

The Global Return of the *Wu Xia Pian* (Chinese Sword-Fighting Movie): Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

by Kenneth Chan

Abstract: In examining the way Ang Lee's Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon grapples with cultural identity and Chineseness, this essay considers Lee's construction of an image of "China" in the film, as well as its feminist possibilities. These readings reveal Lee's conflicted critique of traditional Chinese cultural centrism and patriarchal hegemony.

The *wu xia pian*, or Chinese sword-fighting movie, occupies a special place in the cultural memory of my childhood.¹ Growing up in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Singapore, I remember with great fondness escaping from the British-based education system I attended and from the blazing heat of the tropical sun to the air-conditioned coolness of the neighborhood cinema. (This was long before cineplexes became fashionable.) Inevitably, a sword-fighting or kung fu flick from Hong Kong would be screening. The exoticism of one-armed swordsmen, fighting Shaolin monks, and women warriors careening weightlessly across the screen informed my sense and (mis)understanding of Chinese culture, values, and notions of "Chineseness" more radically than any Chinese-language lessons in school could have. The ideological impact of this genre should clearly not be underestimated, as cinematic fantasy is sutured into the cultural and political imaginary of China, particularly for the Chinese in diaspora.²

Like many moviegoers of Chinese ethnicity, I responded to Ang Lee's cinematic epic *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) with genuine enthusiasm and anticipation. This excitement about the film continues to this day, but my response is also fraught with ambivalence. For many Chinese in the United States and around the world, Lee's film marks an important critical and commercial breakthrough for Asian and Asian American filmmakers who wish to make it in Hollywood. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was showered with critical acclaim, enthusiastically received at major international film festivals, and bagged numerous nominations and awards, including the Academy Award in 2001 for best foreign-language film.³ On the one hand, a kind of cultural nationalism lured Chinese viewers to root for the film to triumph in Hollywood. On the other hand, the film's success evoked suspicions of stereotyping, exoticism, traditionalism, and

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pandering to a Western gaze, a critique grounded in the methodologies of Edward Said's anti-Orientalism.

Ambivalence often frames the responses Chinese audiences have toward Lee's film. When *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* made its debut in Singapore after much hype, I conducted an informal survey of audience responses. Many viewers were initially slow to declare their dislike of the movie (fueled by the ambivalence I have been referring to), but some finally admitted to "disappointment." The main reason they gave for why the film did not live up to their expectations of a *wu xia pian* was its lack of "authenticity." Many members of the audience had been brought up, as I was, on a cinematic diet of sword-fighting flicks in the 1970s and 1980s. Hence, they nostalgically clung to some of the genre's conventions. In that Ang Lee playfully chose to reconfigure these conventions (a point I will return to later), his film was bound to meet with protests from those purists who consider certain traditions of the genre sacrosanct.

The charge of inauthenticity is also leveled on cultural grounds. Specifically, the film is accused of inaccurately representing China's history. Clearly, such criticism arises, first, as a result of the political status the film has attained in the popular cultural history of Asian filmic achievements in Hollywood; unfortunately, the film is expected to carry the burden and responsibility of cultural representation. Second, the *wu xia pian* genre, together with certain period movies, is assumed to offer a kind of cinematic cultural gravitas that efficiently embodies history and tradition. In other words, despite the genre's varied permutations, which can incorporate humor and light-hearted elements, purists expect the genre to retain at its core a traditionalist, nationalist ideology of "Chineseness."

The cultural, historical, and theoretical problematics that I have demarcated thus far—the cultural and ideological significance of the *wu xia pian* to Chinese audiences;⁴ *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon's* appeal to critics and audiences in "the West"; Chinese viewers' ambivalence, marked by a nationalist/anti-Orientalist framework; and their claims of inauthenticity—reveal a cultural anxiety about identity and Chineseness in a globalized, postcolonial, and postmodern world order. This anxiety colors both the filmmakers' approach to and the audience's view of the genre, especially in the context of the Hong Kong movie industry's post-1997 attempts to cross over into Hollywood. As political, cultural, economic, and artistic interests crosshatch, the cinematic creature that emerges inevitably embodies tensions and anxieties, sometimes in a fractured albeit aesthetically beautiful fashion. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is one such postmodernist creature.

To consider the film's attempt to grapple with the larger issues of cultural identity and the politics of Chineseness, this essay will first examine the ideological and cinematic implications of Lee's desire to construct an image of "China" in the film. It will then read the feminist possibilities that the narrative and characters seem to suggest. These two approaches will reveal that, in reconfiguring the traditional *wu xia pian* into a postmodernist cultural product for a global audience, Lee critiques, often in a rather ambiguous and conflicted fashion, the vexing centrality of traditional culture and patriarchal hegemony in China, especially in

light of the liberating possibilities that diasporic mobility, globalization, and transnationalism supposedly present.

