

**A Global Significance of Revisiting
Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon:
Reinventing the Wuxia Tradition in the
Sense of Global Sisterhood**

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Abstract

Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) is a milestone in the history of the martial arts genre not only in terms of its box office returns but its reinventions of the genre for the global audiences. It is significant to look at Lee's *Crouching Tiger* in relation to contemporary cultural globalization because the film exemplifies how a cultural product foregrounding "difference" can be circulated globally. In *Crouching Tiger*, there are two radical images of woman, fated women and powerful women, coexistent in the three female characters. These two female images are globally applicable in the sense that they address two fundamental feminist issues. Depictions of fated women are concerned with women's victimhood, whereas images of powerful women are concerned with women's empowerment. Together, they invite viewers to reflect upon a global sisterhood through a wide range of cultural imaginary in the representations of female images: from submissive women to tough women. Lee as a cultural mediator has established a cinematic aesthetics of the *wuxia* genre in such a sense of a global sisterhood for making transnational imaginary of cultural identities possible.

Keywords: cultural globalization, global sisterhood, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Ang Lee, global Hollywood

重探《臥虎藏龍》的跨文化操演：

武俠與跨國女性的傳統創新

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摘 要

李安的《臥虎藏龍》(2000)在武俠電影史上的意義至少有兩個：其一，它是史上行銷國際市場最賣座的武俠電影；其二，雜糅與創新武俠電影既有傳統，將武俠影片的觀眾群推向跨國的市場。重探《臥虎藏龍》的重要性在於這部文化全球化商品所再現的雖然是具有文化特殊性的武俠傳統，但卻可以跨越文化藩籬暢行於全球電影市場。本篇論文討論李安如何形塑這部影片中女性角色做為嫁接東西文化差異的槓桿，同時創新與承繼既有的武俠影片傳統，最終讓武俠電影躍上國際影壇。在這部電影中主要女性角色再現的是兩種對比的女性形象：命定女子與女強人。這兩種形象其實反映出全球女性主義關注的兩個根本命題，一個是受傳統壓迫的女性，另外一個是女性的增能。這樣的說法也許過於簡化女性議題的複雜性，但全球市場的考量，某種程度的簡化正是該電影再現能夠遊走於不同文化之間，召喚觀眾對電影內容的想像與認同。李安的《臥虎藏龍》透過女性角色讓跨國的文化想像得以成形，藉此建立一種跨文化的武俠電影美學。

關鍵詞：文化全球化、女性、臥虎藏龍、李安、全球好萊塢

I. Introduction

Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000)¹ is categorized as a martial arts or martial chivalry film.² The purport of the film as a specimen of cultural globalization may be crudely evidenced by its world-wide dissemination as a globally popular film whose box-office success in the global market has been unprecedented for the genre.³ The film is a milestone in the history of the martial arts genre, for the *wuxia pian* or the martial chivalry genre is formally recognized in the mainstream film market across the world due to the film (Lo, *Chinese* 178; Lu 226).⁴ Lee has collaborated with global Hollywood to establish cinematic aesthetics specific to the genre through *Crouching Tiger* for the global audiences. Interestingly, the laudatory reactions toward the film in the West seem to suggest *Crouching Tiger* as a cultural product about Chinese culture has the possibility of bridging the differences between the West and the East. As several news reports note, it has been, by contrast, given a cold shoulder by different Chinese communities in Hong Kong, Taiwan and China (Marquand 2001; Landler 2001). The mixed feelings toward the film by Chinese communities mark a fundamental difference between the West and the East in terms of their viewing experience of the *wuxia* film genre.

¹ The film will be referred to as *Crouching Tiger* hereafter.

² In Chinese, the film genre of martial chivalry is called "*wuxia pian*," which is often translated into the martial arts film as well, but the translation—the martial chivalry film is closer to its Chinese meaning, because this film genre involves not just a display of martial arts (*wu*) but a sense of chivalry (*xia*) from the perspective of Chinese culture. For a detailed explanation about *wuxia pian*, see Linda Sunshine, ed., *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, 112.

³ Strictly speaking, *Crouching Tiger* is the bestselling film of martial chivalry (*wuxia pian*) since 1980 according to the statistics given at Box Office Mojo. In fact, there is no such a genre as *wuxia pian* at the website; *Crouching Tiger* is crudely grouped with Jackie Chan's action films in the category of the action-martial arts with the *Rush Hour* series at the bestselling top three followed by *Crouching Tiger* in the Number four. Its total box-office is \$128,078,872. See the category of "Action—Martial Arts" at *Box Office Mojo*.

