

An Analysis of the Uniquely Chinese Oriental Aesthetic in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

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Abstract: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, as a martial arts film, is filled with a variety of summaries and expressions of Eastern aesthetics, the origins of which are closely linked to Taoist thought. This emphasis on the spirit of cessation, seclusion and compassion forms the backbone of the film, while the writing of rebellion, resistance and domestication fills the flesh and blood of the film. In this film, Ang Lee attempts to deconstruct traditional oriental aesthetics and then reorganise them, resulting in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, a film with a twisted story and vivid, subtle images that carries a classical artistic aesthetic while incorporating modern thinking, which is worthy of a glimpse with an oriental perspective.

Keywords: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Oriental aesthetics, Martial arts chivalry.

1. Introduction

The Chinese have always had romance and poetry engraved in their bones, and this hazy, misty mood and thought make up the uniquely Chinese oriental aesthetic. It is serene and indifferent, but also intense and passionate; it is delicate and soft, but can also be wild and uninhibited; it is deeply engraved in the classical Chinese narrative, carefully hidden in every corner of the composition and transformed into the love between the lines or the meaning in the delicate images, bringing the audience a sense of "hearing the thunder in the silence". In the following, this paper will explore the inner meaning of oriental aesthetics in the context of the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, directed by Ang Lee, in terms of characterization and scenography respectively.

2. Outstanding Oriental Aesthetics in Characterization

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is a martial arts film directed by Ang Lee and released in 2000. It tells the story of Jen Yu, a mischievous woman who stole the Green Destiny Sword and stirred up trouble in the world because of her desire for the world of martial arts, but eventually came to her senses when Li Mubai died and she plunged into the ravine. In this film, Ang Lee abandoned the large-scale cooperation in previous martial arts films, and instead gave this film a kind of meditation that means "the Chan sect". Rather than being about a fishy society, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is more about the desires and emotions of the human heart through such an abstract world.

Let's start with the central character of the film, Jen, who is the most complex character to portray. As a rebellious girl with outward meekness and inward rebellion, Jen is full of sharp thorns. She is the best representative of the rebellion against feudal rituals and the quest for freedom of the heart, but she is also an evil and righteous demon who disturbs the order of the world. In Ang Lee's assessment, Jen is "sinister on the outside and masculine on the inside", which is true. Superficially, Jen is calm and serene, her Jen House origins constraining her within the small quadrangle, but when night falls, she reveals her inner wildness and restlessness, a

yearning for the freedom of the outside world that is transformed into a substantial desire the moment she gets her hands on the Green Destiny Sword. That's how she came to haunt Throwing Stars House and tumble through the bamboo forest later on. Jen is the title of the whole story, a projection of the desires of all the people in the film, representing the ultimate freedom and the negation of indoctrination, and a physical repository of the imagery of desire and freedom for all the people in the film. Such an extremely egotistical and rebellious character is contrary to traditional Eastern concepts, but at the same time, the image was created with the influence of both Buddhist and Taoist thought. "Like vegetation that grows and flourishes, they returns to the root from which it springs". The two influenced and constrained each other, culminating in Jen's complex personality, which was a character that defied all stubborn ideas and pursued the realm of freedom emphasized in traditional oriental contexts. She is not a character that fits perfectly into the traditional oriental aesthetic, yet she is the character endowed with the most oriental aesthetics on her: a sexy, soft, voluptuous body that fits the definition of a traditional woman, a proud, persistent, inner spirit that would rather bend than break, and a subjective definition and contemplation of the ultimate in life under Taoist thought. Her life is like a dream, like the inscription on the couplet behind her at the beginning of the film, as vague and evanescent as her existence itself, which is a symbol of freedom, of romance, of the collapse of patriarchal power.

Next, let's switch the perspective to the second female protagonist in the film, Yu Xiulian, who travel around and had a code of conduct of her own. Yu Xiulian and Jen present a strange relationship that is both oppositional and unified and complementary to each other. On the surface, she looks capable and neat, full of loyalty, but she is very feminine, longing for a family, likes stability, and can give up everything and grow old with Li Mubai as long as he is willing to let go of the desire to fight for hegemony. At heart, Yu Xiulian is extremely in tune with the definition of a traditional Chinese woman. She comes from a martial arts background and is very disciplined. Ang Lee once explained it, "As long as there are rules, (Yu Xiulian) will follow them. She also has her doubts, but she works them out on her own, considers them and then does what she is told." Yu Xiulian is,

by nature, a character with a strong sense of morality, like Li Mubai, and the appearance of Jen evokes a hidden desire in the hearts of these two, which leads to the subsequent confession in the bamboo forest and the confession of love in the kiln. Yu Xiulian is a character who adheres to traditional feminine thinking, so she is outwardly bold and urbane but inwardly subtle, an ordinary woman who follows the norms of survival in a patriarchal society and is crowned with the aura of a chivalrous woman. This is why Yu Xiulian's final confession at the moment of Li Mubai's life and death is so moving, for it is only then that she truly completes her inner transformation, moving from self-restraint to freedom.

