens. Jen takes herself out of the system and leaves it in pieces behind her. She leaves Lo and the spectator to attempt to assemble meaning under the surface of her final fall/flight. Hunt sees Jen's final gesture as choosing to

remain in flight, resist a fixed identity or space, not fitting neatly here or there. Here, perhaps, is both the fate and the romance of the *wuxia* heroine. She can fly, she can even soar, but she can never really afford to land.³³

Hunt's elegiac reading of Jen's flight at the end is complicated when the film is considered not as a "pure" example of the *wuxia* genre, but as a transnational hybrid. In such a light, Jen's narrative drive to resist landing is because she knows that landing will force her to live by the rules.

In order to understand the role of women warriors as disruptive forces in *Crouching Tiger*, I will offer a close analysis of two hand-to-hand battles. These

fights are the film's most spectacular sequences, in terms of mise-en-scène and cinematography and also in terms of fight choreography. One is the showdown between Jen and Shu-lien in the training compound, and the other is the fight that immediately follows between Mu-bai and Jen in the tree-tops of the bamboo forest. The former is between Jen and her potential role-model and the latter between Jen and her potential teacher. Despite her obvious affection for Shu-lien and her reverence for Mu-bai's martial accomplishments, Jen violently resists their influence. It is clear from these battles that Jen *enjoys* fighting Shu-lien and Mu-bai. Over the course of the film, Jen repeatedly shows a (socially) disturbing delight in her martial power.

The first fight takes place in the training grounds of Shu-lien's headquarters. The stage is set, complete with a central ring and a variety of weaponry positioned along the periphery. Jen is armed with Mu-bai's sword, and it is her possession of his sword which begins the violence: "That is Li Mu-bai's sword. Don't touch it," orders Shu Lien. The relationship of the two women to Mu-bai and to one another is complicated by the Green Destiny sword. Shu-lien's wish is to return the sword to Mu-bai, whereas Jen's desire is for the phallic power it provides. For Shu-lien, the sword represents reunion with Mu-bai, perhaps in the formation of a heterosexual couple, yet for Jen the sword represents freedom from the strict aristocratic life she has led, and the power she desires. By extension, the destructive potential of the weapon provides an interesting way to look at both characters' relationship to violence. On the one hand, Shu-lien uses the sword, and violence in general, as a means to earn a living and to gain acceptance in Mu-bai's world of *jianghu*; whereas, Jen's martial violence is an extension of her all-consuming and destructive desire to be free. This opposition is played out in this sequence at Shu-lien's house.

During her fight with Jen, Shu-lien uses every weapon at her disposal in the training grounds. All of them fail under Jen's command of the Green Destiny and Shu-lien is wounded at the close of the sequence. Shu-lien's arm wound is one of the very few instances where blood is shown in the film. In other instances, the shots of blood are simultaneous with death, for example the head wound inflicted on the police detective. Given the rarity of blood, especially considering the amount of time the film spends in representing violent encounters, it bears noting. The wounding of Shu-lien ends her fighting role in the film and begins her position as mourning lover. She is narratively castrated, denied further kinetic power or an active role in the conclusion of the film. Jen's wounding of her has transformed her spectacle from one of violence to one of sentiment. Once Jen has dealt with the threat posed by Shu-lien she has Mu-bai's undivided attention and she can work out her rebellious issues with him directly.

Jen struggles against Mu-bai, her only martial superior in the film. During her fight with him in the bamboo forest, the camera punctuates the flashes of swordplay with moments of slow-motion close-ups and long-shots of characters flying through the trees. Mu-bai and Jen, both clad in flowing white robes, balance on the treetops. Where Jen's wounding of Shu-lien has communicated a rejection of her example during the previous battle, the ethereal quality of the fight between Jen and Mu-bai highlights the high stakes of the fight and its psychological ramifications. The shots in this sequence are, on average, longer than in previous fights, and with the addition of wirework, give a preternatural quality to the exchange.

As Mu-bai's economical movements become slower, Jen's movements become less graceful and more agitated. She falls from the treetops on several occasions. She is losing the battle. The two finally set down on a rock overlooking a

river. Jen agrees to become Mu-bai's student if he can take the Green Destiny from her in three moves. He does so in one. However, when Jen refuses to kneel before her new master the generic resolution dictated by either *wuxia* or melodrama is frustrated. Jen is robbed of her phallic power, but refuses to accept her position as subordinate to it. Jen's refusals lead to Mu-bai and Jade Fox's deaths, and to her ultimate release from the system of genre and patriarchy.

“I am the Invincible Sword Goddess:” the Excesses of Martial Arts

The women warriors of *Crouching Tiger* and the spectacles they command represent a key trend in action heroines of recent popular cinema: a scavenging of Asian action tropes into Western action cinema and a new kind of violent gendered spectacle. The warrior woman in recent cinema is a seasoned professional whose use of violence is never accidental and rarely defensive. The importance of the function of martial arts in this respect cannot be overestimated. Martial *art* is exactly that, an art which requires training and takes time and effort to perfect. The cinematic woman warrior masters these skills and is able to employ them in both her narrative and representational struggles for power and agency.