⁴ It is generally agreed that the global recognition of the film is not only found in its overall box-office performance but also in its winning numerous awards at world-wide film festivals and Oscar awards in particular. The success of the film has attracted the academic attention to the extent that almost every article or book dealing with contemporary Chinese language films after 2000 talks about *Crouching Tiger*. In fact, the cinematic aesthetics in *Crouching Tiger* is not invented by Lee; he is reinventing in the film the traditions of the genre particularly established by King Hu's *wuxia* films during the 1970s.

Since the film was well received by many critics in the West and later became a box-office hit in the United States, a great deal of literature has been produced with such focuses upon the film's *wuxia* traditions, transcultural implications, transnational collaboration with the Hollywood industry and many others. According to Christina Klein, *Crouching Tiger* is "the most commercially successful foreign-language film in U.S. history and the first Chinese-language film to find a mass American audience" (18). Analyses of the film's reception can be generalized in two perspectives. First, it is argued that the film is considered inauthentic for its twists from the traditional *wuxia* film in terms of its pace, storyline, fighting and accented Mandarin spoken in the film (Chan 4; Klein 20; Lee 282; Shih 2). Second, audiences in the West seem amazed by the film's superb cinematographic representations of martial arts—fighting, kicking and flying. As a review says, "Everywhere in the world . . . audiences have had the same response to *Crouching Tiger*—rapture. They gasped with glee as Jen and Jade Fox soar into the night" (Corliss 124). It is more of a Western perspective to claim for a consensus of the world's equally rapturous responses to the filmic representations of martial action in *Crouching Tiger* because those who are familiar with the genre probably would not be particularly impressed by the choreographic actions featured in the film.⁵

In explaining *Crouching Tiger* as a transnational project, Peichi Chung comments that "Lee's contribution to Chinese cinema today is his capability to cultivate cinematic narratives that bridge the East-West cultural divide" (417). Indeed, Lee's *Crouching Tiger* has reinvented the *wuxia* genre by intermingling cultural elements from the East and the West in order to make the film desirable in the global market. These elements

⁵ Anti-gravity leaps, walking up walls, jumping over the rooftops with the help of the invisible wirework have long been used in Chinese *wuxia* films. See David Bordwell's discussion of three martial arts directors (Zhang Che [Chang Cheh], Lau Kar-Leung and King Hu) in *Planet Hong Kong* (248-260).

are displayed, for example, in the shots of the desert scenes,⁶ the introduction of Jiang Hu as a generic concept of the *wuxia* films, and the feministic thoughts of featuring a recalcitrant female character (Chan; Cai; Inness). Lee has successfully come up with a way to transcend cultural boundaries, making the *wuxia* film recognized at a global scale. With the system of global Hollywood in charge of production, marketing and distribution, *Crouching Tiger* has a better chance for success in the global market.

Here, I would like to argue that Lee's selection of an action heroine as the narrative focus derives from orientalist expectations of the *wuxia* genre and the trend of featuring action chicks in recent Hollywood films. In fact, the significance of revisiting Lee's *Crouching Tiger* in the *wuxia* genre points to the subtle nuances of contemporary cultural globalization in the sense that the cultural *mélange* between the West and the East in the film has been so intricate and complex that it is hardly distinguishable from one to the other.

II. The Wuxia Tradition Reinvented: Fated or Powerful Women

It can be argued that the narrative thread of featuring a young rebellious woman Jen in *Crouching Tiger* is an attempt to appeal to the global audiences as much as to reinvent the *wuxia* genre itself. Although it is not uncommon for the *wuxia* film to have a woman warrior in the core of the storyline, it is unconventional for the film narratives to have a young woman as the lead role who does not rectify the travesty of justice but causes trouble for all.⁷ The typical narratives of the *wuxia* film focusing on a female martial artist are usually patriarchal in the sense that the heroine is depicted to carry on

⁶ Eperjesi remarks that these flashback sequences for some North Americans are very much similar to the captivity plot of the American Western where a bourgeois lady is captivated by the savage Indian in the sun-baked desert (31). In fact, the captivity plot describing a woman from a civilized world kept hostage by uncivilized barbarians is also one of the *wuxia* traditions.

