

Reading Ambiguity and Ambivalence: The Asymmetric Structure of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

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Bordwell and Thompson write that: "Looking is purposeful; what we look at is guided by our assumptions and expectations about what to look *for*" (Bordwell and Thompson, 1990: 141). Bordwell and Thompson's statement about what they refer to as "film art" resonates against the remarkable variety of responses to Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) from various media. Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, for instance, calls the film, "the most exhilarating martial arts movie I have seen", while a Beijing newspaper describes it "as unrealistic and exaggerated as a video game" (Ebert quoted in Chu, 2001: A1: 1). The opening fight sequence, which has the actors flying across rooftops, is widely reported to have produced spontaneous applause at its Cannes Film Festival screening; in Shanghai, however, "audiences hissed its fantasy flight scenes" (Rennie, 2001: 30). Hong Kong viewer, Maria Wong, says:

For Hong Kong Chinese there's simply not enough action... I grew up with this type of film. You can see them everyday on TV. It's nothing new, even the female angle. But *Crouching Tiger* is so slow, it's a bit like listening to grandma telling stories. (Wong quoted in Rose, 2001)

The first chase sequence does indeed take place about fifteen or twenty minutes into the film -- far too late by Hong Kong standards. In contrast, many Western critics have praised its gravity-defying stunts. For instance, *CNN.com* reviewer, Paul Tatara gushes: "The first fight, which springs to sudden, exquisite life... surely will elicit rounds of applause from audiences the world over -- action, after all, has become cinema's universal language" (Tatara, 2000). This professed "universality" is quickly debunked by a small sample of responses from other Chinese spectators. According to Zhong Gang, a bank employee: "The action scenes weren't as good as the old kung fu movies... People flew around way too much. If you put me on wires, I could fly around too... There was no real martial-arts skill" (Zhong quoted in Chu, 2001: A1:1). Chinese filmmaker Xie Fei concurs: "Some in China say that the movie's gongfu [kung fu] is not very exciting because it's quite artificial. They can feel the wires and cables used" (Xie quoted in Tan, 2001: L10). In contrast, Joan Acocella acknowledges the artificiality of the wire-work, but sees in its very artifice the sublimation of film art:

The filmmakers may digitally erase the wires, but they cannot erase the wires' effects... but, like other artifices -- head voices in opera, point work in ballet -- it can create a poetic image, and give things a certain lilt and unexpectedness (Acocella, 2001: 100).

The wide disparity in responses to the film has been attributed to differing cultural expectations, specifically between the expectations of Eastern and Western audiences. Li

Xun, director of the Graduate Programme of China Film Arts Research Centre, surmises that: "What is appealing to American audiences is the exoticism: the totally fresh aesthetic of Chinese martial arts and the imaginary artistic conception. But that turned out to be mundane to Chinese viewers" (Li quoted in Dai, 2001: 1). Xie Fei suggests that Lee may have fallen into the old orientalist trap, where Chinese culture is re-packaged for Western consumption: "Lee is clever. He knows what they like" (Xie quoted in Tan, 2001: L10). The common assumption here is that Western audiences lack knowledge of the genre. However, is this the sole reason for the varied reactions to the film? Note that the small sample of quotations above already indicate differing expectations even among Chinese audiences, where audiences from the mainland appear to privilege realism, and audiences from Hong Kong appear to privilege action.

When I watched the film in Singapore, several audience members burst out laughing when Michelle Yeoh uttered her first words with a distinctly Malaysian-English accent. The English- and Cantonese-speaking actress could not speak or read Mandarin and had to memorise the dialogue phonetically. Chow Yun-fat, a Cantonese speaker, also had difficulties with the language and both actors have commented that, "speaking Mandarin was like speaking Shakespeare" (Chow quoted in Short, 2000). In fact, the four main characters speak with four different accents, and the verbal incongruity made it difficult for some audiences to appreciate the other merits of the film.

