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***Wu xia pian* and the Asian Woman Warrior**

Catherine Gomes / Cinema

Abstract

This paper challenges the assertion of Western film criticism that the Asian woman warrior is a new phenomenon. Rather, I suggest that because of its exposure to early Hollywood interpretations of the Asian woman, Western film criticism has a conventional view of Asian women, hence this is a possible reason why the Asian woman warrior garnered interest amongst film critics. What I have done here is to provide a flashback to the presentation and treatment of women in Chinese *wu xia pian* or martial arts films. The purpose of this paper is to show that while *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon/Wo Hu Cang Long* (2000) may have captured the imagination of Western audiences because of its strong and powerful fighting Asian women, the figure of the woman warrior in *wu xia pian* is not unusual nor unique. Rather, she is a quintessential character in *wu xia pian* and Chinese psyche.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon/Wo Hu Cang Long (2000), a Chinese-language sword fighting period or *wu xia* film, has generated a plethora of popular and critical Western film criticism that responds to the physically strong Asian woman warrior.¹ These film critics suggest that the Asian woman warrior is one of the newest feminist figures to appear in mainstream Western cinema. In this paper, I question Western film criticism's discourse that the Asian woman warrior is a new figure. Rather, I suggest that while the Asian woman warrior may be a new phenomenon in the West, this martial arts fighting female warrior is an established icon in Chinese-language films, particularly in Hong Kong quasi-national cinema. I do this by tracing the

historical development of the Asian woman warrior in Chinese-language, particularly Hong Kong, *wu xia pian* or martial arts cinema.

The Exotic Asian: Hollywood's Perception of the Asian Woman

While the Asian woman has periodically featured in Hollywood films as mysterious and exotic,² it was not until films such as *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1955) and *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), in particular, that the image of the Asian female became iconicised as one of feminine beauty, passivity and weakness.³ Gina Marchetti notes that Hollywood has fondly highlighted the element of race and gender in its depiction of the Asian woman as 'sexually available to the white hero' and in constant need of rescue by a white man.⁴ In *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*, for example, Marchetti draws attention to the deterioration-of-independence of female (Asian) protagonist Han Suyin, who starts out as a medical doctor only to (dis)evolve into a lonely, lost and unemployed woman due to the death of her Caucasian lover.⁵ Meanwhile, Peter Feng observes that Suzie Wong, the 'Hong Kong hooker-with-a-heart,' developed into the prototype for Hollywood's perception and idealisation of the Asian woman.⁶ Suzie, as Marchetti notes, is 'illiterate, orphaned, sexually abused as a child [and] brutalised regularly as a prostitute'.⁷ It is only through her romance with Caucasian Robert Lomax that she is 'rescued' from an unhappy and lonely life of prostitution in the sleazy alleyways of 1960s Hong Kong.

This idealised version of the Asian woman as passive and weak was dominant in Hollywood cinema until Michelle Yeoh's role as the independent and capable Chinese Agent Wai Lin in *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997).⁸ While Agent Wai Lin is still portrayed as the beautiful, exotic and somewhat mysterious Chinese secret agent, she is notably equivalent to James Bond. In order to understand this significant transformation of the Asian woman in Hollywood cinema, it is important

to deconstruct Hollywood's initial depiction of the Asian woman as passive and weak.

Marchetti provides a possible explanation for Hollywood's portrayal of the Asian woman as an agreeable damsel. She speculates that this is drawn from a fantastical fear of a 'threatening' Asia. In her study of the Hollywood narrative of interracial sex and romance between the Asian female and the Caucasian male, Marchetti explains that rather than being a mere erotic fantasy, the Asian woman is actually an Orientalist signifier for 'Asia, Asians and Asian themes'.⁹ Reading the Asian woman within a postcolonial and poststructuralist feminist framework, Marchetti argues that Hollywood's insistent depiction of the Asian woman as feminine and passive is fundamentally linked to the perceived threat of Asia as the 'yellow peril'. She notes that the West, particularly the United States, was concerned with Asia's emergence as both a military and capitalist threat to Western hegemony.¹⁰ She notes that 'the yellow peril combined racist terror of alien cultures, sexual anxieties, and the belief that the West will be overpowered and enveloped by the irresistible, dark, occult forces of the East' where 'much of this formulation necessarily rests on a fantasy that projects Euro-American desires and dreads onto the alien other'. It was this fantasy, Marchetti explains, that fuelled Western imperialist desires to carve up Asia into colonies in order to nullify any military threat the yellow peril might pose. But the fear of Asians was not limited to military might. Instead, it was further fuelled by Asian immigration to the United States in the nineteenth century. Marchetti observes that Asian immigrants entering the United States were viewed as 'a flood of cheap labour, threatening to diminish the earning power of white European immigrants', and this view enabled the 'deflect[ion of] criticism of the brutal exploitation of an expansionist capitalist economy onto the issue of race'.¹¹ Marchetti also states that like other non-white peoples, the yellow