⁷ For example, Cheng Pei Pei, Jade Fox in *Crouching Tiger*, plays a female martial artist named Jin Yan Zi in King Hu's *Come Drink with Me* (1966) and Chang Cheh's *Golden Swallow* (1968). In both films, she is a martial artist who helps solve social problems.

an unfulfilled mission left behind mostly by a dead father or brother (Cai 455-448). In other words, the heroine usually takes on a series of adventures not for the sake of seeking individual needs as Jen in *Crouching Tiger* but for the welfare of the collective—family, society or even the nation. It requires further investigations into the cultural politics of such a twisted strand of featuring Jen as a young inexperienced woman with superb martial arts.

Arguably, the Chinese martial arts film is a rather patriarchal genre, because the genre conventionally focuses upon heroes as the leading characters who have to fight for righteousness or the cause of the collective (Chan 10; Lee 286). Lee's selection of a heroine rather than a hero seems to be consistent with the usual practice of Hollywood films where Asian men are hardly represented in the image of a national hero fighting for the cause of the collective.⁸ The cultural politics for Lee to opt for a young rebellious woman with superb martial arts is complex since the film as a transnational project coproduced by global Hollywood must aim at the global market.⁹ In *Crouching Tiger*, the image of Jen as a martial artist appears to go with the trend of featuring "action chicks" in the American popular culture (Inness 1-17). However, there is another image of Jen radically different from a woman warrior; she is demanded by society to assume the traditional role of a delicate and compliant woman. As feelings of ambivalence and conflict are constantly invoked in Lee's films, these two contradictory but coexistent female images are the tactics employed in the film to reinvent the *wuxia* genre for the global audiences.¹⁰

⁸ One might argue that there are increasing representations of Asian men in mainstream Hollywood films, for example, Jet Li, Jackie Chan and Chow Yun-Fat. But we have to note that most of their Hollywood roles correspond to stereotypical expectations of Asian artists for performing kung fu as an enjoyment of violence. Their roles invite us to look more at their action than their "heroic" deeds.

⁹ From a diasporic reading of the characterization of Jen as a young rebellious woman in the film, it is held that the storyline featuring youthful individualism and female liberation is part of the diasporic Chinese experience as in the generational conflicts (Dilley 135).

¹⁰ Lee often claims that he would like to make as many genres as possible, but it seems that conflicts are recurrently staged in his films regardless of the genre (Dilley 25; Yeh and Davis 180).

Many critics recognize the feminist thoughts represented in the film. Most of their interpretations focus on how feminist concepts have been encoded in the filmic representations of three leading female characters. For example, Chan sees the film as a subversion of the *wuxia* film as a masculinist genre by reinventing the narratives of the film to focus on Jen as a feminist character (10-14); Lee analyzes how feminist thoughts are invoked in challenging traditional values upheld by Confucianism and Taoism (288-290); Cai explicates how female desires are both addressed and regulated in the relations of female characters to symbols of the patriarchal power in the film (448-452). Here, my interpretations of the three female roles in the film would take a different direction; I would orient my arguments toward how the representations of female images in *Crouching Tiger* are transnationally appealing.

If we look at the three leading female characters (Jen, Shu Lien and Jade Fox) in *Crouching Tiger*, we will see they all assume both the role of a female warrior and that of a submissive woman. In terms of the socially prescribed gender roles for them, they seem to suffer from a twist of fate respectively in their own ways. They are demanded by society to assume “fated women” because their fates are predetermined by their gender. Descending from an aristocratic family, Jen is trapped in a social matrix where her marriage is decided by her parents for political alliance. In the case of Shu Lien, she is taking care of the family business as a leader. Efficient and successful, she demonstrates her expertise in doing her business in the precarious and dangerous underworld. When it comes to her feelings for Li Mu Bai, the central hero in the film, she looks completely repressed and takes on the stereotypical role of a submissive woman. Throughout the story, she is never able to get her desires consummated until a kiss on Li’s lips at his last breath. As for Jade Fox, she is fated in the sense that she proves unable to transcend the socially demarcated boundary for women. She is denied any possibility of becoming a Wudang disciple because she is a woman. On the one

hand, the film appears to address a feminist issue by highlighting the patriarchal oppression of women, but, on the other, the film narratives portraying their gender as their inescapable fate somehow enhances the stereotypical expectations of traditional women in Chinese culture.