In some ways, this aural diversity can be seen as representative of the diversity of the Chinese diaspora -- Lee is from Taiwan but works in the U.S.; action choreographer Yuen Wo-ping is from Hong Kong; Chow Yun-fat is also from Hong Kong, but has since moved to Hollywood; Michelle Yeoh is from Malaysia, but is based in Hong Kong; Zhang Ziyi is from Beijing; and Chang Chen hails from Taiwan -- and the filmmakers themselves were keen to emphasise the film's composite identity (Corliss, 1999). According to James Schamus:

The film was shot in almost every corner of China, including the Gobi Desert and the Taklamakan Plateau, north of Tibet, near the Kurdistan border. We were based for a time in Urumchi where all the street signs are in Chinese and Arabic, all [the] way down south to the Bamboo Forest at Anji. [Then] North to Cheng De where the famous summer palace is... The studio work was done in Beijing, we recorded the music in Shanghai, and we did the post-production looping in Hong Kong. *So it is really bringing together every conceivable image you could have of China* (Lee and Schamus, 2000a; emphasis mine).

Paradoxically then, the film's "Chineseness" is represented by a whole myriad of Chinesenesses, and it is this cultural schizophrenia that enables Chinese audiences to scoff at the film, while basking in its international success. In his acceptance speech at the Academy Awards, cinematographer Peter Pau said: "It's great for me, the people of Hong Kong and *for Chinese people all over the world*" (Pau, 1991; emphasis mine). In Taiwan, Lee was bestowed a great honour when the Taiwanese President, Chen Shui-bian, visited his home to congratulate him on being the first Taiwanese national to win an Academy Award (Anon, 2001b). No matter that Lee was trained in New York and has made the U.S. his home for over twenty years.

While a closer investigation of the social and cultural factors influencing specific audiences is necessary before the various responses to *Crouching Tiger* could be fully accounted for, this essay is concerned primarily with the aesthetic of the film itself and the ways in which its

asymmetric structure confounds expectations of the genre, whether from an Eastern or Western perspective. *Crouching Tiger* is widely recognised as a martial arts film that is also a romance. According to Stephen Teo, the two genres "make for uneasy bedfellows" and result in "a conflict of styles", a discomfort attributed to the fact that the film does not conform to the conventions of either genre (Teo, 2000). However, it is my contention that the film, in fact, resists many of the conventions of the martial arts genre, precisely through its equal constitution as a mythical romance. Lee has said: "I hope I can live 300 years, [then] I can try all the [film] genres and mix them and twist them and learn about them" (Lee quoted in Anon, 2001a).

In writing about a film, it is customary to begin by providing a quick précis of the plot in order to give the reader a brief sense of what the film may be "about". However, an attempt to do so for *Crouching Tiger* can actually prove self-defeating because of what I identify as its "asymmetric" structure. As different characters and motivations come to the fore at different points in the film, it is difficult to articulate clearly what or who the film might be "about." The film in fact begins with an end: it introduces Li Mu Bai (played by Chow Yun-fat) and his desire to retire from the life of a *wuxia* exponent (or knight errant) even though he has not yet succeeded in avenging his master's death. This departs from the plot structure of most martial arts films, which are often centred on revenge, and usually conclude with the hero's successful, and cathartic, elimination of the villain (Bordwell, 2000: 183).

In *Crouching Tiger*, however, the clear polarity of good and evil is undermined as conflict results more from misapprehension and misalignment than true evil. Although Jade Fox is introduced as Li's enemy, the film's narrative is not focused on her pursuit or capture. Significantly, the crimes of which she is accused have taken place outside the film; even her killing of the police officer is presented as almost accidental. At the same time, her villainy is not motivated by wealth, power or world dominion; in the film, she professes that her only desire was to master the *Wudang* form of martial arts. Interestingly, her murder of Li My Bai's master stems from the vengeance of a woman scorned: "He'd sleep with me but he would never teach me."

Similarly, it is difficult to identify who the hero might be. Li leaves the film in the first few minutes, only to return after the initial action sequence is concluded with the theft of the Green Destiny sword. During that sequence, it is Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh) and her fighting prowess that take centre stage rather than Li's. This can be partly explained by the fact that Chow Yun-fat, although a prolific actor in Hong Kong, had never held a sword on film before this. His name was made as a gunfighter in John Woo's gangster films. Michelle Yeoh on the other hand is a practising martial artist and the showcasing of her athleticism is evident in *Crouching Tiger*. Nevertheless, the casting choice has some bearing on the structure of the narrative, since the hero is generally expected to advance the action and the plot. Even when Li My Bai returns to the film, he does so not because he has learnt of the theft of his sword, but because he is finally ready to settle down with Shu Lien, a sentiment he never gets to fully express before he is interrupted.

