Crouching Women, Hidden Genre: An Investigation Into Western Film Criticism’s Reading of Feminism In Ang Lee’s Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

By drawing on critical literature on Ang Lee’s swordplay (wu xia) film Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon and earlier wu xia films, in addition to a close textual analysis of the film and its English-language subtitles, this paper investigates western film criticism’s assertion that the film is feminist because of its strong female warrior protagonists. It suggests that it is in the ambivalent conventions of the wu xia genre, where Confucian patriarchal and hierarchical order are strongly present in the wu xia world of disorder, that an environment for this feminist reading is created.

The Ang Lee swordplay (wu xia) film Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon garnered critical acclaim and box-office success when it was first released worldwide in 2000. The film’s plot is simple, as it is navigated by the theft and retrieval of The Green Destiny, an ancient sword that once belonged to wudang hero Li Mu Bai (Chow Yuen Fatt). The search for the sword functions as a narrative device that introduces the characters of Mu Bai; his friend Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh), for whom he has an unspoken love; the aristocratic Jen (Zhang Ziyi); her governess and Mu Bai’s sworn enemy, Jade Fox (Cheng Pei Pei); and Lo (Chang Chen), a bandit leader who becomes Jen’s lover. The film is set in ancient China, a time when Chinese society was governed according to patriarchal and hierarchical Confucian order. While the film explores the relationships between the five protagonists, popular and academic western film criticism’s reading of the film focuses on its swordswomen (nu xia) characters, in particular Jen, and how these women negotiate within this Confucian Chinese society. Consequently, film criticism reads the swordswomen in Crouching Tiger as feminist precisely because they negotiate within a Confucian Chinese society.

Confucian order is one of the fundamental themes that grounds Crouching Tiger in the wu xia genre, a genre that has ambivalent themes as it allows for both chaos and (Confucian) order to thrive symbiotically. More importantly, it is a genre that allows for the existence of nu xia.

Crouching Tiger’s director explains that Crouching Tiger is a film that is strongly influenced by the wu xia genre, both in its cinematic and literary form. In Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Portrait of the Ang Lee Film, Ang Lee explains that the film is a product of his nostalgic imagination of creating a bygone China: ‘[t]he film is a kind of dream of China, a China that probably never existed, except in my boyhood fantasies in Taiwan’. Lee further states that this ‘dream of China’ is ‘fired by the martial arts movies [he] grew up with and by the novels of romance and derring-do [he] read instead of doing [his] homework’. Ang Lee notes that he uses the popular Hong Kong martial arts genre ‘as a kind of research instrument to explore the legacy of classical Chinese culture’.

This paper thus argues that because Crouching Tiger is grounded in the conventions of the wu xia genre, these conventions, in particular the existence of nu xia in a Confucian Chinese society, allow western critics to read these women as feminist. This paper therefore asks the question: How do the conventions of the wu xia genre allow for a feminist reception of Crouching Tiger’s female protagonists? In order to answer this question, it will first consider evidence in film criticism that
locates *nu xia* as feminists. Next, it will engage in an in-depth study of the history of *nu xia* in Chinese-language *wu xia* cinema.

**Crouching Tiger’s Feminist Reception**

*Crouching Tiger* is a film that has generated a variety of feminist popular and critical readings that feature the film’s strong female protagonists. 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 therefore is about strong women. Popular film reviews, in particular those that collectively appear on the internet website ‘Rotten Tomatoes: Movie Reviews and Previews’, assert that the film breaks new ground. This is for two reasons: women appear in a genre that is conventionally perceived as masculine-centred and the film is set in Confucian China, a society highly prejudiced against women. These reviews compare *Crouching Tiger* with other Hollywood action films such as *Charlie’s Angels* (2000) rather than with Hong Kong films within the (*wu xia*) genre. The commentators are drawn to the notion of women as protagonists and skilled martial artists rather than to the subtle ideologies that they signify as central protagonists in the narrative.

In another critical review of the film, William Leung suggests that *Crouching Tiger* is a feminist film. He argues that heroines Shu Lien and Jen are feminist characters because they are characterised with more depth than women in traditional *wu xia* fiction and popular martial arts films. Leung speculates that this is because of the influence of western feminism upon both Ang Lee and his scriptwriter John Schamus. He bases this assertion on their collaboration on the film adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*. Leung regards *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) and its author Jane Austen to be quintessential examples of western feminist thought. He further notes that Lee and Schamus have both commented that they see *Crouching Tiger* ‘as a kind of *Sense and Sensibility* with martial arts’. He equates Shu Lien’s ‘conventional wisdom’ with the sense of Elinor, and Jen’s wild carefreeness with Marianne’s sensibility.