peril 'contributed to the notion that all non-white people are by nature physically and intellectually inferior, morally suspect, heathen, licentious, disease-ridden, feral, violent, uncivilized, infantile, and in need of the guidance of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants'.¹² Hence, one way to nullify the threat of the yellow peril is to feminise Asia through Orientalist portrayals of the Asian woman. Marchetti postulates that Hollywood narratives therefore depicted romantic Asian-Caucasian sexual liaisons in order to ideologically 'uphold and sometimes subvert culturally accepted notions of nation, class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation'.¹³

While Marchetti's analysis of the fear of an Asian threat is useful, the issue of a gendered relationship between a masculine West and a feminised East should also be considered. In his seminal work *Orientalism*, Edward Said states:

The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony ... [t]he Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be 'Oriental' in all those ways considered commonplace ... but also because it *could be* – that is, submitted to being *made* Oriental.¹⁴

The relationship between the East (Orient) and West (Occidental) therefore becomes one in which the powerful, masculinised West devours and thereafter represents the feminised East. This patronising relationship was not only prevalent between imperial nations and their colonies but also between non-imperial Western and Eastern countries.¹⁵

However, the perception of the Asian woman as weak and exotic changed when she made her global debut in the 1997 film *Tomorrow Never Dies*. Once exclusively located in Asia, particularly Hong Kong cinema, the Asian woman warrior, through Agent Wai Ling (Michelle Yeoh) in this James Bond film, thereafter paved the way for other Asian woman warriors to grace both the Hollywood big as

well as small screens. Detective Grace Chen (Kelly Hu) of *Martial Law* (1998–2001) fame became a popular fighting female figure on television while in 2000, Angel Alex (Lucy Liu) of *Charlie's Angels* and *Crouching Tiger's* wushu exponent and teacher Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh) both became international icons of strength, endurance and (in the case of Yu Shu Lien) Asian values. These attributes were furthered with the appearances of Flying Snow (Maggie Cheung) and Moon (Zhang Zi Yi) in *Hero/Ying Xiong* and Mei (Zhang Zi Yi) in *House of Flying Daggers/Shi Mian Mai Fu* in 2004. Engaging not only in heroic activities, the Asian woman warrior has also been involved in villainous conduct. Jen (Zhang Ziyi), in particular, proved a challenge for Michelle Yeoh and Chow Yuen Fat in *Crouching Tiger* while Hu Li (Zhang Zi Yi again) proved to be a formidable adversary for Chief Inspector Lee (Jackie Chan) and Detective James Carter (Chris Tucker) in *Rush Hour 2* (2001).

In order to understand what may have appeared to be a sudden influx of Asian warrior women onto Western cinema and film criticism, it is important to have an understanding of Hong Kong *wu xia pian*. This will provide a basis for understanding the *wu xia* genre as a subgenre of *wu xia pian*.

Film Critics Have Their Say

While *wu xia* films featuring the *nuxia* (swordswoman) have been the subject of popular, critical and academic reception in the West, *Crouching Tiger* took interest in the genre and the swordswomen protagonists to new heights. *Crouching Tiger* received favourable and unprecedented international reception when it was released in 2000. Film critics theorised that *Crouching Tiger* rivalled the usual Hollywood fare of action films and typical Hong Kong chaotic kung-fu films which have been criticised for sacrificing character development for incredible action stunts. Instead, *Crouching Tiger* was a film with high production values and ideological social

themes. *Crouching Tiger* is appealing because of its unique ability to blend Chinese heroism and values with Western pop feminism, and the intimate and stylised attention the filmmakers paid to the mise-en-scene through lush and epic cinematography, period costumes and fantastical action sequences displayed by wire-work.

Film reviewers who comment on *Crouching Tiger's* focus on women assert that because the film's three main protagonists are women located in a patriarchal society, the film is about strong women. Popular film reviews, in particular those that collectively appear in the Internet website *Rotten Tomatoes: Movie Reviews and Previews*, assert that the film breaks new ground because women appear in a genre that is assumed by the West to be male-centred and because the film is set in a society that is highly prejudiced against women.¹⁶ These reviews compare *Crouching Tiger* with other Hollywood action films such as *Charlie's Angels 2000*, rather than with Hong Kong films within the swordplay genre.¹⁷ These commentators hence are only drawn to the notion of women as protagonists and skilled martial artists, rather than the subtle ideologies that they signify as central protagonists in the narrative.