Most recent action heroines, from *Charlie's Angels* to *Resident Evil* (Paul Anderson, USA/UK/Germany/France, 2002), are martial artists to some extent. The inclusion of martial arts in films about violent women has dramatically altered their relationship to violence and aided in changing the action heroine's relationship to her own narrative. Martial arts are also a deciding factor for the way in which these films focus on constructing a perfected, naturalised version of martial womanhood. However, the “perfect” body of the hybrid action-cinema heroine is almost always white, despite the Asian roots of the martial arts through which her identity is formed.

Crouching Tiger is one of the rare instances where a non-white action heroine (and entire action film) is embraced by Western audiences with box office sales and Academy Awards.³⁴ Jen and Shu-lien's martial identities depend on their location in China's past. Where China can become fetishised as a surface place granting unmediated access to spirituality and ancient wisdom to Western spectators, the Asian women of *Crouching Tiger's* hybrid China can be read as having tapped into that wisdom by virtue of their ethnicities. According to Chow's framework, Jen and Shu-lien are able to access the ancient wisdom of marital arts because of their coding as Asian/"Other." Yet, the film as hybrid also frustrates an ethnocentric surface reading. Jen and Shu-lien are not action heroines confined to China, or to *wuxia*, but are heroines whose representations borrow freely from the elements offered by other genres, such as the Western. For, just like the western hero, Jen's individualism and violence distinguish her and separate her from civilised society. While her martial skills are celebrated as extraordinary by Mu-bai, he likewise knows them to be potentially destructive to any social order (Wudang, *jianghu* and aristocratic orders alike).³⁵ Just as Shane must leave town at the end of *Shane* (George Stevens, USA, 1953), Jen also leaves. While Jen's flying exit is the more spectacular, the finales serve similar purposes—separating the violent protagonist from the community which cannot contain him or her. Where Shane disappears into the vast and unknowable frontier, Jen floats away into a similarly mysterious space. This contradictory function of the Western hero (upholding and challenging civilisation simultaneously) is embodied by Jen who is, among other things, both loyal daughter and rebellious fighter.

Jen is not constructed as a perfected body in the manner of the Western action cinema. There is no montage showing her growth and training. Her martial body is

not showcased in the same manner as *Charlie's Angels*, in close-up and under the gloss of several (pastiche-inspired) costume changes. She is self-taught from a manual stolen by an angry and sexually exploited woman. Jen has willed herself into the role of martial artist. She has constructed *herself*, rather than allowed the cinematic apparatus (or a teacher) to put her together. Her making is unexpected and unseen, but not a complete mystery as in other *wuxia*, where, according to Bérénice Reynaud, the woman warrior's "kung fu or swordsmanship is all the more terrifying because it is unexplained."³⁶ The spectator is aware of how Jen got her skills, even if he or she is denied the spectacle of her training. What remains unexplained are Jen's motivations. Where other *wuxia* heroines, such as Yang Hui-ching in *A Touch of Zen* or Yim Wing Chun in *Wing Chun* (Yuen Wo-ping, Hong Kong, 1994), have taken up martial arts for self-defence, Jen has not. Neither are her skills part of a family legacy, as in the case of *The One-Armed Swordsman* (Zhang Che, Hong Kong, 1967).³⁷ Rather, Jen is enjoying herself, "playing around" as she tells Mu-bai. Her motivations remain a mysterious frustration to her potential teachers, her family, her lover and the spectator. Jen's martial artistry and celebratory relationship to violence are part of what defines her hybrid identity and the tool by which she resists incorporation into any ordering structures, even those of genre.

Crouching Tiger's play on the cinematic expectations of the Eastern or Western spectator is dependent upon its hybridisation and the unique characterisations of its women warriors. The film's process of generic experimentation and resistance to national and generic rules relies, in part, on its transnational production situation, the cultural context of its reception and the hyphenated identities of its director and production crew. *Crouching Tiger* represents a shift in imagining historical tradition and action spectacle—from the mourning of a lost national or generic object towards

a representation of genre and the past as fractured, complicated and above all, transnational.

¹ Ang Lee's statement from the liner notes of the *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* DVD, released by Columbia TriStar in June 2001.

² Leon Hunt describes *jianghu* as "the world of vagrants" which carries with it its own laws and rules which, while strict, offer the *wuxia* warrior-woman "a freedom of movement far from the constraints of the circumscribed, more Confucian world of the Kung Fu film" (*Kung Fu Cult Masters: From Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger*, London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 124.

³ Kwai-cheung Lo, *Chinese Face/Off: The Transnational Popular Culture of Hong Kong* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 189-190.

⁴ Wei Ming Dariotis and Eileen Fung, "Breaking the Soy Sauce Jar: Diaspora and Displacement in the Films of Ang Lee" in Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, ed., *Transnational Chinese Cinema: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 214. The same has also been said of *The Ice Storm* and *Ride With the Devil*.

