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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 Lee[1]

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 (US/Taiwan, 1993) and Eat Drink Man Woman (Taiwan, 1994) and delves into the familial trials of historical American in The H( )T2(000 1 Tf -4(he)-6(2(n25( )]Ts1 Tf -4(he)-6(20 Td 1(o)2(f(i)-20.00

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]

body of work are almost always made when reviewing the film.[9] 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. Of course not all Western audiences were new to Asian cinema in 2000; however, it is a reasonable

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 subpar 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.

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 Li 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

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 wuxia, 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 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. Chen uses the example of a Western reading of the spiritual principles of Taoism which ignores its

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'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 appropriatin2(i)-2(on,.QAi)- notcom

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 Chinese wuxia 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 accompl-6(at)-6(o)-4(i)]Ty thefph22( )ae 0(eat)-2(a)4(t)-(e)4(t)6(o)-4(i)]a(i)-2(on, how)2

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 "absolute 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. Firstly, 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 inner

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 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

Jen’s world of the aristocracy has different rules from the This is reinforced by the hierarchal privileges afforded to Jen by her Manchurian identity Shy Lien

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 Mubai 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 Mubai 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. As 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 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 ke0g( )]Tiverereereee1 -1.1 t-3(o)-4(an)b0("6(o)-4(at)-6(p)s1.15 TD5( ).)T4.81

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 treetops 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

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

Crouching Tiger is one of the rare instances where a 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 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 Lo-Mai, 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, US 1953), Jen also leaves. While Jen's flying exit is the more spectacular, the two scenes 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

[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-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*, 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.
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