[Insert Pic 1]

In his review for *Phantom Tollbooth*, a film-review website, J Robert Parks notes that unlike Hollywood films that are exploitative of women, '*Crouching Tiger* portrays them as strong, extraordinarily effective women who can do anything a man can do, while at the same time overcoming the obvious prejudice against them'.¹⁸ Similarly, Jeremy Heilman comments in *Moviemartyr.Com* that the film 'is revolutionary is its treatment of women [because it] shows feminine equality while being set in China'.¹⁹ Online film reviewer Bryant Frazer likewise comments that Ang Lee gives women actors central roles. He states that both Ang Lee and

screenwriter James Schamus 'provide their actresses with characters of considerable psychological depth and credibility'.²⁰ He further summarises that

Michelle Yeoh is terrific as Yu Shu Lien, Li's old friend who turns detective at the theft of Green Destiny. The 20-year-old Zhang Ziyi turns in a fine performance ... as the wide-eyed Jen Yu, an apparent innocent who turns out to be the ... dragon of the title.²¹

Similarly, in his commentary on the focus of women in the film and female subjugation in *Nick's Flick Picks*, Internet film reviewer Nick Davis comments that it is rare that women are given a central role in this genre. He states:

Even as the action climaxes accumulate toward the film's end, we never forget the social circumstances of its characters, especially the thwarted desires of its women. As ever, [Ang] Lee proves a much more successful director of women than of men, and he wisely (if surprisingly, considering the genre) grants his actresses center stage.²²

While the popular reviews lack sophisticated analyses of the film's strong women and feminist themes, they do provide an indication of the way the film was received by Western audiences. But where the popular reviews lack depth of analysis, the critical reviewers attempt to plug this analytical gap by unpacking the film's strong woman theme.

In 2003, academic Leon Hunt dedicated a section of his chapter 'The lady is the boss? Hidden dragons and "deadly China dolls"' from his book *Kung-fu Cult Masters: From Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger* to the film *Crouching Tiger*, and in particular, to its sword-fighting female protagonists.²³ In the same year, academic Chris Berry edited an anthology on Chinese films entitled *Chinese Films In Focus: 25 New Takes* containing an essay by Felicia Chan.²⁴ In her essay, Chan reads cultural 'translability' and cultural migration in *Crouching Tiger*. It was also in 2003 that Hong

Kong-based but Western-trained academic Ken-fang Lee published an essay specifically dedicated to analysing *Crouching Tiger's* female protagonists as an allegory of transnationality.²⁵ In 2004, Sherrie A Inness, a pioneering commentator on feminist popular culture, released an anthology that contained an essay that questioned a feminist reading of *Crouching Tiger*.²⁶ In the anthology, essayist Charlene Tung commented on the way commentaries on the feminist element associated with the swordswomen in the film exoticises more than anything else. Fran Martin's forthcoming essay 'The China Simulacrum: Genre, Feminism, and Pan-Chinese Cultural Politics' in Chris Berry's and Lu Fei-i's *Island on the Edge: Taiwan New Cinema and After* explores the notion of Western identification of 1990s pop feminism in the character of Jen.²⁷

[Insert pic 2]

In his critical review of the film, William Leung suggests that *Crouching Tiger* is a feminist film.²⁸ He argues that heroines Shu Lien and Jen are feminist because they are characterised with more depth than women in traditional *wuxia* (swordplay) fiction and popular martial arts films. Leung speculates that this is because of the way that Western feminism influences both Ang Lee and his scriptwriter James Schamus. He bases this assertion on their collaboration on the film adaptation of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Leung recognises *Sense and Sensibility* and its author Jane Austen to be quintessential examples of Western feminist thought. He further notes that Ang Lee and Schamus have both commented that they see the film 'as a kind of *Sense and Sensibility* with martial arts'.²⁹ He equates Shu Lien's 'conventional wisdom' with Elinor's sense, and Jen's wild carefreeness with Marianne's sensibilities.³⁰

A problematic aspect of Leung's essay is that he does not differentiate between swordplay and kung-fu genres. He states that the martial arts genre

considers women as nothing more than decorative elements in films where they take on roles solely as capricious girlfriends, devoted sisters, mysterious nuns and traitorous girlfriends. Leung's argument does not recognise that, in contrast to kung-fu films, conventional swordplay films, which date back to the 1925 Runje Shaw film *Heroine Li Feifei/Nixia Li Feifei* and Zhang Shichuan's film *The Burning of Red Lotus Temple/Huo Shao Hong Lian Si*, have been populated with warrior women who are highly skilled in martial artistry.³¹

While there is an obvious and growing body of critical work on the Asian woman warrior, particularly in *Crouching Tiger*, there is very little reference to the history and traditions of *wu xia pian*, and specifically, the genre's treatment of women.