Film scholars Felicia Chan and Fran Martin, in their respective studies on the film’s reception in the west, attempt to offer some explanation and contextualisation of why western film reviewers read feminism in *Crouching Tiger*. Chan and Martin note that *Crouching Tiger* is successful in the West because Western audiences are able to identify with the film’s Western interpretation of ‘knightly chivalry’ and pop feminism. In her essay on the cultural migrancy and translatability of *Crouching Tiger*, Chan suggests that *Crouching Tiger*, as a cultural text, can be translated differently by different groups of people, regardless of ethnic origin. She provides evidence of this in the way that the film was marketed in the United States and received in Asia. Chan states that the film’s success in the West is because of its marketing strategy. It was marketed to five different target groups: ‘the art-house crowd, the young, the females, action lovers, and the popcorn mainstream’. Moreover, she notes that while *Crouching Tiger* has enjoyed a successful run in the West, its reception in Asia has been lukewarm. She explains that this is because *Crouching Tiger* is a simple film that can be understood by western audiences, regardless of Chinese cultural knowledge. She further states that because *jiang hu* is translated as ‘world of knight chivalry’, western audiences can then translate *jiang hu* into western medieval chivalric terms rather than Chinese terms. By doing so, western audiences identify with the film’s content. Meanwhile Chinese diasporic audiences in Asia, who have been fed on a fodder of *kung fu* films, are critical of the film’s slow pace and sparse action sequences.

Fran Martin’s essay on *Crouching Tiger* and allo-identification closely follows Chan’s notion of audience identity by paying particular attention to audience identification in a pan-Asian and transnational context. Allo-identification is explained as “identification with an image of an ‘other’, or a subject position significantly different in some way from the viewer’s own self-identification”. Martin bases her argument on allo-identification in *Crouching Tiger* on the transnationality of the audience’s experience because of media globalisation. In this vein, she proposes that for *Crouching Tiger*’s ‘considerable and enthusiastic non-Chinese audience … allo-identification and the pleasure of floating in and out of identification with the spectacle of “Chineseness” may constitute some of
the film’s key pleasures’. Martin’s key argument suggests that *Crouching Tiger* is a film with which a western (Euro-American) audience will easily identify. Martin explains that *Crouching Tiger* is a film that promotes a 1990s pop-feminism that Euro-American audiences are familiar with because of exposure to films and television series such as *Dark Angel* (2000-2002), *Josie and the Pussycats* (2001), *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), *The Powerpuff Girls* (2002), *The Contender* (2000), *Charlie’s Angels* (2000) and *Bridget Jones’ Diary* (2001). In particular, Martin suggests that it is in the character of Jen that this 1990s pop-feminism is recognised. Martin concludes that because western audiences identify Jen with 1990s pop-feminist girl-power, Jen’s Chineseness becomes inadvertently recognised as and identified with this contemporary image. Hence Martin suggests that western audiences identify Chineseness through Jen as being ‘all about girl-power’.

The importance of popular film criticism’s reading of the feminism in the *nu xia* and academic engagement with the western reception of the film is that western film criticism of *Crouching Tiger* lies in its contextualising the *nu xia* within a Confucian Chinese patriarchal and hierarchical context. However, this essay is not about critiquing western film criticism. Here it is suggested that Confucian society is read in the film primarily because of the film’s genre roots. The following section of the essay investigates the *wu xia* genre and its treatment of swordswomen.

**The Nu Xia And Her Ambivalent Jiang Hu World**

In general, *wu xia* films, also known as swordplay or ‘martial chivalry films’, are films that detail ‘the chivalrous exploits of “knight-errants” [sic] and “lady knights” in ancient dynasties’. The figure of the *wu xia* hero or heroine is driven by three fundamental codes: chivalry and honour, loyalty and revenge. These codes are in turn driven by the plot. Normally *wu xia* films are most associated with chivalry and honour while loyalty and revenge are elements commonly linked with *kung fu* films. While Bhaskar Sarkar interprets the ‘mythic figure of the *xia* or wandering swordsman’ as chivalrous and heroic, Sarkar also notes that the swordsman is a figure that is ‘inherently subversive’ as ‘he evinces with the law and the regime’. Sarkar speculates that ‘these chivalrous heroes are best understood as icons conjured up to be moral arbitrators in an anarchic, confusing world’.