In addition, one third into the film, the character of Jen (Zhang Ziyi) takes over as the main focus, and the plot deviates from Jade Fox and the Green Destiny sword to a lengthy flashback of Jen's encounter with Lo (Chang Chen). However, it is not entirely accurate to say that the film is "about" Jen's desire to escape the confines of her aristocratic lifestyle and a loveless marriage either. Certainly, the desire for personal freedom is the central motivation

for her actions, but the narrative development of the film as a whole is not centred on that pursuit alone.

Throughout the film, the characters' actions and motivations are constantly deflected from the central line of action, both narratively and thematically. In fact, the narrative slides asymmetrically from one pair of characters to another, one story to another, one theme to another, and back again. As a result, it is equally difficult to identify the main romantic focus of the film. According to Stephen Teo:

The structure of the film is founded on the central romance of the two young characters, while the two secondary characters, played by Chow Yun-fat and Michelle Yeoh, provide the dramatic stimulus for martial arts action. (Teo, 2000)

However, the dynamics of the relationships in the film do not quite support such a neat geometry. I would argue that the central "romance" (in the broadest sense of the word) is in fact that between Li Mu Bai and Jen. On the surface, as Teo notes, the relationship between the older couple appears to mirror the relationship between the younger pair, in a "quadrangular" pattern as Teo puts it, which then provides the "dramatic stimulus for martial arts action" (Teo, 2000). However, from the time Li takes an interest in Jen, it is their relationship that actually stimulates the action in the film, dramatically as well as thematically. When these two first meet, they spar and Li unexpectedly offers to train her. In their two major encounters, their "fight" is rendered as an ethereal aerial chase and is accompanied by the romantic strains of Tan Dun's score performed by cellist, Yo-Yo Ma. Contrast this with Jen's two major fights with Shu Lien, where the sonorous beat of drums in the background serve to emphasise the rhythmic, physical and more masculine aspects of combat. The encounters between Jen and Li are more sensual and romantic, especially in the encounter at the bamboo grove. The soft-focus close-ups of Jen's face framed by the green of the bamboo leaves emphasise the delicacy of her features as the bamboo sways languorously to the music. In the final encounter between the two, erotic overtones are most apparent when Jen, dressed in a diaphanous gown drenched by the rain, bares her chest briefly to him and asks: "Is it me or the sword you want?"

However, it is important to note that Li's attraction to Jen does not necessarily compete with his love for Shu Lien, and there is no evidence that one is in competition with the other. The complex interweaving of both relationships is apparent in this short dialogue that takes place between Li and Shu Lien in the scene where she chances upon him practising with his sword in Sir Te's courtyard:

LI: You did your job well. But, this girl ... I saw her last night.

SHU LIEN: I knew she would intrigue you.

LI: She needs direction ... and training.

SHU LIEN: She's an aristocrat's daughter. She's not one of us. In any case, it will be all over soon. You'll kill Fox, and she'll marry.

LI: That's not for her. She should come to Wudan [*Wudang*] and become a disciple.

SHU LIEN: But Wudan does not accept women.

SHU LIEN: It's not our affair. Even if Wudan accepts her, her husband might object.

LI: I thought by giving away the sword I could escape the Giang Hu [*jianghu*] world. But the cycle of bloodshed continues.

SHU LIEN: I wish there were something more I could do to help you.

LI: Just be patient with me, Shu Lien.