Hong Kong *Wu Xia Pian* (Martial Arts Cinema)

In order to understand the *wu xia* film genre, it is necessary to examine *wu xia pian* (martial arts cinema). *Wu xia pian* refers to Hong Kong martial arts cinema, and encompasses the subgenres of *wu xia*, kung-fu and gunplay. *Wu xia pian* developed within the twentieth century and began in the film studios of China and Hong Kong. While both these cinemas embarked on making films, it was Hong Kong that became the undisputed leader in *wu xia pian*. A possible reason for this is communist China's strict anti-superstition laws, which forbade the making of films with superstitious content after the communist takeover in 1949. By this time, the phantastical – supernatural power like palm power (supernatural power through the palms of practitioners' hands) and flying through the air – mixed with religious (Taoist) and philosophical (Confucian) beliefs became popular aspects of *wu xia pian*.³² Hong Kong, then a colony of Great Britain, was immune to such censorship laws.

During the early years of *wu xia pian*, there were two art forms that inspired the genre: literature and opera. Chinese *wu xia* novels such as *The Water Margin* had been capturing Chinese popular sentiment since the Tang dynasty.³³ *Wu xia*, the Mandarin term for martial arts, featured protagonists who are chivalric and adept with swordplay. The popularity of the novels became even more pronounced at the turn of the twentieth century as China underwent political and social upheavals, in particular the May Fourth Movement of 1919. Beijing Opera, which is essentially pre-twentieth century Chinese theatre, is fundamentally swordplay live theatre where performers thrill audiences with their acrobatic stunts and agility. Popular martial arts performers Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung and the legendary 1960s swordplay actress Angela Mao are themselves trained Beijing Opera performers. Chinese literature and Beijing Opera both featured swordswomen in their narratives. Hence the appearance of warrior women in such early *wu xia* films such as *The Nameless Hero/Wuming Yingxiong* (1926) and *Swordswomen of Huangjiang/Huangjiang Nuxia* (1930) was not surprising nor confrontational to audiences.

In general, *wu xia* films – also known as swordplay or ‘martial chivalry films’ – are films that detail ‘the chivalrous exploits of “knight-errants” and “lady knights” in ancient dynasties’.³⁴ The figure of the *wu xia* hero is driven by three fundamental codes: chivalry and honour, loyalty and revenge. These codes are in turn driven by the narrative plot. Swordplay films are most associated with chivalry and honour while loyalty and revenge are elements commonly linked with kung-fu. While Bhaskar Sarkar interprets the ‘mythic figure of the *xia* or wandering swordsman’ as chivalrous and heroic, he also notes that the swordsman is a figure who is ‘inherently subversive’ as ‘he evinces a contingent, provisional sense of justice and often comes into conflict with the law and the regime’.³⁵ Sarkar speculates that

'these chivalrous heroes are best understood as icons conjured up to be moral arbitrators in an anarchic, confusing world'.³⁶

Chivalry and honour in *wu xia* films are recognised through the codes of *jiang hu*.³⁷ *Jiang hu*, or the 'World of Vagrants', is the space that martial arts heroes inhabit. In this space, loyalty to one's master, family and friend is emphasised. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* uses swordplay to explain how these codes work.³⁸ It not only discusses the codes of chivalrous honour and loyalty but questions them through the personalities and exploits of the characters in the film. This is particularly so in the figure of the Asian woman warrior. The three female protagonists each represent different developmental aspects of the Asian woman warrior. While Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh) is the warrior bound by tradition, specifically honour and loyalty to the discipline and her master Yuen Bai (Chow Yuen Fat), Jade Fox (Cheng Pei Pei) presents the other end of the spectrum as she is fuelled by independence rather than tradition. It is Jade Fox's character that highlights the negative effects of loyalty and questions the chivalric code as her loyalty to her own master in her youth results in her being sexually used by him. Meanwhile Jen (Zhang Ziyi) is a site that combines the two extremes.

While the *wu xia* genre enjoyed immense popularity in the 1950s and 1960s, a new kind of *wu xia pian* subgenre was emerging particularly with the release of films starring Bruce Lee in the West and auteur director Zhang Che in Asia. This new cinematic *wu xia pian* form became known as kung-fu. Early kung-fu films mainly used empty-hand combat or fist-fighting. The rise of kung-fu, which means 'accomplishment with effort', coincided with the fall of Mandarin and rise of Cantonese as the language of choice in China.³⁹

In the 1980s *wu xia pian* films became more sophisticated. Films such as *Project A/A' Gai Waa* (1983), *Winners and Sinners/Wu Fu Xing* (1983) and *Police*

Story/Ging Chaat Goo Si (1985) located *wu xia pian* 'in a predominantly urban space and mixed it with broad comedy, dangerous stunts and other kinds of action such as gunplay'.⁴⁰ Gunplay thus is a sub-genre of *wu xia pian*, with guns replacing swords or fists. Craig Reid, for example, explains that *wu xia pian* films during this period became 'fight films using martial arts'.⁴¹ *Wu xia pian* films can therefore be loosely classified as films that combine 'conventional' martial artistry with other aspects of the action genre.