Finally, there is Li Mubai, a good but boring man, a "crouching tiger" who is hidden from the world. He embodies all the traditional Chinese spirit of chivalry, who is the observer of the rules of the world and the guardian of morality. Ang Lee's desire to be both 'inhuman' and 'human', to be above the moral code of most ordinary people while not being able to truly separate himself from the community of human beings, has made him a great warrior of his generation. What haunts Li Mubai is the always-vacant Taoist thought and the judgement of popular morality. In the first half of the film, when Jen is dueling with Li Mubai outside the temple late at night, Li Mu Bai picks up a branch from the ground and attacks Jen while trying to teach her a lesson, admonishing her that "if you temper a sword-edge to its sharpest, the edge will not last long", a quote from Laozi. He tried to persuade Jen not to be too sharp, because the golden mean is the supreme way in traditional Chinese thought. The fight scene with its obvious edification completely dissects the inner character of Li Mu Bai, a noble and chivalrous man of great seclusion, and a seeker of the supreme path with the spirit of seclusion and cessation of the Go. However, Li Mubai, who is imbued with traditional morality, is finally aroused by a hidden desire in his heart when he meets Jen. He hopes that Jen will be tamed by himself, and the emotions aroused by lust eventually translate into Li Mubai's search for his ego, making him willing to confess his love to Yu Xiulian in the final moments of his death. Throughout his life, Li Mubai deconstructed the self, facing entanglements and choices from his inner desires.

From the perspective of traditional Eastern aesthetics, the characters of the three protagonists in this film are the product of the evolution of their social environment. Jen is a rebellious rebel, an alienated product of extreme dogmatism; Yu Xiulian is a replica of the more traditional Oriental chivalrous woman; Li Mubai is more in line with the traditional Oriental aesthetic definition of a "chivalrous man". However, outside the framework of traditional oriental aesthetics, these three characters also form an interesting relative relationship if viewed from the other side. Freud defined the theory of personality structure in such a way that personality is divided into three realms: the Self, the Ego and the Superego. The ego is the most primitive stratum, which acts according to the principle of pleasure; the self is the objective tendency to act brought about by the individual's contact with reality; the superego is the product of self-correction under the principle of supreme goodness and the standard of authoritative values. In this film, Jen is the "ego" who acts according to her sense of self, and Li Mubai is the "superego" who acts in opposition to him. The two contradict each other, but are interdependent, like two sides of a mirror. So there is always a hint of affection between them, which is an "unspeakable" feeling that surrounds them. Professor Jiang Yin thinks, "The ineffable

speech is the most basic consistency between the religious experience of Zen and the artistic experience of poetry, on which the internal mechanism and practical method of Zen poetry are formed". This must be the reason why most of the characters in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* carry an air of transcendence.

3. The Imaginative Expression of Oriental Aesthetics

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is not a martial arts film that fits perfectly within the traditional definition of the term. Ang Lee's expertise in the portrayal of delicate emotions makes this film naturally more delicate and beautiful than other martial arts films. Instead of the large-scale cooperation represented by Hong Kong-made martial arts films, this film incorporates a touch of romance, adding a bit of emotional and tenderness etched in the bones of the Chinese people. Whether it is the green bamboo on the mountain, the leaky tiles on the eaves, or the chivalrous man with the sword, the fastidious clouds, this kind of unconventional and abstract imagery is present in every corner of the film, which is the most extreme hazy statement under the frame, as well as the most obscure and ambiguous expression of oriental aesthetics.

Let's start with one of the most unmissable fight scenes in the film - the bamboo forest battle between Jen and Li Mubai. In traditional Chinese martial arts films, the emphasis is on "form", i.e. on the fisticuffs and moves of the martial arts, and in many martial arts films, the plot is designed to lead to the fight scenes. For these films, the martial arts are designed to activate the audience and stimulate the senses, so it has been accepted that martial arts films will always remain in an awkward position of being "crude and unappealing". In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, however, Ang Lee has found a strike balance between vulgarity and elegance. This "bamboo forest battle" combines the traditional and wild characteristics of martial arts with the expression of both emotional and aesthetic, thus turning the mundane into a dedicated scene both with the picture of beauty and the image of expression, and accomplishing the ultimate expression of literary drama in the form of martial arts in a green flourish.