Reconfiguring the *Wu Xia Pian*/Reimagining China. As Fredric Jameson's investigations of the postmodern have revealed, postmodernist aesthetics and cultural production are implicated and shaped by the global forces of late capitalist logic.⁵ By extension, one could presumably argue that popular cinema, as a mass-media art form, can be considered postmodern by virtue of its aesthetic configurations, its means of production, and the global reach of its distribution networks.⁶ The *wu xia pian* is no exception.⁷ Hence, to conceptualize *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* as a postmodern, globalized form of the *wu xia pian* is in itself not a particularly new or exciting development; headed by a pan-Asian cast with stars from Malaysia (Michelle Yeoh), Hong Kong (Chow Yun-Fat and Cheng Pei Pei), Taiwan (Chang Chen and Lung Sihung), and China (Zhang Ziyi), the movie's production team was truly global in its makeup.⁸ Sources of funding for the movie were similarly international.⁹

The pan-Asian cast and the film's global appeal complicate and challenge Lee's restructuring of the genre. Lee's career trajectory has taken him from the art house to the mainstream.¹⁰ He understands how audience appeal and box-office draw can keep a film project financially afloat. To maintain major studio backing, Lee appreciated that his film had to be accessible to a Euro-American audience, but it also had to have cultural appeal to Asian audiences, who are generally more familiar with and nostalgic about the conventions and styles of sword-fighting movies.

Negotiating these apparently conflicting objectives led Lee to tell "a story with a global sense" or, as executive producer and screenwriter James Schamus puts it, to make "an eastern movie for western audiences and in some ways a more western movie for eastern audiences."¹¹

Although Schamus is describing an end product arising out of a complex process of cultural and linguistic translation during the scriptwriting process, his comments are reflective of the politics of global audience appeal. More significantly, the film is emblematic of a hybrid form that embodies the cultural reconfigurations and tensions resulting from its place in a global capitalist economy. What this filmic form further reflects is cultural anxiety about representation and identity, particularly about what it means to be Chinese in the context of the Asian "invasion" of Hollywood.

In making an "eastern movie for western audiences" and a "western movie for eastern audiences," Lee found himself in the unenviable position of being culturally stuck between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, cultural essentialists and purists accused him of making a *wu xia pian* that diluted the genre's tradition and that propagated an inaccurate representation of China and Chinese culture. On the other hand, anti-Orientalists suggested that Lee was pandering to a western desire for Oriental exotica and kung fu stereotypes of Asians.

In an interview featured in a special "East Meets West" edition of *Newsweek*, Lee addresses the contention that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is "too Hollywood," and consequently betrays his own sense of cultural anxiety. He opens his

response by locating the film within the Hollywood system of production, which he claims limits the film's aesthetic possibilities:

That was the only way to make this movie. Hollywood financed it, Hollywood was responsible for the esthetics. I use a lot of language that's not spoken in the Ching dynasty. Is that good or bad? Is it Westernization or is it modernization? . . . In some ways modernization *is* Westernization—that's the fact we hate to admit. Chinese people don't watch Chinese films anymore. They watch Western movies. In Taiwan, "Crouching Tiger" did so well because it was promoted as a big Hollywood movie.¹²

Lee's pragmatism is problematic, yet his lack of any delusions about the parameters with which he could work may constitute the first step toward a tactical¹³ reexamination of Hollywood's impact on Asian filmmaking and the complex systems of appropriation and exchange that take place between various cinemas. Even more noteworthy is Lee's willingness to admit that cultural syncretism and hybridization are an inevitable part of a globalized film industry. This view implicitly points to the problem with the cultural purist position. Later in the interview, however, when asked if he could "make a purely Asian mainstream movie," Lee returned to the idea of Chineseness in a way that exposes his uneasiness about embracing the "Westernization" of moviemaking:

With *Crouching Tiger*, for example, the subtext is very purely Chinese. But you have to use Freudian or western techniques to dissect what I think is hidden in a repressed society—the sexual tension, the prohibited feelings. Otherwise you don't get that deep. Some people appreciate it; others don't because it twists the genre. It's not "Chinese." But to be more Chinese you have to be westernized, in a sense. You've got to use that tool to dig in there and get at it.¹⁴

One gets the feeling that Lee needs to justify his "western" methodologies and techniques by formulating them as a means to a cultural end—that is, the reification of the centrality of Chinese culture. The goal of my critique here is not to accuse Lee of any duplicity or even inconsistency but rather to explore the ambivalence that characterizes this anxiety. I will return to this issue after examining briefly the anti-Orientalist reading of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Anti-Orientalist criticism has become a crucial part of film and cultural studies. Hence, any Asian movie that succeeds in Hollywood is inevitably scrutinized, and probably rightly so, for its possible complicity in the perpetuation of Orientalist discourses in the movie industry. In her excellent examination of China's Fifth Generation filmmakers, Rey Chow introduces the notion of contemporary Chinese cinema "as a kind of postmodern *self-writing*," a cinema that reconstructs a representation of "primitivism" that appeals to specific Orientalist discourses about Asia.¹⁵

Is Ang Lee guilty of such self-Orientalism in making *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* an "eastern movie for western audiences"? A close look at the film's visual style and imagery—the panoramic sweeps of exotic landscapes and the fetishization of sexual repression and Oriental sensuality—provides evidence to support such a claim.¹⁶ Consider, for instance, the camera's seductive gaze on Zhang Ziyi's face as strands of her black hair, blown by the gentle breeze, softly caress it, all captured in slow motion in the now-famous fight scene on a bamboo treetop.