While *wu xia* is about codes of chivalry and honour, kung-fu fashions itself as a 'Cinema of Vengeance'.⁴² In other words, the world of kung-fu is not the world of *jianghu*. The 'traditional' codes of honour and chivalry have changed. Even though notions of loyalty and discipline, particularly between master and pupil, are still present, the narratives are about revenge (for instance, by the female assassins in *Naked Killer/Chiklo Gouyeung*, 1993). In Hong Kong kung-fu cinema a code of honour still exists in the world of the anti-hero (gangster films for example). Kung-fu films therefore feature anti-hero protagonists.

The *wu xia pian* genre therefore provided the visual and narrative space for women to be strong and powerful through martial artistry. Because women were fighting together with men in these films, it was not long before Chinese-language *wu xia pian* films started predominantly featuring Asian woman warriors.⁴³

Locating the Asian woman warrior in *Wu Xia Pian*

Hong Kong cinema's interpretations of the woman warrior existed long before Western constructions of this figure were either developed or theorised. The genesis of the Asian woman warrior is in traditional folklore. Poems depicting valiant Asian woman warriors like the famous Hua Mulan and oral tales of the daring female knight-errant who wandered the lands not only inspired Chinese girls but, more

importantly, Beijing Opera.⁴⁴ The rich tradition of Beijing Opera often portrayed the Asian woman warriors who not only battled on an equal footing alongside their masculine colleagues but, since the early twentieth century, were also most often portrayed by female actresses.⁴⁵ Unlike their traditional Japanese, Greek or Shakespearean theatre counterparts, Beijing Opera allowed women to train as actresses, especially as fighters. Angela Mao, of now classic films *The Fate of Lee Khan/Ying Chun Zhi Fengbo* and *Lady Whirlwind/Tie Zhang Xuan Feng Tui*, who was one of the earliest and most successful 1960s and 1970s martial arts actresses, was herself trained as a Beijing Opera performer.⁴⁶

First emerging in Chinese cinema, it was as early as 1925, against a post-May Fourth Movement backdrop, that one of the first films featuring a woman warrior was released. Ren Pengnian's *The Heroine of Deserted River/Huang Jiang Nuxia* was a Chinese film that showcased a leading female protagonist engaged in martial artistry.⁴⁷ Other films featuring strong female figures, particularly female knight-errants, like *Red Heroine, White Rose/Hong Nuxia Bai Meigui* and *The Swordswoman of Huangjiang*, were soon to follow.⁴⁸ It was during this period (1920s–1930s), argues Zhen Zhang, that martial arts films featuring the 'female knight-errant' manifested 'the cultural ambivalence toward 'science' and 'democracy' propagated by the May Fourth ideology,' capturing 'the popular imagination of the time'.⁴⁹ The 'power' of the female knight-errants, Zhen suggests, became a signifier of this cultural ambivalence in the post-May Fourth Movement.⁵⁰ Female protagonists were thus integral to the films, and functioned as emblems of wider socio-cultural dynamics.

With the release of King Hu's groundbreaking *wu xia* China/Hong Kong classic *Come Drink with Me/Da Zui Xia* in 1966, featuring a young ballerina Cheng Pei Pei, the Asian woman warrior took centre stage as the main protagonist.⁵¹ This was the first time that a *nuxia* was the main protagonist as previous *wu xia* films only

featured her as a supporting character. Cheng was later to star in other notable martial arts films such as *Golden Swallow/Hsia Yu-yen* (1968) and *The Lady Hermit/Zhong Kui Niang Zi* (1971), reprising her warrior role in *Crouching Tiger* as the villainous Jade Fox.⁵²

[Insert pic 3]

The most significant Hong Kong film to emerge in the 1960s that was to set the tone for the 'modern' Asian woman warrior was *The Black Rose/Siyah Gui* (1965). *The Black Rose* prompted a plethora of films featuring a female Robin Hood figure within the format of Hollywood's *James Bond* films.⁵³ These films, produced only in the 1960s, came to be popularly known as *Jane Bond* films. Hong Kong cinema critic Sam Ho vehemently notes that 'nowhere in the history of Chinese film, and arguably world cinema, are fighting women more dominant than in the Jane Bond films of Hong Kong'.⁵⁴ The dominance of these 'fighting women' goes beyond their ability to do battle or outwit their enemies. Rather, films like *The Black Rose* were allegorical discussions on globalisation and (post)modernity in Hong Kong society, both aesthetically and ideologically.