Furthering Sarkar’s observations, Berenice Reynaud aptly points out that the fictitious *wu xia* world, otherwise known as *jiang hu* (world of vagrants), is an ambivalent space. She recognises that the while ‘the *jiang hu* world is anarchistic and one that reveals itself to be “a symptom of disorder … composed of thieves, travelling entertainers, knights-errant, killers, bodyguards for hire, and unattached women”, it is also a world that abides with the “Confucian respect of the master, father and traditional authority”’.

Noted Hong Kong cultural critic Law Kar explains that the Shaw Brothers, a Hong Kong based production company producing a prolific amount of *wu xia* films in the 1960s and early 1970s, upheld ‘familial and religious systems’ in their films. Kar states that ‘[d]ating back [to] Shaws’ Shanghai days of the 1920s and ’30s, there had been a tradition in their film to uphold the familial and religious systems’. Shaw Brothers (HK) Ltd exploited this tradition, evident in the costume films produced in the 1950s and 60s as an economic and cinematic institution. Kar further explains that the Shaw Brothers’ *wu xia* films commonly featured female warriors in the form of lady knights-errant as they appealed to audiences.

The genesis of the *wu xia* heroine is rooted in traditional folklore; poems depicting valiant *nu xia* like the famous Fa Mulan and oral tales of the daring female knights-errant who wandered the lands not only inspired Chinese girls but more importantly, Beijing Opera. The rich tradition of Beijing Opera often portrayed the *nu xia* as battling alongside their masculine colleagues on an equal footing. They were also most often portrayed by female actresses. Unlike its traditional Japanese, Greek and Shakespearean theatre counterparts, Beijing Opera allowed women to train as actresses, especially as fighters. Angela Mao, whose films *The Fate of Lee Khan* (1973) and *Lady Whirlwind* (1972) are now classics, was one of the earliest and most successful 1960s and 1970s martial arts actresses and was trained as a Beijing Opera performer. Actresses such as Mao and Cheng Pei Pei who appeared in the golden age of *wu xia* cinema in the 1960s and early 1970s, and Michelle Yeoh, Maggie
Cheung, Brigette Lin and Anita Mui who appeared in the genre’s revival in the 1980s and 1990s, have become synonymous with their portrayals of *wu xia* heroines.

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 Lone River* was a Chinese film that showcased a leading female protagonist engaged in martial artistry. Other films featuring strong female figures, particularly female knights-errant, like *Red Heroine*, *White Rose* and *The Female Knight-Errant from Huangjiang*, were soon to follow. It was during the 1920s and 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’. The ‘power’ of the female knights-errant, Zhen suggests, became a signifier of this cultural ambivalence in the post-May Fourth Movement era.

Although the *wu xia* heroine was not a new or controversial figure in Asian film, it was not until the release of King Hu’s groundbreaking martial arts China/Hong Kong classic *Come Drink with Me* in 1966, featuring a young ballerina, Cheng Pei Pei, that the *nu xia* took centre stage as the main protagonist again. Cheng was later to star in other notable martial arts films such as *Golden Swallow* (1968) and *The Lady Hermit* (1971), reprising her warrior role in *Crouching Tiger* as the villainous Jade Fox. *Come Drink with Me* is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it not only featured a woman in the lead role, it also emphasised the balletic and choreographed aspects of martial artistry. Secondly, director King Hu has frequently acknowledged that the martial arts sequences in this film were dictated not by violence but by dance.

The 1980s and early 1990s saw a re-emergence of the *wu xia* genre strongly featuring the *nu xia*. This era witnessed Michelle Yeoh carving a career in martial arts films, therefore establishing her as the ‘Queen of Martial Arts’. More importantly, this was the period that witnessed cinema’s strangest film goddess: Brigitte Lin. Through films such as *The East is Red* (1993), *Dreadful Melody* (1993) and *Ashes Of Time* (1994) Lin became known for her transgendered *nu xia* roles.