Apart from the submissive roles prescribed by society, women in *Crouching Tiger* are represented as woman warriors who can kick and fight like their male counterparts. At first glance, this seems to share the trend of increasing filmic representations of new images of women as action chicks who are not only beautiful but also tough in Hollywood during the past decade (Inness 1).¹¹ In fact, it has been a tradition of Hong Kong action cinema to portray the female fighter as the narrative center, but it is relatively a recent development for Hollywood to do so (Tasker 15). As already noted, Lee is paying homage to the *wuxia* tradition through *Crouching Tiger* in many ways. The different images of the three female fighters in the film are the consequences of negotiating between the *wuxia* tradition and global Hollywood's taste for action chicks.

In the traditional Chinese *wuxia* film, female martial artists are mostly portrayed for their action, not for their sex appeal (Cai 448).¹² In *Crouching Tiger*, the role of Shu Lien meets the traditional sense of the female fighter who takes over her father's business and abides by the moral and behavioral codes of society. As a stock female villain in the *wuxia* tradition, Jade Fox plays sneaky tricks against her enemies. Deviating from the traditional role of a female fighter in the *wuxia* film, the role of Jen has a lot in common with the popular image of an action chick, for her toughness is

¹¹ For example, female characters in the action-comedy series, *Charlie's Angels*, are not only sexy but powerful. Another example is Angelina Jolie in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) and *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* (2005). Moreover, bond girls used to serve mostly as eye candy but now bond girls like Michelle Yeoh in *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997) and Halle Barry in *Die Another Day* (2002) are not only sexy but actively involved as fighters in James Bond's missions.

¹² Representations of sex are hardly seen in the traditional *wuxia* films until the resurrection of the genre in the 1990s where there are sexual implications but no blatant portrayals of women as sex objects. For example, in both *Swordsman II* (1991) and *Swordsman III* (1992), starring Brigitte Lin, tropes of transvestism are employed to tell the stories but filmic representations are still focusing on fighting scenes, the major appeal of the *wuxia* film.

being displayed simultaneously with her feminine charms.¹³ Considering the episode of her clandestine relationship with Lo in the desert, it is impossible to ignore the director's wish for appealing to sexual charisma in Jen. With the narrative focus on Jen in the film, Lee is tailoring the image of the female fighter in the *wuxia* tradition to come in tune with the more sexually enticing image of women for the global audiences.

III. Global Sisterhood Invoked

Since the 1970s, Hollywood has tried to capitalize on the new images of independent women as a way to respond to the feminist social movement; the burgeoning images of women as tough and powerful are often represented with the tendency of sexualization of their personas as an indication of their femininity for the audiences (Tasker 18-19). In exploring the tough female images in contemporary popular culture, Jeffrey A. Brown asks: "When women are portrayed as tough in contemporary film, are they being allowed access to a position of empowerment, or are they merely being further fetishized as dangerous sex objects?" (47). There might be increasing representations of women as active and powerful in the popular culture but these images of powerful women often carry overtones of sexual titillation. Central to this phenomenon is a feminist issue: whether women are empowered by assuming active roles or they simply serve as a gratification for sexual fantasies. In *Crouching Tiger*, the filmic representations of the character Jen aim at both making her a superb martial artist and soliciting her feminine charms. Does the feminist consciousness in the film empower women in general or become contained in the film's attempts to please the general public by the emphasis of her femininity?

¹³ There are different types of action chicks in contemporary Hollywood films. Here, I take Jeffrey A. Brown's contention of action chicks enacting masculinity and femininity in "Gender, Sexuality, and Toughness: The Bad Girls of Action Film and Comic Books" (49).

From the stereotypes of oriental women as fated to the liberating roles of female fighters, *Crouching Tiger* is inviting viewers to be sympathetic to them in terms of a global sisterhood because these two images of women represent two fundamental feminist issues: women's victimhood (fated women) versus women's liberation (powerful women). For contemporary transnational feminist discourses, there is a tendency to argue against a global sisterhood, which is often criticized for its failure to "recognize the differences among women and the multiple axes of discrimination based on class, ethnicity, 'race,' religion and sexual preference" (Mackie 181). Here, I deliberately refer to the feminist thoughts in the film as an expression of global sisterhood. *Crouching Tiger* funded by Hollywood must target at the global market. It is more likely to reach audiences at the global scale if the film simplifies female images at two radical ends of "fated women" versus "powerful women." For the conservative audiences, fated oriental women meet their stereotypical expectations; for the liberal audiences, it would be gratifying to see female fighters take the initiative and settle their own business.