Aesthetically, it can first be speculated that *The Black Rose* was one of the first films within the *wu xia pian* tradition, for the protagonists marry 'Cantonese film's acrobatic swordswoman' with the 'stoic inspector'.⁵⁵ There is a blending of both (chivalric) *wu xia* and (contemporary) kung-fu traditions in the film. *The Black Rose* followed the *James Bond* format in employing spectacular displays of technology. Technology was depicted in form of (everyday) gadgets (lipstick guns, death-ray watches, ultra-violet shades) and the special effects that enabled them to work.⁵⁶ Third, *The Black Rose* and its other Jane Bond successors of the 1960s (*The Dark Heroine/Mu Lanhua*, *Diamond Robbery/Zhuanshi Da Jien*, *Lady Bond/Nu Shashou*, *The Girl with Long Hair/Changfa Guniang*, *Lighting Kille/Shandian Shaxingr* and *The Maiden*

Thief/Yunu Shentou) also portrayed their protagonists as 'modern' women who not only enjoyed A-Go-Go dancing and lived in opulent excess, but also possessed 'good' traditional Chinese family values.⁵⁷

Ideologically, the Jane Bonds reflected the (financial) independence Hong Kong women were encountering as they entered into the workforce during the colony's economic boom.⁵⁸ *The Black Rose's* female protagonists Josephine Siao and Chen Po-chu, for example, represented the 'new' Hong Kong woman.⁵⁹ Siao and Chen were cast in similar roles as the young and beautiful Jane Bond spies whose opulent and decadent lifestyles intertwined with their ability to uphold justice.⁶⁰ These roles were important because they became allegorical representation not only of Hong Kong women but Hong Kong society as a whole, blending modernity with traditional Chinese culture. Ho observes that these characters emphasised family values, as 'the fighting woman must eventually return to her rightful position in the family'.⁶¹ Like the *wu xia* hero(ine) who is the site of ambivalent struggle, the Jane Bond character also becomes the site for engagement of modernity with cultural tradition.

In his research on the Jane Bond phenomenon, Ho describes Hong Kong as a metaphor for Chinese modernity. He speculates that the Jane Bond films, in turn, were ideologically reflective of Hong Kong's rapidly emerging modernity.⁶² *The Black Rose* was a metaphor for Hong Kong's blossoming modernity. This was shown in the technological gadgets the female protagonists used and the glamorous lifestyles they led. In 1992, *The Black Rose* was made contemporary in the (parody) sequel *92 Legendary La Rose Noire*. The significance of this sequel is that it was a pastiche of Hong Kong historical and commercial modernity in the 1960s. This was referred to through the references to television within the film.

Both *Come Drink with Me* and *The Black Rose* reflected the (sub)genres of their era (the 1960s and 1970s respectively). These films also set the standards for future (Hong Kong) martial arts films featuring the Asian woman warrior. The next era took place in the 1980s and early 1990s, comprised contemporary (kung-fu type) films that most notably featured women as law enforcement officers.⁶³ The inspiration for such films came from the success in the early 1970s of similarly themed television shows that highlighted women as police inspectors. In the 1980s, films such as *Yes Madam/Huang Gu Shi Jie* (1985) and *Inspectors Wear Skirts/Ba Wong Fa* (1988) saw intrepid female fighters battling corruption and drug lords. The final era, which took place in the 1990s, was more inclined towards spy films on a global scale, particularly *Project S/Chao Ju Ju Hua* (1993), whose plot involved terrorist activities and *Black Cat/Hei Mao* (1991), an Asian version of Luc Bessons's *Nikita*.⁶⁴ The spy films are relevant to the present argument as they can be considered successors of the 1960s Jane Bond films and a more sophisticated commentary on (Hong Kong) modernity. In other words, these films locate and showcase the development of Hong Kong (post)modernity. What is significant about the history of Asian warrior women in Hong Kong *wu xia pian* films is that they were not only prominent figures in this cinema and but also played an integral role as allegorical cultural figures in Hong Kong society.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the popular critical reaction to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* that celebrated the Asian woman warrior as a new phenomenon. While Western audiences and critics, exposed to early Hollywood interpretations of the Asian woman as weak and passive, may find this figure novel, the Asian woman warrior has a long history in Chinese film and literature. This article has provided a

historical context for the Asian woman warrior, and shown that while *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* may have captured the imagination of Western audiences with its strong and powerful fighting women, the figure of the woman warrior in *wu xia pian* is not unusual nor unique. Rather, she is a quintessential character in *wu xia pian* and Chinese psyche.

¹ The term 'Asian woman warrior' is also used in a PhD thesis by Olivia Khoo. See Olivia Khoo, 'The Chinese Exotic: Contemporary visibilities of diasporic Chinese femininity', PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2002.