Although one cannot dismiss or sufficiently reiterate the value and importance of criticizing self-Orientalism in light of the ethics of representation, the continued belaboring of such a critique may deny the genre any possibility of presence given that the *wu xia pian* is by its very nature traditionally “ethnic” and exotic in its appeal. In other words, can one ever make a mainstream *wu xia pian* for a global market without falling into the trap of self-exoticism?

Again, my aim is not to mute anti-Orientalist criticism but to mobilize a different register of inquiry. For if the need to appeal to a Western gaze turns on self-Orientalism (as problematic and questionable as that is), what modes of self-ethnic “writing” does Lee engage in that might in some ways be salvageable as a productive critical enterprise? In the preface to the coffee-table book of the film, Lee theorizes that the making of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was the making of an imaginary China—an act of reimagining “China”:

The film is a kind of dream of China, a China that probably never existed, except in my boyhood fantasies in Taiwan. Of course, my childhood imagination was fired by the martial arts movies I grew up with and by the novels of romance and derring-do I read instead of doing my homework. That these two kinds of dreaming should come together now, in a film I was able to make in China, is a happy irony for me.¹⁷

In his seminal essay on psychoanalysis and cinema, “The Imaginary Signifier,” Christian Metz likens the cinematic screen to “the mirror of childhood” in the Lacanian Imaginary. The audience, in gazing into that screen, enters into a perceptive state of identification like that of the mirror stage but with a difference—the cinematic image “is more involved on the flank of the symbolic, and hence of secondariness, than is the mirror of childhood.”¹⁸ This difference is of significance when we consider Lee’s theory that the image of China constructed in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is an image drawn from his childhood imagination. This image is a mirror of secondariness in that it is implicated by the Symbolic, by the Law of the Father. But what is critical is the reverse pull of the image that Lee enacts as a mode of intervention. His conceptualization of the film as a dream of a China “that probably never existed” reflects a nostalgia not for a China of yesteryear but a hope for a better China, politically and culturally. Hence, his return to the innocence and idealism of childhood is achieved through the film’s suturing of his boyhood daydreams, fantasies, myths, and legends from Chinese literature and his experiences of the *wu xia pian* and its fantastic images.

How can the suturing of elements that are clearly part of the Symbolic produce a cinematic product that permits critical intervention and resistance? Like the literary mythopoeic nature of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*,¹⁹ Lee uses traditional myths and cinematic conventions to create a fantasy space in which to play out alternative political and cultural concerns that ultimately question the very ideological basis of the superstructure—namely, the myths and conventions he starts with.

A theme that has permeated Lee’s Chinese-language films is the perennial cultural desire for individual freedom and rights versus a concern with social and communal responsibility. This problematic binary opposition is still being

stereotypically framed as an East-versus-West issue. It is within this binary that Lee inserts filial piety, Chinese patriarchy, and the social and cultural authority of the father figure, as witnessed in his trilogy *Pushing Hands* (1992), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994). Lee has confessed that these issues have a hold on him and on many other Chinese:

The essence of morality in the East is “filial piety”: loyalty to your parents, to your family. It’s where you come from. It’s where your heritage comes from. Filial piety has been holding back Chinese society for many years. But now it’s facing destruction because East is meeting West. . . . So that’s the common theme of my first three movies: society, family, the changing world, people not knowing what to do. I also think the father is an extension of my idea of Chinese culture—which is patriotic society. . . . In Asia [*Pushing Hands* is] . . . still their favourite film. They couldn’t get over it. It has some emotional core not only of Chinese but also of Eastern society. It’s the filial piety inside you. It’s been taught for thousands of years. It’s the basic moral code and you cannot follow it. You feel total guilt because you cannot fulfil it. You become a Westerner and you betray your parents. Something you feel unable to deal with: total guilt.²⁰

Lee turns patriarchal moral traditions into a productive guilt, which enables him to explore the clichéd nature of these issues in creative and complex ways. In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *jiang hu*, or the ancient martial arts world, constitutes the *habitus*²¹ where the demands of social and communal responsibility are located. To inhabit this world, the *wu xia*, or martial arts hero or heroine, must abide by its honor code of spoken and unspoken rules. (It is in the context of *jiang hu* and its mythos that the *wu xia pian* was capable of functioning as a popular ideological tool for cultural indoctrination, particularly during the height of its popularity in the 1960s and 1970s.) The oppressive nature of the disciplinary machine that is *jiang hu* disappears into the spectacularity, the romance, and the epic scope of the martial arts displays, the heroic duels to the death, and the freewheeling life of the *wu xia*. Smitten by this idealization of the *wu xia* lifestyle, Jen Yu (Zhang Ziyi) tells Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh) near the beginning of the film that she envies her freedom and that of Li Mu Bai (Chow Yun-Fat): “I wish I were like the heroes in the books I read. Like you and Li Mu Bai. 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.”²²

The more worldly wise Shu Lien then narrates the story of her love for Mu Bai and the honor code that prevents them from consummating their love. She offers the following reason to Jen Yu in an earlier scene: “Fighters have rules too: friendship, trust, integrity. . . . Without rules, we wouldn’t survive for long.” In contrast, Jen Yu’s disregard for the code offers her the chance to experience passion with Dark Cloud Lo (Chang Chen) in the Mongolian desert. With Mu Bai’s death comes Shu Lien’s regret; her final advice to Jen Yu is a message of self-integrity: “Promise me one thing, whatever path you take in this life . . . be true to yourself.” In explaining the title of the film, Lee captures the essence of this conflict:

The true meaning of the film lies with the “Hidden Dragon.” *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a story about passions, emotions, desires—the dragons hidden inside all of us. . . . So as Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien pursue Jen, they are chasing their own dragons.