The verbal pattern in this little exchange resembles the thrust and parry of an elegant fencing exercise. The director has said that, "the drama is itself choreographed as a kind of martial art, while the fighting ... is also a way for the characters to express their unique situation and feelings" (Lee, 2000: 7). Shu Lien's practical statements are thrust at Li who expertly evades them. Her matter-of-fact assertion that "She's an aristocrat's daughter... she'll marry" is met with an objection ("that's not for her"), but why should he care what happens to Jen now that his sword is recovered? When Shu Lien again asserts the bald fact that "Wudan does not accept women," Li's reason for suggesting that the sect might make an exception is cryptic at best, dubious at worst. He says that if they do not, Jen might become a "poisoned dragon". In Chinese, "poisoned dragon" is an idiom for the waywardness that may result if talent like Jen's is unharnessed and undisciplined, and the elusive nature of that "poison" is what the film seeks to explore. Shu Lien's direct statement ("that's not our affair") is met with another enigmatic, almost philosophical, reply: "I thought by giving away the sword I could escape the Giang Hu world. But the cycle of bloodshed continues". Up to this point, there has been no real evidence of bloodshed in the film except Jade Fox's killing of the police officer, so it is unclear what "cycle" Li is referring to, except perhaps one that is determined by conventions of the genre itself. The contrast between Shu Lien's level-headedness and Li's evasiveness emphasises the depth of his interest in Jen, although the nature of that interest is not clear. The bond between he and Shu Lien appears to be a bond of another sort, of promise, loyalty, and understanding, although equally unspoken. At the end of the conversation, Shu Lien accepts his reasons, and even offers to help (although with what, we are never quite sure), and his last words to her ("Just be patient with me") seem to close the discussion with a promise, though of what, we are equally uncertain. As Li deflects Shu Lien's questions, the film deflects each attempt to find a corresponding answer to the questions it poses.

So, even though Shu Lien declares near the end of the film that "everything has an antithesis", dialectical pairing and resolution appear to be thwarted in the film in story, theme, and structure. Attempts to force the film into pre-conceived paradigms inevitably result in frustration. David Edelstein, reviewer for *Slate.com*, grumbles that the long flashback "warps" the movie, that "Chow and Yeoh disappear for a long stretch... Jade Fox, the central villain, is gone for nearly an hour", and that "Lee and Schamus can't make up their minds if Jen is the story's protagonist or antagonist -- which wouldn't matter at all if the shifting structure of the movie didn't mirror their ambivalence" (Edelstein, 2000). Finally, he admits that he would need to "redigram it in [his] head" before he could truly enjoy the film (Edelstein, 2000). Edelstein's inability to accept the asymmetric structure of the film *as is* suggests pre-conceived expectations about narrative structure and film conventions that

Crouching Tiger resists. The danger of such "redialgramming" is that the interpretation may not in fact be fully sustainable by the film itself.

The asymmetric, or "warped" structure of the film, as Edelstein calls it, is directly related to the effect of ambivalence and ambiguity it produces. It is less a flaw than an exercise which calls into question expectations previously shaped by generic conventions and film history. In fact, much of *Crouching Tiger* is also devoted to exploring the sense of the lost romance and nobility of the *wuxia* tradition itself. Although generally known to be a staple of Hong Kong pop cinema, the martial arts genre is by no means a unified one. Lee has often said in many interviews that he was returning to the *wuxia* (or sword-fighting) films of his boyhood (Corliss, 2001; Tong, 2000: L5). These *wuxia* films are generically different from *kung fu* (or fist-fighting) films, more closely associated with modern Hong Kong cinema. Swordplay narratives, according to Stephen Teo, were traditionally set "in medieval dynasties and other mythical fantasies which, in turn, became stylistic conventions of the genre", such as "the effortless facility of swordfighting heroes and heroines to leap, somersault and generally levitate in defiance of gravity", which *Crouching Tiger* displays to full effect (Teo, 1997: 98). The *kung fu* genre on the other hand "emphasised the body and training rather than fantasy or the supernatural," as in the films of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan (Teo, 1997: 98). *Wuxia* films gave way to *kung fu* films by the early 1970s, and currently enjoy a different status as lengthy television serials (Teo, 1997: 102). The casting of Cheng Pei Pei, "queen" of the *wuxia* films in the 1960s (including several of King Hu's) in the role of Jade Fox, refers to this development. In *Crouching Tiger*, Cheng symbolically gives way to a younger generation of actors in same the way Jade Fox had to give way to her young protégé, Jen.