### The Subordination Of The Nu Xia In 1960s Wu Xia Films

While the *wu xia* genre portrayed women as skilled swordswomen, it also portrayed them in subordinate roles. Reynaud notes that although *wu xia* films depict strong female characters, the ‘real subject of the diegesis is not the woman, but the male body, and women, fighting or not, often end up as pawns’. In addition, she notes that in this genre, the woman is not whom she appears to be: she becomes a kind of femme fatale who ‘looks like one thing and right in front of your eyes … becomes another thing’. Moreover, Lau Shing-hon observes that there are two interrelated themes governing the female characters in the (1960s) *wu xia* genre, that is, ‘[f]or a daughter to be torn between her father and lover, and to be afflicted by ambivalence and helplessness’.

A case in point is the film *The Temple of the Red Lotus* (1965), which was the first colour Shaw Brothers *wu xia* film. This film displayed the themes of restlessness, freedom and young love through the characters of *nu xia* Lianzhu and her lover Guiwu. By recognising these themes, Law Kar inadvertently draws attention to the dominant presence of women, even though he does not explicitly involve gender in his discussion of youth. The uniqueness of the film is that it is populated by lady knights-errant characters who make up a family of noble bandits, the Gan family. Precisely because of the strong presence of women, the film presents an interesting gender twist in Koo’s theorisation of the conflict between father and daughter, for instead of the father, the daughter (Lianzhu) goes against her (female) family in order to be with her lover (Guiwu).

Law Kar’s analysis reveals that the emphasis on youth-related rebellion, which he recognises as ‘faintly alluding to the new generation’s aspirations for free love and freedom of action’, opposes ‘long-held family and social values’. This is because in the film the lovers Lianzhu and Guiwu have to ‘fight’ the female family members of the Gan clan in order to achieve freedom to love each other and to live their own lives together. What is significant about the narrative is that Lianzhu is
convinced by Guiwu to leave her family. She goes against her family primarily because her (male) lover urges her to do so. While she has moved from her biological family (father’s house) to that of her lover’s (husband’s house), she still functions within the constraints of rigid gender codes. In the film, she still subscribes to the male dominance of her husband even though she ‘disobeys’ her father. Furthermore, Guiwu battles the matriarchy (sister-in-law, aunt, mother and finally grandmother) systematically as what Guiwu fights against is not only the patriarchy but age hierarchy within her own gender. While Law Kar’s review of The Temple of the Red Lotus suggests that the swordswoman Lianzhu is ambivalent because she ‘disobeys’ her father in favour of her husband, what is significant is that Lianzhu still functions within a Confucian hierarchical order. This hierarchical order grounds the swordswoman in Confucian Chinese culture even though it may appear that she is transgressing the laws of patriarchal hierarchy because she ‘obeys’ her husband. However, it is by obeying her husband that Lianzhu upholds the patriarchal order precisely because this order is dominated by the father, husband and then son, and it is her husband Guiwu who is present in the film rather than her unseen father. As her father is absent, the next person in the patriarchal order that Lianzhu has to obey is her husband Guiwu.

While the mid-1960s to early 1970s witnessed the release of a plethora of *nu xia* films, the theme of ambivalence in female characters not caused by conflict with family members but because of young love is overtly evident in films by King Hu, the legendary Hong Kong filmmaker who championed and promoted strong and skilful swordswoman protagonists. One of the most significant films of this period that featured the strong and skilful *nu xia*, was King Hu’s *Come Drink with Me* (1966), the first Shaw Brothers production to feature the swordswoman in a leading role. In this film, the protagonist Golden Swallow, played by a young Cheng Pei Pei in her first film role, is the emissary, soldier and daughter of the local governor who has arrived in a village to single-handedly negotiate her kidnapped brother’s release from a group of bandits led by Jade-Faced Tiger. While Golden Swallow’s exceptional skill is displayed in a tense scene at an inn and a spectacular fight scene at the bandits’ headquarters (a converted Buddhist monastery), the character’s strength is undermined by the presence of the masculine hero Drunken Knight (Yueh Hua) who is not only her guardian angel but also the heroic figure in the second half of the film. Drunken Knight takes over the role of protagonist in *Come Drink with Me* when Golden Swallow is weakened and wounded after her battle with the bandits led by Jade-Faced Tiger. While Golden Swallow’s exceptional skill is displayed in a tense scene at an inn and a spectacular fight scene at the bandits’ headquarters (a converted Buddhist monastery), the character’s strength is undermined by the presence of the masculine hero Drunken Knight (Yueh Hua) who is not only her guardian angel but also the heroic figure in the second half of the film. Drunken Knight takes over the role of protagonist in *Come Drink with Me* when Golden Swallow is weakened and wounded after her battle with the bandits at the temple. Throughout this part of the film, she is nursed back to health by Drunken Knight, acts as a foil to his skill, and is frequently saved by him whenever she is in danger. In the final battle with the bandits and evil Abbot Liao Kung, it is Drunken Knight who not only rescues a nearly defeated Golden Swallow but whose skills are the only ones that can defeat Liao Kung. This ambivalence exposes the patriarchal politics of Confucian society where the father, husband and son are the dominant figures of the family. The power of subjugation by the patriarchal order in its signified form is present throughout the film.