In the case of Jen as the narrative center of the film, her images as a traditional fated woman and a powerful female fighter are equally important in the film. She simply does not fit the dichotomous taxonomy of any sorts. The filmic representations of Jen as a bride from the aristocratic class in her wedding procession are full of orientalist imagery where her image as a traditional woman is meticulously portrayed. With the highlights of red symbolizing good luck in Chinese culture, Lee stages a spectacular Chinese wedding procession where the bridegroom on the horseback leads the bridal litter with bearers and the band parading in the street. Viewers are given a close-up of Jen as a bride from feet to her face with a clear intention to show-case the traditional wedding gown. By so doing, Lee has invited the audiences not only to gaze at the pompous wedding ceremony of the aristocracy, but to fantasize the bridal image

that Jen in the imposingly gaudy gown has embodied. Although it is quite common for Chinese costume dramas to have a wedding ceremony in the plot, the incorporation of a marriage theme into *Crouching Tiger* makes it visually convenient for Lee to create a sense of tradition for the female image on the one hand. On the other, since arranged marriages might be one of the most entrenched cultural registers of the Orient, it is ideologically liberating to see the transformation of Jen from a submissive to a self-assertive role by running away from the arranged marriage.

Struggling between a pious daughter and her craving for freedom, Jen seems to be confused about her life in the world. She is constantly negotiating her gender roles in society, but she does not fit either a dichotomous good or bad like Shu Lien or Jade Fox. In exploring gender imaginations in *Crouching Tiger*, Cai comments that female desires are relegated to darkness in the filmic representations of how Jade Fox and Jen put on black clothes and act at night in order to make their femininity invisible and remain “ominous and enigmatic” (453). Indeed, their action at night reflects their repression in the daytime. In the *wuxia* tradition, the trope of darkness has something to do with concealment of identity but it is problematic to jump to the conclusion that it specifically aims at concealing their femininity and characterizing female characters as dangerous and indecipherable.

In *Crouching Tiger*, Jade Fox turns into a martial artist at night but remains a humble servant in the daytime simply because she needs to conceal her identity as a convict. It is safer for her to take action at night. For Jen, her disguise as a masked thief stealing the Green Destiny serves more as a pleasure of transgressing social boundary than as an up-front challenge of the patriarchal force, otherwise she will not return the sword before she really gets into trouble. It would be a mistake to claim that female desires have been channeled into marginality in this context, because gender might get concealed by the trope of darkness but does not represent the whole picture of such a

trope.

In fact, it is rather subversive for a young delicate aristocratic woman to assume a bandit-like figure. Gender stereotypes are being challenged with Jen playing both a traditional female role and a woman warrior. In the flashback where Lo and Jen start off as enemies but turn out to be a pair of lovers, we see Jen's determination to become a fearless action chick when her jade comb is taken away by Lo. In this episode, Lee twists the traditional captivity plot of the *wuxia* genre where a beautiful woman from the civilized world is taken hostage by bandits in the underworld.¹⁴ It is Jen as an action chick who chases after Lo for getting her comb back. The long shot showing them racing each other on the horseback makes their fighting look more like horseplay rather than battling. Comical touches are central to their fighting choreography. Jen as an action chick is portrayed more like Lo's equally capable opponent than a captivated woman or a damsel in distress.

As Lee turns their relationship into a romance, elements of sex and love are woven into the exotic landscape. It is rather sexually enticing to present Jen taking a bath in Lo's cave and having Lo get thorns out of her feet.¹⁵ It is interesting to note that Jen is metaphorically presented to make the first move in her relationship with Lo. In Lo's cave, Jen demands Lo return her comb like giving an order. They are seen in a medium shot with the camera focusing on one or the other back and forth to create their confrontational interactions on an equal footing. As Lo refuses to take her order, she acts like a tough girl taking an arrow at hand and stabbing Lo's chest. Without a twitch on his face, Lo grabs her hand away and they get into a scuffle like foreplay before

¹⁴ Eperjesi remarks that these flashback sequences for some North Americans are very much similar to the captivity plot of the American Western where a bourgeois lady is captivated by the savage Indian in the sun-baked desert (31). In fact, the captivity plot describing a woman from a civilized world kept hostage by uncivilized barbarians is also one of the *wuxia* traditions.