Jen's youth and energy remind them of the romance and freedom that neither of them has experienced. Having chosen a life of duty, Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien had to suppress their passions and desires, and, most of all, their love for each other. It is always close to the surface, but if they gave in to their true feelings, they would be abandoning the code of honor that shaped their lives.²³

One could easily deconstruct the binary logic of the social responsibility versus personal freedom opposition, but doing so does not nullify the very real impact this logic has on Chinese society and communities and on individuals' lives. Lee confronts this logic in his Chinese films by shuttling between its poles as a way of negotiating an illusive middle ground. In *Pushing Hands*, the protagonist, Alex (Bo Z. Wang), finds himself caught between honoring his tai chi master father (also a signifier for Chinese tradition and culture) by caring for him in his old age and honoring the needs of his Anglo-American wife for personal space. Wai Tung (Winston Chao), the gay son in *The Wedding Banquet*, finds an awkward compromise by setting up an unconventional family unit in order to appease his parents' desire for a grandchild. This confused awkwardness persists in *Eat Drink Man Woman*, in which the daughters find themselves perplexed by their father's new romantic adventures, as they struggle to calibrate a response that will satisfy society's expectation of filial piety. In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Jen Yu similarly engages in cultural calibration and shuttling, as evidenced in her ambivalent actions and responses: she steals the Green Destiny sword, returns it, and then steals it again; her relationship to Shu Lien shifts between that of sworn enemies and sworn sisters; and her affair with Lo is consecutively marked by intimacy and distance as Jen battles between her own desires and her need for social respectability and acceptance.

Clearly, Jen's behavior reflects her deep resistance to patriarchy. I will discuss this at length in the final section of this essay. Before I do, it is important to consider briefly the ethnic landscape of Lee's China.

The linear narrative of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is punctuated by Jen's sumptuous flashbacks of her illicit liaison with the much-feared outlaw Dark Cloud Lo. Just as the desert sequences fracture the main narrative, her passionate affair dislocates the social respectability of mainstream Han society. The radical nature of her liaison lies not just in her transgression of socially acceptable sexual practices but also in *who* these relations are with.

As an outlaw bandit who robs from the rich and whose caravans passed through the deserts of Xin Jiang, Lo represents the antithesis of Mu Bai and Shu Lien—the latter being distinguished heroes of *jiang hu* and Shu Lien the head of the security agency often hired by the rich to protect themselves and their wealth from criminals like Lo. Even more significantly, Lo belongs to a minority tribe in China, a point Jen Yu foregrounds when she calls him a “barbarian.” (The costume designs and the locations in China, such as the Gobi Desert,²⁴ suggest Lo's Turkic roots, thereby introducing the historical tensions between Han hegemony and the resistance by China's racial minorities to this hegemony.)²⁵ Jen's desire for Lo eclipses this racialist gesture when she identifies herself as Manchurian, countering Lo's assumption that her background is Han. This moment of identification with Lo's

ethnic minority status, emblemized further by her wearing “tribal” clothing provided by Lo, signifies Jen’s shift from embracing the respectability of mainstream Han society to fully obeying the inner promptings of her heart.

Lee’s decision to depict the marginal status of China’s ethnic minorities within the framework of Han centrality was a politically astute move, particularly since he defined the film as an attempt to reimagine China. Lee thus unpacks Han hegemony in his formulation of a Chinese national imaginary. But the notion of the centrality of Han hegemony also provides a political metaphor for the Chinese government’s role in the marginalization and oppression of recalcitrant ethnic minorities and territorial enclaves (Tibet and the Uighurs of the Xin Jiang province come to mind), as well as of political dissidents of various stripes. One cannot but think that Lee’s Taiwanese background contributed to the film’s deployment of this metaphor, for how can any reimagining of China, as filtered through the boyhood fantasies and experiences of a young Lee in Taiwan, preclude the question of national identities and cultural loyalties in the troubled relations between Taiwan and mainland China? Therefore, it is all the more tempting to read Lee’s ambivalent negotiation between the calls of tradition and society and those of individuality and freedom ultimately as a trope for the conflict the Taiwanese people face in confronting the larger national issue of Taiwan’s political reunification with mainland China.²⁶

Woman Warriors Ascend: A Feminist Reading. When I started teaching *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* in Singapore, most of my students were quick to suggest that the film offers itself readily to feminist interpretations. The reason most of the students cite is the obvious centrality of the female characters and the part they play in precipitating the conflicts and crises in the narrative. What my students cannot agree on (which, of course, lends to great class discussion) is the political efficacy of the film’s modes of representation and narrative construction as they relate to articulating a feminist agenda. Or, as my students would bluntly put it, is this or isn’t this a feminist film? To answer this question yes or no oversimplifies the issue, for the fact that there is even a need for the question suggests a certain ambiguity in the text. This ambiguity attests to Lee’s strategic configuration of the feminist elements in the film, hence allowing for multiple and alternative readings. This ambiguity is also a result of the overdetermined systems of film discourse, production, and consumption. It is therefore critical to flesh out the varied political valences that this ambiguity engenders.