**A World With Rules: Explaining Jiang Hu Codes In Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon**

While *jiang hu* is a parallel world to that of the wandering swordsman, it is still a world governed by Confucian values. These values are signified by Shu Lien’s reference to the ‘rules’ that dominate the *jiang hu* world. The importance of Confucian values, even in the world of *jiang hu*, is established during the following two exchanges between Shu Lien and Jen. When Jen and Shu Lien first meet, their exchange demonstrates that established rules (or values) rather than individual desires govern both Confucian Chinese and *jiang hu* society. The exchange concerning Jen’s desire to be a *jiang hu* fighter begins with her excitedly telling Shu Lien that ‘[I]t must be exciting to be a fighter, to be totally free!’ Shu Lien coolly replies that ‘[f]ighters have rules too: friendship, trust, integrity … Without rules, we wouldn’t survive for long.’ While Shu Lien is giving her ‘rules’ discourse, the camera focuses on Jen, whose excitement starts to wane as she hears that *jiang hu* fighters are themselves bound by Confucian-inspired rules of decorum and discipline.

This sequence establishes Jen as a young woman who longs to be a fighter, just like Shu Lien. However, Jen is bound by Chinese Confucian values that dictate she obey her family’s and society’s
expectations, in particular that she consents to her family’s plans to marry her to a wealthy man. While subliminally this scene portrays both women desiring each other’s life – Shu Lien’s quest for a married family life and Jen’s desire to be a wandering lady knight-errant – the important element to note is that both lifestyles require adherence to Confucian order. In this scene Shu Lien unsuccessfully attempts to convince Jen that the *jiang hu* world is bound by Confucian values even though there is ‘freedom’ to roam. In other words, the ability to freely wander the countryside is a physical freedom, which is of secondary importance. Shu Lien states that a *jiang hu* warrior is defined by his/her ability to adhere to Confucian values such as loyalty and honour. This exchange reveals that there is no such thing as independent thought and action in the *jiang hu* world. Rather, all thought and action is determined by the Confucian framework of patrilineal order that governs even the *jiang hu* warriors. Moreover, the exchange implies that while women in Confucian society are bound by familial obligations, they still have to adhere to a broader framework of Confucian values. These values state that both community and the ability to strive to be moral beings, are paramount. For this reason, even though the swordswomen in the genre are strong in martial artistry, they are still subjugated by Confucian values that stress and maintain patriarchal power.

In the second scene featuring an exchange between Shu Lien and Jen, Shu Lien reveals her relationship with Mu Bai and the unfulfilled love between them. In a revealing moment, Shu Lien gently explains to a surprised Jen, that she was once engaged to a Meng Si Zhao, ‘a brother of Li Mu Bai by oath’. She continues:

> One day, while in battle, he was killed by the sword of Li Mu Bai’s enemy. After, Li Mu Bai and I went through a lot together. Our feelings for each other grew stronger. But how could we dishonour Meng’s memory? So the freedom you talk about I too desire it. But I have never tasted it ... I am not an aristocrat, as you are ... but I must still respect a woman’s duties.

These exchanges disclose that even though the *jiang hu* world is an uncivilised environment inhabited by vagrants and persons of questionable character, similar to those who Jen encounters at the Star Restaurant, it is still a domain that is bound by cultural values rooted in the rigidities of Confucianism. Shu Lien reveals to Jen the fact that while the world of *jiang hu* has generic rules governing its inhabitants, there are also rules or values that particularly affect women. Shu Lien reveals that she is unable to express her love to Mu Bai because of her duty to Meng’s memory. Furthermore, as a woman, it is not permissible for her to broach the subject with Mu Bai because she ‘still respect[s] a woman’s duties’. It is Mu Bai rather than Shu Lien who attempts to declare his love for her by leaving his meditation training on *Wudang* Mountain and relinquishing his sword to Sir Te.