¹⁵ A woman's feet in ancient China are very much a symbol of sex; it is unc customary to get them laid bare. In the film, Jen does not get foot bondage because she is Manchurian, not Han. Arguably, it is full of sexual implications to get a maid's feet stabbed by thorns and then get them pulled out by a man.

sex.¹⁶ At first, Lo gets on top of her, but, as their passion for each other gets wild, Jen reverses her position to get on top of Lo, ardently kissing him. The arrow on Lo's chest drawing some blood prefigures their consummation later on. Their relationship develops into a romantic love affair where they are presented to be having a bath together and intimately riding on the same horse leisurely across the sunset desert. From chasing Lo for her comb to her sex moves, Jen as a tough girl is asserting her subjectivity in almost every possible way. As they learn about Jen's father has been sending his men to look for her, she says: "Let them look. Don't send me back." Unlike the typical captivity plot in the *wuxia* film where female hostages always need rescue, Jen seems to enjoy her freedom with Lo in the exotic world; she chooses to stay with Lo. Throughout her romantic relationship with Lo, Jen is exercising her girl power in the image of an action chick that bravely goes after what she wants.¹⁷

The flashback of Jen's encounter with Lo in the most outcast world intensifies her feelings of being trapped in her socially assigned role by the arranged marriage. Her submissive role as a traditional woman married off against her will is totally subverted by her impulsive act to become a runaway bride. In the film, Jen's martial arts is so outstanding that she can almost defeat anyone except the hero Li, who wants take her as a disciple before she turns into a real villain. As Jen seems able to break loose from social control of womanhood and starts to roam in society, she is taken back from going too far by the plotting that her untamed desires have caused social disorder and eventually the death of Li (Chan 13; Cai 456).

The film ends with Jen jumping from a bridge on the Wudang Mountain as if it were a suicidal act as often commented by reviewers of the film. One might question

¹⁶ This is what is described in the screenplay. See Linda Sunshine, ed., *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, 99.

¹⁷ Here, girl power refers to Jen's feminist assertion of individualism in her relationship with Lo. She appears to be straightforward with what she wants and likes without any hesitation. See Rebecca Hains, "Power Feminism, Mediated: Girl Power and the Commercial Politics of Change."

how to conceptualize such an ending in relation to the feminist issues raised by her two radically different images—the image of a traditional woman and the image of an action chick. First of all, it remains debatable whether her jump is suicidal or not. Logically, she is jumping downwards to the valley, but she is visually represented in a slow motion flying among the clouds in the sky as if she were a Chinese fairy. Arguably, this vision of detachment from the earthly world suggests her jump as suicidal in that it looks like she is going to the immortal world. However, considering her reminding Lo of the legendary story where a boy jumps from a mountain without getting hurt, the film narrative implies a possibility of her rebirth. In the film, Jen does not look particularly remorseful of Li's death; it is a forced and teleological interpretation to assume a moralistic vision of her jump by saying that “[the] suicide is a masochistic act of repentance” (Cai 456). In my view, Jen's seemingly suicidal jump reflects her confusion about life in general; she remains unable to seek a way out of her social entrapment as a woman.

IV. Conclusion

In *Crouching Tiger*, there are two radical images of woman, fated women and powerful women, coexistent in the three female characters. These two female images are culturally specific to the Chinese popular culture, for they are reinvented from the existing female images in the Chinese *wuxia* genre. In the meantime, they are also globally applicable in the sense that they address two fundamental feminist issues. Depictions of fated women are concerned with women's victimhood, whereas images of powerful women are concerned with women's empowerment. Together, they invite viewers to reflect upon a global sisterhood. When Jen as an action heroine is able to get away from the arranged marriage, viewers of the film are likely to assume that the image of an action chick is synonymous with women's empowerment. Given the film's

conclusion with a sense of ambivalence through the representation of Jen's suicidal jump, we can argue that Jen's character as a female fighter does not really get empowered, for the suicidal jump designates her uncertainty about life.