The *wu xia pian* and subsequent kung fu spin-offs can be considered masculinist films. Often powered by heroic male characters, these films invest heavily in the ideological entrenchment of Chinese patriarchal power. Apart from the occasional intrusion of women warriors and helpless damsels in distress, many of these movies center on male-dominated action sequences and the *wu xia* brotherhood via various modes of homosocial bonding.²⁷ The machismo of the genre’s action sequences—the sheer power, speed, and spectacle of violence in the filmic imagery—further accentuates the masculinist inflections, albeit stereotypically. Hence, when Lee foregrounds the women as the driving force of the action and the narrative, *Crouching*

Tiger, Hidden Dragon becomes a subversive moment in the gender history of the genre.²⁸ “The martial arts film is very masculine,” reflects Lee, “but in the end our film finds its center in its women characters. It is the women who, in the end, are walking the path of the [Taoist] ‘way.’”²⁹ One wonders, however, if the centering of the women and their control of the film’s action are attempts to write in female agency as feminist empowerment; or can the reinscription of the women in “walking the path of the ‘way’” be construed as their recommitment to the patriarchal order and its ideology?

Ambiguity also characterizes readings of the action sequences. Almost every fight scene is dominated by women. Again, the question is, do we read this as female empowerment and agency? Or should we place it in the context of the hierarchy of *jiang hu* power, in which the female *wu xia* joins the lower ranks of petty swordsmen, who are ruled by their passions and aspire to become like the (male) master, epitomized by Li Mu Bai—the ultimate swordsman who achieves enlightenment in the form of a transcendental aloofness from the baser human instincts?

The three central female characters in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* are Shu Lien, Jade Fox, and Jen Yu. Shu Lien, as the good “hero,” functions as the mouthpiece of the patriarchal establishment; she articulates the ideology of *jiang hu* and seeks to interpellate Jen into that mainstream. Shu Lien’s saving grace is her eventual realization that she has to be true to her own heart, a lesson she shares with Jen Yu in the final scenes of the movie. In this sense, Shu Lien is a less interesting character to analyze than her villainous counterparts, Jade Fox and Jen Yu.

Jade Fox is a slightly more conventional villain than Jen, in that she represents the traditional femme fatale turned disgruntled witch who is seething with resentment against the establishment. However, Jade Fox offers a twist on this character type in that her “villainy” arises not out of pure evil (as it does in many of the genre’s archetypes) but out of her marginalization and exploitation within the male-centered *jiang hu*. Jade Fox’s sexual tryst with Li Mu Bai’s master does not end in her receiving the training manual and instruction that she covets but in her killing Li’s master.

Li: Wudan should have gotten rid of you long ago. It’s been a long time, Jade Fox! You don’t remember me. . . . But you should remember my master. You infiltrated Wudan while I was away. You stole our secret manual and poisoned our master! Now it’s time for you to pay!

Fox: Your master underestimated us women. Sure, he’d sleep with me, but he would never teach me. He deserved to die by a woman’s hand!

Although the film’s plot line involving Jade Fox eventually conforms to the genre’s narrative conventions (the “good” Li Mu Bai triumphs over his “evil” nemesis, Jade Fox, and avenges the death of his master), her presence disturbs the essentialist moral categories that these conventions depend on and usurps the moral authority of Chinese patriarchal traditions that legitimize the masculinist social structures of *jiang hu*. As an extratextual note, it was a casting coup on Lee’s part to have the 1960s doyen of the *wu xia pian*, Cheng Pei Pei, who appeared in King Hu’s *Come Drink with Me* (1966) and Zhang Che’s *The Golden Swallow* (1968),

play Jade Fox. This decision added a delicious intertextual and intergenerational gloss that accentuates the subversive nature of Jade Fox as a character in the re-emergence of the *wu xia pian* in the new millennium.

Jen Yu is an extension and a reconfiguration of the Jade Fox character type. Although their characters' trajectories parallel each other up to a certain point, Jen Yu deviates from this pattern by not surrendering to the dark side as Jade Fox does. The battle between Jade Fox and Li Mu Bai for Jen Yu's soul, so to speak, is a morality tale that problematically predicated the gender divide. But in allowing the young Jen Yu to occupy this middle space, where she has to make decisions that will radically transform her life, Lee throws into relief the ways and means of patriarchal interpellation and cooptation.