*There is Order in Hierarchy: Confucian Women and the Patriarchy*

Confucian writings on the rules of conduct for femininity and female behaviour are found respectively in the *Nu Er Jing* (*The Classic for Girls*) and *Nu Jie* (*Precepts for Women*), which require women to ‘submit’ to the patriarchy. It is in *The Classic for Girls* that the sanchong (*Three Obediences*) and *Four Virtues* are found. The *Three Obediences* state that a woman must obey the patriarchal order, which takes the form of father (before marriage), husband (during marriage) and son (when widowed). In *Crouching Tiger*, this ideology of the *Three Obediences* is distinctly displayed amongst some of the characters. For example, there is an implied potential romance between Mei and Bo. This takes place in a scene at Mei’s house after her father Tsai is killed. Bo is standing guard outside her house and protecting her from an attack from Jade Fox, when Mei shyly opens the door and tells Bo to come in. Bo responds by walking into the house, while still alertly looking around. While there is no other hint in the rest of the film that Mei and Bo become husband and wife or lovers, what is implied is that Mei is a gendered object passed along the patrilineal order. In a similar manner, Shu Lien is passed from father to ‘adopted’ father (Sir Te) and from dead fiancé (Meng) to potential husband (Mu Bai). In other words, while Shu Lien is an independent woman who has built a business for herself without the patriarchal order (father, husband, son), it is still this replica of the patriarchal order that is significant in the film.
Jen also travels within the patriarchal order: that is, from her father (Governor Yu) to her lover (Lo) to her official husband (Guo) and then to her lover (Lo) again. Her only escape from the patriarchal order is death, which she chooses when she throws herself off the Wudang Mountain bridge.\textsuperscript{56} There is a further observation to be made about Jen’s relationship with the patrilineal hierarchy. Ang Lee states that both Lo and Jen are young, restless and passionate as compared to the more conservative Mu Bai and Shu Lien.\textsuperscript{57} Moreover, critical and popular reviews observe that Jen is a restless spirit who is trapped in an arranged marriage and who wants to escape primarily because of her love for Lo. But the relationship between Lo and Jen may be interpreted as Jen upholding, rather than questioning, Confucian patriarchal order. This is because the only man that Jen appears to have been with is Lo, and therefore, Lo becomes her de facto husband. Jen’s running away from Guo reveals not disobedience but rather obedience to the patriarchal order as she does so in order to maintain her loyalty and obedience to Lo rather than compromising that by being married to Guo.

The Three Obediences explains that a woman has no personal identity in society but, rather, her identity is defined by this patriarchal order. The Classic for Girls further provides guidelines for women to follow in order to maintain the Three Obediences. The Four Virtues asserts that the Confucian woman should know her place in society and behave according to the ethical codes of general virtue: not talk too much, be clean and make herself beautiful to men, and be a good housekeeper.\textsuperscript{58} The Precepts for Women state that a woman is supposed to be flexible, obedient, unassuming, yielding, timid, respectful, reticent and unselfish in her relationship with her husband.\textsuperscript{59} In other words, total submission and subjugation to the patriarchal order are required. Crouching Tiger displays the gender politics of a Confucian society that adheres to strict hierarchical rules that place women in subservient and secondary positions to men. The film confirms its configurations of women in Confucian society by placing women’s agendas below men’s.

In Crouching Tiger, women’s agendas and desires are made subsidiary to those of men. This is established at the beginning of the film in two exchanges Shu Lien has, firstly with Mu Bai, then with Sir Te, an elder statesman and friend of both Mu Bai and Shu Lien. In the first exchange, between Shu Lien and Mu Bai, Shu Lien agrees to do Mu Bai a favour and transport The Green Destiny as a gift to Sir Te. But when she suggests that he accompanies her to Beijing to deliver the sword he puts his agenda before hers and replies that he wants to visit his master’s grave in order to seek forgiveness for not avenging his master’s murder at the hands of Jade Fox. While the disappointment in Shu Lien’s face at his answer is obvious, she complies and instead suggests that he meet her in Beijing once she has delivered the sword to Sir Te. To this, his only reply is ‘Perhaps’. The second exchange takes place between Shu Lien and Sir Te. When Shu Lien delivers the sword to Sir Te, he calmly refuses as he feels that this is a personal weapon that only a ‘great hero’ like Mu Bai is able to possess, rather than himself. Although Shu Lien calmly pleads with him to accept the sword as a gift, Sir Te instead only ‘accepts’ the sword as its custodian rather than its owner.