Thus, the lack of heroism Stephen Teo notes in the film is perhaps less a flaw in Lee's vision than a metatextual acknowledgement that genres, like values, change over time; although Li Mu Bai and Yu Shu Lien are renowned warriors, theirs is a faded glory (Teo, 2000). The film begins with Li contemplating retirement despite an unfulfilled quest, and Shu Lien reveals a faint regret for a lost youth ("the freedom you talk about, I too desire it. But I have never tasted it"). As the character of Jen takes over, it becomes clear that the two older warriors are part of the past, existing more in legend and swordplay romances than in the present. Read against this context, the ambiguity of Jen's position becomes clearer. She vacillates between antagonist and protagonist because neither role is stable anymore. Jen's confusion is thus symptomatic, perhaps even symbolic, of the loss of an old order and a lack of a new one. As she cries to Jade Fox early in the film: "once I realised I could surpass you, I became so frightened! Everything fell apart. I had no one to guide me, no one to learn from." Thus her yearning for freedom is counterbalanced in the film by her lack of understanding of the restrictions that paradoxically come with that freedom.

The exploration of the meaning of *jianghu* is closely linked to the theme of lost heroism in the film. In the beginning, Jen is full of awe for the *jianghu* lifestyle, and longs for the freedom she expects it offers. However, Shu Lien is quick to remind her that the *jianghu* life is not one of freedom, but bound by a strict code of honour:

JEN: It must be exciting to be a fighter, to be totally free!

SHU LIEN: Fighters have rules too: friendship, trust, integrity... Without rules, we wouldn't survive for long.

The concept of *jianghu* finds only a partial equivalent in the Western notion of knightly chivalry. Literally translated as "rivers and lakes", *jianghu* refers to an abstract community within the Chinese literary tradition. It is a community governed by moral principle and decorum rather than legislation and it exists paradoxically outside as well as within society for although its upright members are not above state laws, they are accorded the moral authority to reject the implementation of those laws should they serve corrupt ends. The notion of *jianghu* bears some similarities to the cowboy code in Wild West pictures. The main difference between the two is that good and evil in *jianghu* terms do not necessarily conform to a sheriff/outlaw paradigm. In *Crouching Tiger*, Li My Bai holds no title of office but represents *jianghu* values at their most noble and selfless. In contrast, Jen, in her personal quest for self-fulfilment and excitement, ignores several tenets of the *jianghu* world, which results in disaster. Much of the narrative and emotional trajectory of the film follows from her lack of appreciation, respect, and ultimately, understanding of the weight of its responsibility.

One of the best examples is the scene at the tavern. On the surface, it closely resembles the numerous tavern fights that have taken place over martial arts film history. However, it later becomes clear that, although Jen's superior prowess initially appears to deflate the warriors' egos, it is Jen herself who is truly exposed -- as being ill mannered, for not observing proper *jianghu* etiquette. It is not the physical injuries she inflicts that enrage her opponents, but the social. One of the characters, Flying Machete Chang, later complains that: "We politely asked for a friendly match, but she showed no respect, and attacked us." The Monk Jing then adds: "I've travelled everywhere, but never met anyone so uncivilised." Thus martial arts fights, even among antagonists, are sparring matches which must respect a particular code of conduct. It is not a "free-for-all" brawl although visually it can appear that way.

The subtle irony, which is a hallmark of Ang Lee's style (beginning with his early Taiwan films to *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) and *Ride With The Devil* (1999)), is once again present here. Because subversion takes place without total inversion, the irony of the situation is not always immediately apparent. If one watches the tavern scene without the dialogue, its visual display reinforces all the tropes recognisable from tavern fights in countless martial arts films. Joan Acocella, reviewing for *The New Yorker*, concurs: "One skirmish in particular, in which Jen, disguised as a boy, takes on a whole restaurant full of hoodlums, seemed designed to satisfy Hong Kong expectations" (Acocella, 2000: 100). True, audiences familiar with Hong Kong films would find the scene visually familiar -- the use of the entire tavern as a battle space, the fanciful characters, the ensuing mayhem as the furniture and other readily available props are used as weapons and obstacles. Lee's homage to tavern fights is evident, but the undermining of Jen's character by two stock characters suggests a degree of self-reflexivity absent in more typical examples of the genre.