The subordination and oppression of women in nineteenth-century China is represented by Jen Yu's fantasy and desire for a life of freedom as a *jiang hu* swordswoman, a life that circumscribes the constraints of arranged marriages. Even if she has misread the "freedom" that membership in *jiang hu* supposedly brings to women, Jen appears to grasp the relationship between gender and power and its symbolic manifestations—she steals the Green Destiny sword, a phallic symbol of *jiang hu* authority, in the belief that it will mysteriously garner the freedom she seeks. The mystification of the phallic power of the sword is further reified when Shu Lien protectively exclaims to Jen Yu, "Don't touch it! That's Li Mu Bai's sword. . . . Without the Green Destiny, you are nothing." The two women then enter into a battle to the death for the possession of the sword, in a classic playing out of that Freudian moment.

The idea of possessing the sword/phallus leads Jen Yu into a performance of gender that again plays with the genre convention of the female swordswoman in drag. In this case, however, Lee offers a campy parody of gendered posturing and performance as a form of subversion. In the teahouse fight scene, a tradition of *wu xia pian* mise-en-scène, Jen Yu encounters an ugly mob of roguish swordsmen who constitute a veritable catalog of *wu xia* character types. With names like Iron Eagle Sung, Flying Cougar Li Yun, and Shining Phoenix Mountain Gou, these caricatures not only up the camp ante but also exemplify a form of masculine performativity that typifies the masculinist *wu xia pian*. Not to be outdone by this performance and posturing of masculinity, Jen kicks butt, literally, with the flourish of a whirling dervish, mocking the men's pompous pretentiousness while sending them reeling out of the teahouse. But part of the ingenuity of Jen's spectacular performance as a swordswoman is her ability to destabilize the gendered seamlessness by proclaiming at the height of the fight scene, "I am the Invincible Sword Goddess!" This regendering appellative, which she bestows on herself in the scene's critical moment, is an instance when drag is, as Judith Butler puts it, "subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced."³⁰

The fetishism surrounding Li Mu Bai's Green Destiny sword constitutes the link between its owner and Jen Yu. In desiring the sword, the latter also desires the social and political power that Li Mu Bai holds. The theft of the sword draws the two together into a relationship that shifts uneasily between sexual attraction and

tutelage and that mimics Jade Fox's liaison with Mu Bai's master. But sexual attraction and the master-pupil dynamic are not exactly poles apart, in that they intersect, especially on the question of domination and power. Hence, Mu Bai's sexual attraction to Jen Yu gets framed in terms of his desire to take her as a disciple (against Wudan's males-only rule). "She needs direction . . . and training," Mu Bai tells a wary Shu Lien, confirming her suspicions that Jen Yu would "intrigue" him.

Discipleship in the martial arts world involves the total submission of disciple to master. This is the rite of passage into that world where a distinct stratification of positions of power is obsessively adhered to. Part of the goal is to shore up Chinese patriarchal strength. Jen's continued resistance to Mu Bai's efforts to subject her to this disciplining punctures the moral legitimacy of his claims and reveals the erotic conflicts bubbling beneath Mu Bai's upright veneer. Ang Lee has constructed two intricately artful and stylish scenes to convey these tensions. The first is the bamboo treetop battle scene. Perched high on top of the trees, Mu Bai and Jen Yu float and sway with the wind, conveying, as I have noted earlier, fluid sensuality. Close-ups of Jen's face reveal her intoxication with the ecstasy of the moment. Mu Bai's cool and masterful countenance expresses his confidence in winning her over, in taking complete control. (The coolness that Chow Yun-Fat has perfected in his screen roles works wonderfully here, in that it conveys the condescending attitude that Mu Bai has toward Jen Yu: Mu Bai chooses always to fight Jen with some form of handicap, be it with one hand behind his back, his sword sheathed, or using a stick instead of a sword.)

The body positions of the two figures on the treetops are also pregnant with symbolism. Mu Bai at one point arches forward and hovers over Jen, who falls backward into a lying position so that their bodies almost but never quite touch. This scene prepares the audience for the final erotic confrontation between Mu Bai and Jen Yu. Having been drugged and dragged into a cave by Jade Fox, Jen awakens to find herself face to face with Mu Bai. Drenched with rainwater, she suggestively pulls back her outer garment to bare her breasts through her wet, hence see-through, blouse. In her drugged state, Jen points the Green Destiny sword at Mu Bai and utters the most erotic line in the movie, "Is it me or the sword you want?" The lowering of psychological inhibitions has enabled Jen Yu to speak more truth in a single question than Mu Bai will ever have the courage to face.

As a final assessment of Jen Yu's efficacy as a feminist character, one needs to pose a troubling question: how do we account for Jen Yu's apparent cooptation into Chinese patriarchal hegemony when she reflects regret for her actions and hurries off to obtain an antidote to save Li Mu Bai's life? One could conceivably read this as the success of patriarchy in disciplining Jen Yu to acknowledge the folly of her ways and reinsert herself into her rightful place as a woman in society's hierarchy of power. On the one hand, Li Mu Bai's death may be read as a "noble" sacrifice to bring Jen Yu back to the fold; even in death, the patriarch maintains his legitimacy and moral authority. On the other hand, one could view the notion of "responsibility" as not just an ideological tool of patriarchal hegemony (which it often can be). Lee may be saying that Jen Yu regrets that she has hurt individuals by her actions but that this regret need not be at the expense of her greater quest for personal freedom.