This bamboo forest battle is about lust and touching, as a way to true interpret emotion. Unlike any other battle scenes in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, this bamboo forest battle actually reflects a confrontation between Li Mubai and Jen at an intellectual or spiritual level. Firstly, in terms of setting, the endless green sea of bamboo is a hazy dream under poetic imagery. Bamboo is considered to be "both yin and yang", meaning as a symbol of transcendence beyond common being. Here, the sea of bamboo neutralizes the flashing with knives and swords, and instead highlights the soft romance of lingering, light and ethereal. Li Mubai and Jen are tossing and chasing in the sea of bamboo, and the forest is quiet, with only the occasional clang of cold weapons clashing together and the undulating panting of Jen, which is exactly what director Ang Lee wanted. Li Mubai, as a decent, patriarchal figure representing patriarchal authority, is bent on indoctrinating Jen, which is contrary to Jen's original intentions, so they two argue with each other by battling in the bamboo forest. Jen is good at using dexterity, and her lightness is even better, and she is wildly gifted with aura, while Li Mubai is calm and steady, with a steady pace, and a warrior's style. They two hide and chase, fighting against Jen's aversion to indoctrination and her desire for ultimate freedom, and hiding

the unspeakable lust between them. Without dialogue or monologue, their respective desires are revealed, and the scene is truly the ultimate expression of oriental aesthetics, both in terms of setting and thought.

Then look at the kiln scene, the climax of the film. In this scene, all the characters complete their transformation on the level of their minds. There is nothing more impressive in this scene than the image of Jen kneeling under a loophole in the kiln cave, tilting her head up to catch the rain with her mouth. In this film clip, Ang Lee employs a fixed shot to accompany a large panoramic shot of Jen hobbling to the centre of the kiln cave and kneeling in the rain. In this image, Jen is placed at the absolute centre, a chasing light falls on her body from the sky, revealing some sense of salvation, but the dampness of the rain around her eventually overwhelms the holiness, revealing the desire that haunts Jen from the beginning and cannot be dissolved - she imagines the "the river and lake" —symbolize the society and people, from the blue-eyed fox Yu Xiulian, Li Mubai and even Xiaohu, not knowing that in the eyes of these people she is the "the river and lake" and desire itself.

The attachment to the rain gives the scene a damp eroticism, and the crushing of the eroticism brings about a reflection on the ultimate in life. Li Mubai decides to express his love for Yu Xiulian when he sees the unspeakable sorrow in the Great Way; the blue-eyed fox sees the endless resentment in the evil and foreign ways, so she eventually dies in the kiln, but also has a trace of love for Jen; Yu Xiulian sees the countless shackles under the bondage of rituals, so she finally decides to step out of rituals and accept Li Mubai's love; and Jen sees the world of human beings in the life and death of the world, where there is morality, attachment and shackles, but not the ultimate freedom she seeks. The kiln in this scene can be likened to a womb where, in the most primitive of human origins, all people complete their own emotional epiphanies and quests, and where these elusive and immeasurable human feelings are given a physical dimension to carry, where the imagery of oriental aesthetics is in sharp blade beneath the still waters, a quest for a transcendental ideology with Taoist overtones.

Speaking of the end credits, Ang Lee once said that he decided to make *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* because he was struck by Jen's jumping off a cliff at the end of the original novel. Ang Lee once said that he decided to make *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* because he was struck by the way Jen jumped off a cliff at the end of the original novel. In the case of this film, this handling of the ending is truly masterful. Jen and Xiaohu stood by the stone bridge, and after

listening to Xiaohu's wish, Jen leapt off the bridge and plunged into the bottomless gorge. In the drifting mist, Jen's body slowly descends, fading to the boundary with the rising drums. It is interesting to note that in Jen's initial form, she strikes a Tai Chi-like starting pose, from which the concept of "the beginning is also the end, and the end is also the beginning" seems to emerge when deconstructed. Throughout, Jen has never let go of her consistent obsession with the pursuit of ultimate freedom, but Li Mubai's death has made it impossible for her to face her inner guilt. She has never been able to reconcile herself with the society of the present, so jumping off the cliff becomes a kind of relief for her. When she does open her arms to face the death she longs for and the ultimate freedom that comes with it, she may also be finally penetrating the world and finding the Supreme Way in another way.

4. Conclusion

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is a story about the sorrow and joy in the world and the quest for a self-justifying heart. Rather than simply telling a story of the loss of a sword, it uses the interaction of various characters to tell the story of the resurgence and demise of traditional Chinese thought. Throughout the film, various oriental aesthetic images and ideas take their turn in the film, both in the traditional values of characterization and in the Chan sect imagery of scene composition. These traditional aesthetics, which are quite oriental in character and contain oriental values, collide with some western expressions to stage this monumental masterpiece.

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