Insofar as the global-local interconnections in the politics of cultural globalization, *Crouching Tiger* mainly exhibits the dimension of the local in terms of the Chinese martial chivalry or *wuxia* film genre, because it is always set in ancient China whose inevitable mysticism and exoticism are part of the genre's traditions (Sunshine 14). Specifically, the film is based on Lee's imaginary cultural China, which was bred out of his reading and viewing experience of the *wuxia* fiction and films during his childhood in Taiwan. Accordingly, Lee has actually reinvented the traditions of the *wuxia* film established in the seventies in *Crouching Tiger*. For the global dimension of the film, it is transnational in its production, distribution, and marketing in the way that it reflects how global Hollywood works in the contemporary cultural landscape. Since the film targets at the global market as dictated by the logic of global Hollywood, here comes the paradox for the film: the genre itself is culturally and spatially specific but the film has to be globally appealing.

It is significant to look at Lee's *Crouching Tiger* in relation to contemporary cultural globalization because the film exemplifies how a cultural product foregrounding "difference" can be circulated globally. As a cultural mediator, Lee has successfully reinvented the traditions of the *wuxia* genre by mixing cultural elements from the East and the West to make transnational imaginary of cultural identities possible. In his attempts at bridging the gap between the East and the West, the film has defamiliarized those who are familiar with the *wuxia* genre in terms of featuring an unconventional action heroine, adding melodramatic and romantic elements to the plot, and accented spoken Chinese, whereas the film has been rather eye-striking for those who have not seen much of the genre. The relatively different reactions to the film in the

East and West mirror the paradox of contemporary cultural *mélange*—the film has opened up a possibility of bridging the East-West divide but also indicates a fundamental cultural difference between them.

Criticism of the film is mainly grounded in two accusations. First, the film is critiqued for its self-exoticism, which easily comes associated with Said's notion of orientalism. Second, some people who are familiar with the genre are displeased about the unconventional representations of the film. However, self-orientalization in *Crouching Tiger* is inevitable because, on the one hand, the *wuxia* genre is always already exotic and mystic, and, on the other, the film is set in imaginary ancient China whose exoticism and mysticism help the suspension of disbelief for some of the significant tropes of the film in terms of its martial arts. David Morley notes that "[the] problem with the politics of cultural protectionism is that it is, of course, premised on a notion that there are pure, authentic, cultural spaces, unsullied by cultural imperialism, which must be defended" (37). The lament for *Crouching Tiger*'s deviation from the traditions of the martial arts film is fundamentally based on the proposition that there are such things as authentic *wuxia*-film traditions. In fact, there are constant reinventions with the genre throughout its history (Sunshine 14). If the tendency for the genre to mix with various cultural elements has been constantly taking place within the Chinese cultural framework, the fact that Lee's *Crouching Tiger* is engaged in a cultural *mélange* with global Hollywood in a transnational context is only a further extension of the genre's continual hybridization and transformation.

Lee has made it clear that there exists a complimentary relationship between dramatic elements and fighting in *Crouching Tiger*.¹⁸ With female characters in the image of fated women and the image of powerful women at the core of the film narratives, the global audiences are given a wide range of cultural imaginary in the

¹⁸ This explanation comes from Lee's audio commentary in *Crouching Tiger*'s DVD.

representations of female images: from submissive women to tough women. Lee as a cultural mediator is negotiating orientalist expectations of those female images in a sexually enticing way. It is worth noting that the portrayals of the central character Jen in the image of a traditional woman and the image of an action chick have played up orientalist anticipations to the extent that her looks still invokes associations with a traditional woman even when she is presented as an action chick. In other words, Jen's image as an action chick is no more threatening than entertaining, because the *wuxia* genre does not have to feature her masculinity as a superb martial artist and her violence is being tampered by her image as a traditional woman. Arguably, the fusion of these two images that has played safe with the conservative viewers as well as the liberal ones contributes to the global popularity of the film.

Lee's *Crouching Tiger* is transnational in many ways. The global popularity of the film indicates that Lee has successfully procured a way to capture the attention of the global audiences. Arguably, the open-endedness can be seen as a meeting point between the East and the West. It is hard to tell whether Lee has the common ground between the East and the West in mind when he is making the film. The fact that the film seems culturally relevant on either side indicates Lee as a cultural mediator has definitely established a cinematic aesthetics of the *wuxia* genre for making transnational imaginary of cultural Chineseness possible.

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