⁵ Lee, DVD liner notes for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

⁶ Hunt, 184.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁸ In publications such as *Rolling Stone* and *Entertainment Weekly*, to name only two.

⁹ A few of the many examples are Jonathan Foreman's *New York Post* article on December 8th, 2000:

"The richly complex plot is based on an early 20th century Chinese pulp novel... about *Wuxia*, or wandering warriors with a strong code of loyalty and honor. To the extent that there is corniness and melodrama in the story, it's all but mandated by the conventions of the source material"

(<http://www.nypost.com/movies/17661.htm> September 8th, 2006); and Roger Ebert's article of December 22nd, 2000 in the *Chicago Sun-Times*: "This story, like all martial arts stories, is at some level just plain silly, but Ang Lee ("The Ice Storm," "Sense and Sensibility") and his longtime collaborator James Schamus (who wrote the screenplay with Wang Hui Ling and Tsai Kuo Jung) are unusually successful in bringing out the human elements...."

([http://uk.rottentomatoes.com/click/movie-](http://uk.rottentomatoes.com/click/movie-1102698/reviews.php?critic=columns&sortby=default&page=1&rid=171680)

1102698/reviews.php?critic=columns&sortby=default&page=1&rid=171680 September 7th, 2006).

Under its definition of *wuxia*, the encyclopaedia site wikipedia.org states that "Wuxia was introduced to the Hollywood studios in 2000 by Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*." This explicit connection on such a widely referenced website further supports my argument that the film is popularly regarded in mainstream US culture as an "authentic" and introductory example of the *wuxia* genre.

¹⁰ Further to this, the title of the film comes from a Chinese saying which translates, roughly, as keeping something important hidden.

¹¹ The film is also an adaptation of a serial novel, and takes into consideration other *wuxia* serial novels and earlier films. It also includes elements of Hong Kong action cinema, as exemplified by stars Michelle Yeoh and Chow Yun-fat, both of whom are world renowned for their Hong Kong film careers.

¹² Hunt, 138.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ The generic and representational patterns traced here all describe a wide mainstream American release, and it is for this reason that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is considered primarily in the context of its Western reception rather than its Eastern (co)production or reception. While I recognise that this one-sided consideration is problematic, it is patterns in Western popular cinema and the film's use of cross-cultural translation that are my primary consideration.

¹⁶ Lo, 179-190. Lo first uses the term "pan-Chinese" in his introduction (177) to establish key questions he will be asking about *Crouching Tiger* and its relationship to Hong Kong transnational popular culture.

¹⁷ Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

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- ¹⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 19.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Hunt quoting Cheung, 120.
- ²² Lo, 185.
- ²³ Anne T. Ciecko, "Transnational Action: John Woo, Hong Kong, Hollywood" in Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, ed., *Transnational Chinese Cinema*, 227.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 227.
- ²⁵ Rey Chow, 8.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 9.
- ²⁷ It should be noted that despite Lo's and Mu-bai's complex identities and sexualities, both their love affairs end. Mu-bai is killed and Jen refuses Lo's offer to return to the desert with him. Lo, despite representing freedom from one patriarchal order (aristocratic Chinese society) is nonetheless representative of another: marriage.
- ²⁸ Hunt, 120. Hunt continues to describe the status of Asian women under the 'Deadly China Doll' syndrome: "The Asian woman is a prime object of what Asian-American critics call 'racist love'.... [I]f Asian men are represented as emasculated and asexual, Asian women are 'only sexual, imbued with an innate understanding of how to please and serve'" (quoting Cheung, 1990, 236).
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Just as Jen and Shu-lien also mused aloud about issues of translation and the inaccurate romance of the *jianghu* world.
- ³² Lo, 192.
- ³³ Ibid., 139.
- ³⁴ According to <<http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=crouchingtigerhiddendragon.htm>>, (April 15, 2006) *Crouching Tiger* grossed a total of US\$128,078,872 in the US. It also won four Academy Awards and was nominated for six more.
- ³⁵ In an almost western style bar brawl, Jen defeats dozens of local thugs and leaves the establishment in ruins. While the sequence does not imitate exactly the bar brawl featured in films like *Shane*, it does resonate with the Western's imagination of a romanticised national past and its troubled relationship to violence. More traditional *wuxia* films have several conventions in common with the Western, if little common iconography. For example, the central warriors of both genres use violence only to protect society from attacking outsiders or corrupt insiders. Marshall Will Kane in *High Noon* (Zinneman, 1952) fights a similar battle as Wong Fei-hung (Jet Li) in *Once Upon a Time in China* (Tsui Hark, Hong Kong, 1991). Both men fight for justice in a corrupt society and both must stand alone. This masculine code of honour, and a nostalgia for simpler and more exciting times, are shared concerns of the Western and *wuxia*.
- ³⁶ Bérénice Reynaud, "The Book, the Goddess and the Hero: Sexual Politics in the Chinese Martial Arts Film" (*Senses of Cinema* 26, May-June 2003). <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/26/sexual_politics_chinese_martial_arts.html > (September 13, 2006).
- ³⁷ Reynaud draws attention to this instance.