A similar incident occurs in the long flashback in the middle of the film. It depicts an episode in Jen's life where she comes close to living the life of romance and freedom she had read about in pulp *wuxia* novels. Indeed, the mise-en-scène and cinematography evoke all the romance and exoticism of the desert, complete with a nefarious, dashing, bandit. However, the irony comes towards the end of the sequence when Lo admits that, "All that Dark Cloud stuff is just to scare people and make my life easier". The bandit is just another little lost boy yearning for security: "Out here, you always fight for survival. You have to be part of a gang to stand a chance. Slowly, your gang becomes your family". Visually, the self-reflexivity is less apparent again, since images of the desert's beauty linger in our minds long after the words are spoken. Thus Lee's irony works more like a gentle reminder than a rude shock,

mostly because it takes place through the verbal counterpoint to the visual, and while the verbal may cast a different light on the visual, it does not serve to entirely displace it.

The ambiguity in *Crouching Tiger*, as I have discussed, arises from its refusal of stable meaning. Its ambivalence arises from its refusal to refuse meaning, for instance by being deliberately obscure (see for example, Wong Kar-wai's *Ashes of Time* (1994)), but from the use of *existing* conventions to construct ambiguity. By invoking established generic conventions to reinforce and yet simultaneously confound meaning, the film sets up an ambivalence in reading as we attempt to make sense of it through common polarities and cultural frameworks such as hero-villain, martial arts-romance, masculine-feminine, visual-verbal, and so on.

Rick Altman argues that, "we must see genres as stable if they are to do the work we require of them" (Altman, 1999: 50). He adds that it is critical practice that polices genre stability:

We critics are the ones who see to it that generic vocabulary remains available for use. While producers are actively destroying genres by creating new cycles, some of which will eventually be genrified, critics are regularly trying to fold the cyclical differences into the genre, thus authorising continued use of a familiar, broad-based, sanctioned and therefore powerful term (Altman, 1999: 71).

However, the difficulty of reading Lee's films lies in the paradoxical manner whereby film genres are treated unconventionally, while all the while maintaining the semblance of conventionality. The ambivalence lies not so much within the film itself, but with our attempts to classify it. Is it a martial arts film? Yes, but not quite. Is it a romance? Yes, but not quite.

Thus, Richard Corliss calls it a "new, exotic strain" borne out of a blending of various elements of film conventions, expectations, and practices, or in his own words: "*a blending, not a collision*, of Eastern physical grace and Western intensity of performance, of Hong Kong kung-fu directness and British attention to behavioural nuance" (Corliss, 2001; emphasis mine). Lee himself admits: "I cannot go all the way and make a purely genre film, I've got to throw everything I know into the movie -- like a combination platter. *The key is to keep the balance*" (Lee and Schamus, 2000b; emphasis mine).

The end of the film sees a convergence of the ambiguity of treatment, as I have discussed, and the ambivalence of interpretation that conditions us. In the final scene, Jen leaps off a cliff to an uncertain fate. "Be true to yourself," she is told by Shu Lien. But does she jump off the cliff because she is unable to fulfil the request, or is she jumping off in order to fulfil it? The question remains open, even if we choose to read it against the context of the legend Lo recounts in the middle of the film. The legend tells of a young man who once jumped off a mountain but did not die -- "he floated away, far away, never to return. He knew his wish had come true" -- and ends with the saying that "A faithful heart makes wishes come true." Although Jen's descent into the clouds suggests that she, like the young man, floats "far away, never to return," does she jump in order to be like the young man in the legend and make her wish -- to right her wrongs, to be with Lo -- come true? Note, however, that she asks *Lo* to make the wish, suggesting that it is he who might truly possess the faithful heart. It is possible then that she jumps because she knows that her wish will *not* come true. As her

descent fades into the final credits, the answer will -- and must -- always remain out of reach, even though the film demands that we grasp at its eternal possibility.

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