² While the Asian woman was also portrayed in Hollywood films as the 'Dragon Lady', for example, Anna May Wong's character Hui Fei in *Shanghai Express* (1932), the dominant image of the Asian woman in Hollywood cinema was that of the eroticised and exoticised other.

³ Films such as *Sayonara* (1957) also established the Asian woman as the 'perfect' submissive woman. In *The World of Suzie Wong*, Suzie may be a prostitute but her submissiveness and damsel-in-distress-and-waiting-to-be-rescued-by-the-white-knight position, made her, according to Gina Marchetti, the ideal woman. In other words, Suzie became the ideal woman as she was non-threatening to the patriarchy. Instead, Suzie was a prop that emphasised masculine dominance. Marchetti also posits that Asian female characters were usually the foil to the strong, independent Caucasian woman. In *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing*, the foil to Han Suyin is the estranged Caucasian wife of her lover, Mark Elliot, whose independence is revealed in her refusal to give her husband his desire for a divorce. See Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993; Jessica Hagedorn, 'Asian women in film: No joy, no luck', *Ms*, vol.4, no.4, 1994.

⁴ Marchetti, 113.

⁵ Some early Hollywood films engaged Caucasian actors and actresses to play the roles of Asians. The role of Han Suyin, for example, is played by Caucasian actress Jennifer Jones, who incidentally has been featured in other Hollywood films of the period playing non-Caucasian roles.

⁶ Peter X Feng, 'In search of Asian-American cinema', *Cineaste*, vol.21, no.1-2, 1995.

⁷ Marchetti, 113.

⁸ Khoo, 'The Chinese Exotic: Contemporary visibilities of diasporic Chinese femininity'.

⁹ Marchetti, 113.

¹⁰ Marchetti, 2-3.

¹¹ Marchetti, 2.

¹² Marchetti, 1.

¹³ Marchetti, 1.

¹⁴ Edward W Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, New York, 1978, 5-6.

¹⁵ An example of this is in the relationship between USA and China in the 1930s. In the 1930s and 1940s, China experienced great hardship at the hands of the imperial Japanese army who were using China to pave the way for an all-out Japanese colonial invasion of Asia. One of the most significant events involving Japanese imperial interests in China was the infamous Rape of Nanjing. The atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers were captured on film and shown in newsreels in USA. At the same time, American audiences were also exposed to General Chang Kai-Shek and his wife Soong Mei-ling appealing to them for financial help. Chang and Soong soon became the international faces of a weak China (East) asking for help from the stronger USA (West).

¹⁶ *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* has had an enormously successful reception in the West. Film reviewers accord this success to the lack of new story ideas and approaches to blockbuster films. *Rotten Tomatoes*, an American-based Internet website that collates Internet reviews of films, lists 139 American Internet reviews on *Crouching Tiger*. These Internet reviews are collated from online sources such as film review websites and online print media sources. *Rotten Tomatoes* reports that 97 percent of the reviews rate *Crouching Tiger* as a 'fresh' film. Out of the 139 reviews, only 4 did not like the film. The average rating of the film is 8.5 out of 10. See Senh Duong, *Rotten Tomatoes*,