These two sequences are important as they imply that Shu Lien is powerless when it comes to her agenda and desires. While she may be a successful entrepreneuse, her older male comrades and friends (Mu Bai and Sir Te) are the ones who have the power to make decisions. In a Confucian society, it is the hierarchy that matters. Shu Lien merely agrees to what they say and dutifully carries out their intentions, without disagreement. Her intentions are never realised.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated possible reasons why film reviews read feminism in Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon and its swordswomen, or nu xia, as feminists. While there are different angles and possibilities to engage with in regard to this question, it has adopted a genre-centred approach to the reading of gender in Crouching Tiger. Hence a possible reason for the feminist leanings of film criticism lies in the genre conventions of swordplay or wu xia genre. The wu xia genre, in which Crouching Tiger finds its hereditary roots, is one governed by Confucian order because of the genre’s predisposition to a disorderly jiang hu world or ‘world of vagrants’.
And it is because of the Confucian social coding in *Crouching Tiger* that a feminist reading of the film’s strong female characters is undertaken by popular and critical film criticism. This paper thus opens up avenues for further discussion of the way western film criticism approaches and engages with *wu xia* films in the wake of the rising number of such films that have reached western mainstream audiences. The films I particularly speak of are Zhang Yimou’s *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*, both released in 2004, and the anticipated 2005 releases of Chen Kaige’s *The Promise*, and Tsui Hark’s *Seven Swords*.

**Notes**

1 *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, (dir. Ang Lee, prod. Hsu Li Kong, Bill Kong & Ang Lee) Taiwan, Hong Kong, USA & China, 2000. Also released as *Ngo Foo Chong Lung* (Hong Kong: Cantonese title) and *Wo Hu Cang Long* (China: Mandarin title).

2 While *wudang* is the *hanyu pinyin* term, the subtitles in *Crouching Tiger* spell the *wudang* as *wudan*.


4 ibid.

5 ibid.


Bryant Frazer remarks 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.’ 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 (Cantonese-language) dragon of the title. The women pose serious threats, make crucial decisions, and ultimately hold sway over this world.’ Bryant Frazer, 2000, ‘Bryant Frazer’s Deep Focus’, viewed 11 August 2004, <http://www.deep-focus.com/flicker/crouchin.html>.

In his commentary on the focus on women in the film and female subjugation, Nick Davis comments that it is rare that women are granted centre stage. He states that ‘[e]ven 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, Lee proves a much more successful director of women than of men, and he wisely (if surprisingly, considering the genre) grants his actresses centre stage.’ Nick Davis, 2000, ‘Nick’s Flick Picks’, viewed 11 August 2004, <http://www.nicksflickpicks.com/croutingtiger.html>.

*Crouching Tiger* 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 gathered from online sources such as film review websites and online print media sources. ‘Rotten Tomatoes’ reports that 96 percent of the reviews rate *Crouching Tiger* as a ‘fresh’ film. Out of 138 reviews, only five did not like the film. The average rating of the film is 8.3/10. Senh Duong, ‘Rotten Tomatoes’, viewed 29 May 2005, <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/crouching_tiger_hidden_dragon/>.

Parks.


10 ibid., p.42.

11 ibid., p.47.


13 Chan.

14 ibid., p.57.

15 ibid.

16 ibid.
In addition, these audiences were critical of the array of accented Mandarin used by the cast: for example, Michelle Yeoh’s Malaysian-English accented Mandarin drew laughter from audiences in Singapore theatres. See Chan, p.62.

18 Martin.
19 ibid., pp.150-151.
20 ibid.
21 ibid., p.157.
22 ibid., pp.158-159.

Martial arts films consist of narratives that feature exponents who either fistfight or use weapons. Wu xia films, for example, include empty-handed martial artistry or swordplay. While swordplay films showcase swords and other ‘conventional’ jiang hu 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 jiang hu and ‘unconventional’ fighting instruments used in kung fu. Leon Hunt, Kung Fu Cult Masters: From Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger, Wallflower, London, 2003, p.7.