It is also important to link our evaluation of Jen Yu to the final “suicide” scene, in which she leaps off the mountain of Wudan. Although this scene lends itself to the conservative interpretation that the suicide depicts the dire consequence of Jen Yu’s unruly actions (that is, the suicide is punishment), I sense instead that Ang Lee has borrowed a page from the American fin-de-siècle novel *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin.³¹ Chopin’s heroine, Edna, walks into the sea in the final scene of the novel, a gesture that could be interpreted as cowardly surrender or as a strong feminist statement reflecting the impossibility of existence in a society where patriarchy has total control. Hence, in jumping off the mountain despite her reunion with Lo, Jen similarly seems to be saying that her relationship with Lo cannot be structured in any way but in accordance with society’s (and hence patriarchy’s) expectations of gendered practices and norms—Lo wants to “make . . . [his] mark on the world” and to “earn . . . [her] parent’s respect.” Marriage to Lo, in spite of her love for him, means giving up the personal freedom that she has been struggling to achieve. My students have tended to resist this rather pessimistic reading. In fact, one of them ingeniously suggested that Jen Yu’s leap is a leap to freedom and escape and that she might indeed be alive and well, considering that she has displayed such expertise in the art of *qing gong* (literally “light skill,” or the ability to defy gravity, jump over buildings, and leap to and from great heights) throughout the film. Such a reading also unites this scene with the narrative’s fulfillment of Lo’s story of hope, whereby God grants a young man his wish when he jumps off a mountain and floats into eternity unharmed. This interpretation turns on a politics of hope, a possibility that the ambiguity of Lee’s filmic imagery permits.

Conclusion. This discussion of the ambiguity of the final scene of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* brings us full circle to my opening question about the ambiguity of the film’s feminist possibilities. I think the semiotic and narrative richness of the film sufficiently foregrounds a feminist critique that complicates this issue on the basis of Chinese culture and the ideological foundation of the *wu xia pian*. In this way, the feminist elements of the movie tie up with Lee’s reimagining of China. By depicting the plight of Chinese women, Lee also accentuates and problematizes Chinese patriarchy as a sign of the oppressive nature of Chinese cultural centrism and traditionalism.³² However, the ambiguities that surface in the filmic text, which may allow Lee to articulate his own complex and often ambivalent sense of obligation and engagement with a return to a paternal figuration of Chinese culture, may ultimately blunt the critiques that I see the film offering. Of course, one must also not dismiss the fact that Lee, as a renowned filmmaker, had to keep as a high priority his desire to make a film with wide audience appeal. So, in a way, Lee’s ambiguous configurations of a feminist politics appeal both to politically conservative and liberal audiences across the East-West divide, depending on how one wishes to read the moments of ambiguity in the film. I am not accusing Lee of “political correctness” (the way conservatives have used the expression) or exonerating him of political accountability. Rather, my purpose here is to reflect on the complex and overdetermined factors and systems that made it possible for this new breed of Chinese sword-fighting film to be successful.

The ascendancy of the *wu xia pian* in Hollywood and in the global film market promises, as Lee's film demonstrates, new configurations of the genre that we can hope will provide effective tools to address and critique questions of Chinese patriarchy and cultural centrism as they are being interpolated by the forces of globalization and transnationalism. But clearly this is and always will be an uphill battle in the capitalist, consumerist systems of Hollywood movie production. Still, despite how the success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* might be perceived, one cannot but hope that the movie's political and aesthetic attempts are portentous signs of better times to come.³³

Notes

1. For an informative study of the history of the *wu xia pian* and the major Hong Kong directors (such as King Hu, Zhang Che, Lau Kar-leong, Chu Yuan, and Tsui Hark) and of their impact on the genre, see chaps. 6 and 7 of Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* (London: BFI Publishing, 1997). David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), foregrounds the significance of Hong Kong action and martial arts cinema.
2. Esther C. M. Yau points out that Hong Kong films provide "light doses of 'Chineseness'" as "a panacea for . . . homesick overseas Asian audiences" (2). Yau, "Introduction: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World," in Yau, ed., *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). The People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and various parts of the Chinese diaspora constitute an interconnected and interdependent circuit of production, marketing, distribution, and consumption of Chinese-language cinema, of which Hong Kong movies form a major component.
3. If awards can serve as reliable indicators of a film's "success," *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is not only an American success story but also a truly "global" film. It picked up awards for best director and best film at the Twentieth Hong Kong Film Awards; best picture at the Taiwanese Golden Horse Awards; best director and best foreign-language film at the Golden Globes; Academy Awards for foreign-language film, cinematography, art direction, and original score and was nominated for best picture and best director.
4. For the purposes of this essay, my use of the term "Chinese audiences" refers to those in both mainland China and in the diaspora.
5. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991).
6. For instance, Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu has suggested that Chinese cinema, even from its inception, has been basically transnational in its means and modes of production. Lu, ed., *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 3.
7. Evans Chan argues that Hollywood has only recently begun to understand and value the impact of Hong Kong action movies on postmodernist cinema aesthetics. However, he laments that the Hong Kong film industry might be in its death throes as it is now being "cannibalized by Hollywood." Chan, "Postmodernism and Hong Kong Cinema," in Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang, eds., *Postmodernism and China* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 303. Could *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and the resurgence of the *wu xia pian* mark a turnaround for the industry, whereby a kind of trans-Pacific cross-pollination might reinvigorate it through collaborative action?