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- '*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*', viewed 11 August 2004, http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/crouching_tiger_hidden_dragon/.
- 17 J Robert Parks, *Phantom Tollbooth*. 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon', viewed 15 December 2000, <http://www.tollbooth.org/2000/movies/crouchingtiger.html>.
- ¹⁸ Parks.
- ¹⁹ Jeremy Heilman, *Moviemartyr.Com*, viewed 11 August 2004, <http://www.moviemartyr.com/2000/crouchingtiger.htm>.
- ²⁰ Bryant Frazer, *Bryant Frazer's Deep Focus*, viewed 11 August 2004, <http://www.deep-focus.com/flicker/crouchin.html>.
- ²¹ Frazer.
- ²² Nick Davis, *Nick's Flick Picks*, viewed 11 August 2004, <http://www.nicksflickpicks.com/crouctigr.html>.
- ²³ Leon Hunt, *Kung-fu Cult Masters*, Wallflower Press, London and New York, 2003.
- ²⁴ Felicia Chan, 'Crouching Tiger, Hiden Dragon: Cultural migrancy and translatability', in Chris Berry (ed.), *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, BFI Publishing, London, 2004.
- ²⁵ Ken-fang Lee, 'Far away, so close: Cultural translation in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol.4, no.2, 2003.
- ²⁶ Charlene Tung, 'Embodying an image: Gender, race, and sexuality in *La Femme Nikita*', in Sherrie A Inness (ed.), *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York and England, 2004.
- ²⁷ Fran Martin, 'The China simulacrum: Genre, feminism, and Pan-Chinese cultural politics in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*', in Lu Fei-i and Chris Berry (eds), *Island on the Edge: Taiwan New Cinema and After*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2004.
- ²⁸ William Leung, 'Crouching sensibility, hidden sense', *Film Criticism*, vol.26, no.1, 2001.
- ²⁹ Leung.
- ³⁰ Leung. Also see Philip Kemp, 'Stealth and duty', *Sight and Sound*, vol.10, no.10, 2000.
- ³¹ Stephanie Po-yin Chung, 'The industrial evolution of a fraternal enterprise: The Shaw brothers and the Shaw organisation', in Ain-ling Wong (ed.), *The Shaw Screen: A Preliminary Study*, Hong Kong Film Archive, Hong Kong, 2003, 3.
- ³² Damu Liu, 'From chivalric fiction to martial arts film', in Lau Shing-hon (ed.), *A Study of the Hong Kong Swordplay Film (1945–1980)*, Fifth Hong Kong International Film Festival and The Urban Council, Hong Kong, 1996.
- ³³ The *Water Margin* is also known as *The 108 Heroes*, *The Outlaws of the Marsh* and *All Men Are Brothers*.
- ³⁴ Martial arts films consist of narratives that feature exponents who either fist-fight or use weapons. *Wu xia* films, for example, consist of empty-handed martial artistry or swordplay. While swordplay films showcase swords and other 'conventional' *jianghu* weaponry like spears, kung-fu films make use of 'unconventional' weapons such as tables, chairs and even the (live) bodies of other characters in the films. *Wu xia pian* films amalgamate both 'conventional' weaponry associated with the *jianghu* and 'unconventional' fighting instruments used in kung-fu. Hunt, 7.
- ³⁵ Bhaskar Sarkar, 'Hong Kong hysteria: Martial arts tales from a mutating world', in Esther CM Yau (ed.), *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2001, 164.
- ³⁶ Sarkar, 164.
- ³⁷ Bordwell, Chap 1.
- ³⁸ Bordwell, Chap 1.
- ³⁹ Hunt, 1.
- ⁴⁰ Hunt, 4.
- ⁴¹ Hunt, 7.
- ⁴² Hunt, 7.
- ⁴³ What I mean by Chinese-language is both Mandarin and Cantonese films. In the 1960s and 1970s, Hong Kong produced both Mandarin and Cantonese films. Mandarin films were usually *wu xia* epics while Cantonese films featured kung-fu as the martial art of choice. While the 1960s *wu xia* films were in Mandarin, the 1980s and 1990s *wu xia* revival saw the vernacular Cantonese being used.
- ⁴⁴ See Elisabeth Croll, 'Changing identities of Chinese women: Rhetoric, experience and self-perception in twentieth-century China', Hong Kong University and Zed Books, London and New Jersey, 1995, 14; and Bey Logan, 'Fighting females: The far East's favourite females of fury', in *Hong Kong Action Cinema*, The Overlook Press, Woodstock and New York, 1995, 153.
- ⁴⁵ Logan, 153.

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- 46 'Eighth Annual Chinese Film Showcase: *Come Drink with Me*', Asia Media Access, 29 March 2003.
- 47 Wendy Arons, 'If her stunning beauty doesn't bring you to your knees, her deadly drop kick will: Violent women in the Hong Kong kung-fu film', in Martha McCaughey and Neal King (eds), *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2001, 31; Sam Ho, 'Licensed to kick men: The Jane Bond films', *The Restless Breed: Cantonese Stars of the Sixties*, The 20th Hong Kong International Film Festival, 1996, 40.
- 48 Zhang Zhen, 'Embodiment of excess? The proliferation of the "martial arts" film and the image of the female knight-errant in Shanghai cinema, 1920s–1930s', paper presented at the China and Inner Asia Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, March 26–29, 1998, Washington, DC.
- 49 Zhang.
- 50 The legacy of the powerful Asian woman warrior as signifier of cultural uncertainty and ambivalence is precisely what was to follow in later films in the martial arts genre. See Zhang.
- 51; Logan, 153–4.
- 52 *Eighth Annual Chinese Film Showcase: Come Drink with Me*.
- 53 Ho, 40.
- 54 Ho, 40.
- 55 Ho, 40.
- 56 Ho, 43.
- 57 Ho, 42–5.
- 58 Poshek Fu, 'The 1960s: Modernity, youth culture, and Hong Kong Cantonese cinema', in Fu Poshek and David Desser (eds), *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2000, 74.
- ⁵⁹ See Ho's article on the Jane Bond phenomenon.
- 60 Ho, 45.
- 61 Ho, 45.
- 62 Ho, 45.
- 63 Teo, 102.
- 64 Logan, 171.