23 Siu-fung Koo explains that the Hong Kong wu xia genre is derived from the popular wu xia novel which draws on the combined ideologies of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. In particular, it is Confucianism that creates the ordered society within the jiang hu world. Quoting writer Luo Qing on the popularity of wu xia fiction, Koo states: ‘The Analects, the Confucians’ bible, is also the basis for the formulation of Chinese ethics. The thoughts expounded in this book have given birth to such ideas as ‘Heaven, Earth, Rulers, Parent, Teacher’, and ‘Teach loyalty and filial piety in the family’. This moral code is deeply ingrained in the psyche of the Chinese … Whoever rejects this hierarchy of obligations will be punished, by death in cases of serious transgression … ’ Siu-fung Koo, ‘Philosophy and Tradition in the Swordplay Film’, in Lau Shing-hon (ed.), Study of the Hong Kong Swordplay Film (1945-1980), Hong Kong International Film Festival & The Urban Council, Hong Kong, 1996, p.26.

25 ibid., p.164.
27 ibid.
29 ibid.
30 ibid., p.134.
32 ibid.
33 Asia Media Access 2003, Eighth Annual Chinese Film Showcase: Come Drink with Me, Metropolitan State University, Minneapolis, viewed 25 August, 2003 <http://amamedia.org/movies/showcase/03showcase/come_drink.shtml>.
34 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 McHugh & Neil King (eds.), Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2001, p. 31; Sam Ho, ‘Licensed to Kick Men: The Jane Bond Films,’ in Hong Kong Film Archive, The Restless Breed: Cantonese Sturs of the Sixties, Twentieth Hong Kong International Film Festival & The Urban Council, Hong Kong, 1996, p.40.
36 ibid.
37 The legacy of the powerful wu xia as signifier of cultural uncertainty and ambivalence is precisely what was to follow in later films in the martial arts genre. ibid.
39 Asia Media Access.
40 This film also set the standard for the choreographed martial arts sequences, which actresses with no previous martial arts training were later to utilise. Actresses like Brigitte Lin and Maggie Cheung, who have no genuine martial arts skill, were made to look as if they were highly skilled martial arts exponents because the ‘artful use of doubles and the often surrealist stylisation of their action sequences enables them to work.’ See Logan, p.153. Michelle Yeoh, the actress who is now synonymously associated with the martial arts genre, was trained as a dancer. Hence her movements are balletic and therefore an important signifier with the choreographed nature of martial arts genre. Also see Stephen Teo, ‘King Hu,’ Senses Of Cinema, vol. 21 (2002), viewed 28 May 2005, <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/02/hu.html>.
41 Asia Media Access.
42 Although Lin’s first transgendered role was in Tsui Hark’s Peking Opera Blues, a 1986 film set in China’s chaotic 1920s, it was in the wu xia genre that her role as a transgendered character was significantly developed.
The reason for my reference to The Temple of the Red Lotus is that, like Crouching Tiger, this film is a ‘first’. While The Temple of the Red Lotus is the first colour wu xia film released by Shaw Brothers in Hong Kong, Crouching Tiger was the first wu xia film meant for a global (non-Chinese, particularly western) audience. Second, while both films significantly feature female protagonists, they are fluidly bound by Confucian Chinese culture.

I refer to King Hu because Ang Lee heavily draws on King Hu’s cinematic style for inspiration in making Crouching Tiger, in particular King Hu’s brushstroke style in the cinematography and mise-en-scene of the film. Ang Lee borrows King Hu’s unique action style in the bamboo forest scene where Chow Yuen Fat and Zhang Ziyi are ‘floating’ amongst a bamboo forest as they fight with each other. This scene is a recreation of an action scene from King Hu’s A Touch Of Zen where the actors in this 1969 film are suspended with the help of wirework as they battle in a forest.

Come Drink With Me is discussed in this paper because its ingénue Cheng Pei Pei plays Jade Fox in Crouching Tiger. In addition, the character of Jen is based on Cheng’s character Golden Swallow in Come Drink With Me.


For a discussion of the jiang hu world and its codes and rules, see Ho Ng, ‘Jiang Hu Revisited: Towards a Reconstruction of the Martial Arts World,’ in Lau (ed.), pp.73-86.


While the subtitles state that wudang is the term used for the martial arts form, the subtitles also note that the site where wudang is practiced is called Wutan rather than Wudang Mountain.