8. Biographies of the production team and a list of the complete credits for the film are available in Ang Lee et al., ed., *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: A Portrait of the Ang Lee Film* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2000). This book also includes the complete screenplay in English and essays by Lee, Schamus, David Bordwell, and film critic Richard Corliss.
9. See screenwriter and executive producer James Schamus's account of the complex negotiations over financial backing for the film in "The Guardian/NFT Interview: Ang Lee and James Schamus," *Guardian Unlimited*, November 7, 2000, <http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,6737,394676,00.html#early>.
10. Beginning with his renowned trilogy *Pushing Hands* (1992), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994), Lee has taken up more mainstream projects, including an adaptation of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *The Ice Storm* (1997), the wonderful but underappreciated *Ride with the Devil* (1999), and the superhero movie *Hulk* (2003).
11. "The Guardian/NFT Interview."
12. Nisid Hajari, "Erasing the Boundaries," *Newsweek*, special ed., Issues Asia, July-September 2001, 79.
13. I have in mind Michel de Certeau's notion of "tactics" here. See de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). See especially xvii–xx.
14. Hajari, "Erasing the Boundaries," 79.
15. Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), xi, 20–23.
16. For a reading of the exotic in Lee's first three movies, see Sheng-mei Ma, *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 144–58.
17. Lee et al., *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, 7.
18. Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier," in Philip Rosen, ed., *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 253. Although Metz's theoretical concern is the spectator-screen relationship, the tropes of the mirror and the imaginary as they play out on identity are useful in thinking about a filmmaker's construction of his work.
19. Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (New York: Vintage, 1976). It is clearly not coincidental that in the chapter "White Tigers," Kingston claims that the merging of her mother's "talk-stories" and her own experiences with the *wu xia pian* led to her fantasies of being the legendary swordswoman Fa Mu Lan.
20. "Ang Lee: Pushing Hands," in Stephen Lowenstein, ed., *My First Movie: Twenty Celebrated Directors Talk about Their First Film* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), 372–73. For varied interpretations on this issue in Lee's films, see 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 Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 187–220; and Michael Chiang, "Coming Out into the Global System: Postmodern Patriarchies and Transnational Sexualities in *The Wedding Banquet*," in Peter X. Feng, ed., *Screening Asian Americans* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 273–92.
21. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990), 52–65.

22. All English translations of the dialogue from the film are from Lee et al., *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.
23. Lee et al., *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, 76.
24. According to Schamus, "The film was shot in almost every corner of China, including the Gobi Desert and the Taklamakan Plateau, north of Tibet, near the Kyrgyzstan border." Ibid., 46.
25. For a general sense of the Han-minorities dynamic in China's history, see Wolfram Eberhard, *China's Minorities: Yesterday and Today* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1982).
26. Lee's sense of the political is influenced by certain momentous events in his life and in China's history. His parents sought refuge from communist China in Taiwan, a fact that must have left a significant impression on Lee's perspective on China. Lee considers the death of Chiang Kai-shek and China's admission into the United Nations, coupled with Taiwan's withdrawal, to be "big 'hit[s]'" or "shocks" in his life that significantly colored his views. Judy Stone, *Eye on the World: Conversations with International Filmmakers* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 1997), 596–98.
27. For a discussion of male homosocial desire along a spectrum that includes homosexual desire at one end, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1–20. I am not suggesting here that the homoerotic is absent from the *wu xia pian*; the films of Chang Che and Lau Kar-Leong exemplify, for instance, the subtext of homoerotic tensions in the relationships and in the machismo displays of the male characters. See Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema*, 102–7.
28. Whether one attributes this choice to the source material for the screenplay (Wang Du Lu's novel) or to Chow Yun-Fat's lack of martial arts experience, Lee decided to shift the action sequences away from Chow Yun-Fat's character. "The Guardian/NFT Interview." However, one can still credit Lee and James Schamus for wanting to pursue a project that deviated in its gender conventions from the genre.
29. Lee et al., *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, 7.
30. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 125.
31. Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (New York: Norton, 1994).
32. I realize that Lee's use of Chinese patriarchy as a metonymic stand-in for Chinese culture and the oppressive force field it asserts can diminish the specific feminist critique of Chinese patriarchy. Yet cultural and feminist critiques can form a kind of political alliance to take on the same structure that enacts their respective modes of oppression.
33. Zhang Yimou's recently released *Hero* (2002), which stars Jet Li, Maggie Cheung, Tony Leung, and Zhang Ziyi, appears to be riding on the coattails of the success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Interestingly, *Hero* was selected as the People's Republic of China's 2002 Academy Award entry for best foreign-language film. Unfortunately, Zhang's take on the *wu xia pian* seems to work within a rather conservative cultural politics, despite the film's aesthetic innovations.