

WOMEN AND TRADITIONAL CHINESE CULTURE IN CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON

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Women and Traditional Chinese Culture in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

The modern films, oriented on the mass consumers, contain the usually exaggerated characters, representing different archetypes of human unconsciousness. They show the common view on problems on which the narratives are based. My research is an attempt to define the way of realization the question of gender roles in a Chinese film, using as an example of such film ***Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon***, directed by Ang Lee in 2000. The film is named with an allusion on the verses of the ancient Chinese poet Yu Xin: “Behind the rock in the dark probably hides a tiger, and the coiling giant root resembles a crouching dragon”. The phrase “crouching tiger, hidden dragon” means the place where there are many people who are talented but not famous. A main narrative line is the story of Jen, the daughter of Manchurian aristocrat. She studied the martial arts under the guidance of her servant, who was a well-known criminal Jed Fox. Jen has to be married to a representative of the powerful Chinese family, but she wants to become free of the daughter's and wife's obligations, so she steals the sword of monk Li Mubai, the Green Destiny, which allows her to become an invincible warrior, unless Li Mubai comes for his sword and takes it from her. Then Li Mubai and Jade Fox, who are the enemies, kill each other. Jen does not want to live in the world where both of her teachers (Jade Fox, her former teacher; and Li Mubai, who supposed to be the future one) are dead. There is no charismatic person who could be an ideal for her. Jen jumps from the high mountain Wu Dang and falls into the mist to become free.

The theme of gender roles in the society in the brightest way is shown through the character of Ju Jiaolong, i.e. Jen. Jen can be considered as a main character of ***Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon***. Its narrative is based on her life; and her death is a final scene of the film. There is also one interesting detail: in Mandarin, according to Martin, her name means a “delicate dragon”, when the name of her lover, Luo Xiaonhu,

means a “little tiger” (Martin, 2005, p. 151-152). So, these characters show another side of the film's name. Certainly, these names must be understood symbolically: a dragon and a tiger are the two beasts from the System of the Five Beasts – a dragon, a snake, a tiger, a leopard and a crane (five Chinese schools of Kung Fu, primarily established when the Chinese martial arts had just begun to exist). The dragon is only one mythical beast among the five ones. The main distinction of this school is focusing of trainings on the wisdom of disciples, which helps to understand the main laws of the universe and, in such a way, to understand the harmony in accordance with which every true master of Kung Fu must live. Another interesting symbol and the second character, to which my essay is dedicated to, is Jade Fox, the teacher of Jen. There are Taoist legends that tell about such category of women which are called foxes. According to the legends, they are witches; and they desire to have a sexual contact with a Taoist alchemist to steal his vital energy which is preserved by Taoists in order to use it for their special purposes. So, a woman who is called a fox is a cunning demonic creature. It can be very dangerous for everyone who tries to become enlightened but cannot control his lust. The main goal of my research is to show what sides of the female life are displayed by Jen and her teacher, represented in the traditional Chinese symbolical system respectively by a dragon and a fox.

To understand how these characters correlate with a traditional Confucian view on the nature and social position of women, there must be cleared a real position of women in the traditional Chinese society. Such information would serve as a theoretical base of my research, because no narrative can be understood without its context. In this case, the story of Chinese female warriors cannot be analyzed without any understanding of the main principles regulated the life of Chinese women in those times the film tells about. The Confucians believed that the main guarantee of the perfect society was its hierarchical structure which determined the role of every member of social life, the responsibilities of every category of people toward other categories.

There were five relationships, which could determine the position of any person in relation to others. The position of women was always similar; they had to obey. “In the ideal Confucian home – a microcosm of the state – women were expected to demonstrate obedience before all other virtues, and at every stage of life. As children, girls were required to obey their fathers; as wives, women were required to obey their husbands; and as widows, women were required to obey their grown-up sons” (Richey, 2008). Such a situation is brightly described in sentences of Zhu Xi: “To do wrong is unbecoming to a wife; and to do good is also unbecoming to a wife. A woman is only to be obedient to what is proper” (Richey, 2008). According to Martin, the film is based on the traditional Chinese tales about female warriors (nuxia) (Martin, 2005, p. 153). However, it does not mean that such women are traditional parts of the Chinese culture, rather they are fantastic heroines and their characters serve as the examples of amusing exceptions.

The Taoist philosophy divides all existing things into two categories: yang (an active and male principle) and yin (a passive, female principle). The harmony of the universe is grounded in the correlation between these principles. Certainly, when something which must be yin becomes yang; it breaks the balance and brings some negative consequences (Richey, 2008). In ***Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon***, a definitely negative character is represented by Jade Fox. She can serve as an example of “something yin which became yang”: In the scene of fighting between a police officer, his daughter and Jade Fox, Li Mubai tells that she poisoned his teacher and stole the manual with the secret Wu Dang’s martial techniques. But Jade Fox answers that the teacher of Li Mubai did not want to teach her; and everything he wanted were sexual relations with her. Thus, she used her yin side and poisoned the teacher in order to at least get the manual. However, her crime was worthless, because she had not enough intellectual power and talents in the field of martial arts to understand this manual. The viewer can see from the scenes of the mentioned fight, when Li Mubai said that her technique was imperfect and of the dialogue between Jen and Jade

Fox after that fight when Jen confessed that she had understood more than her teacher from the manual. Women are naturally more emotionally unstable, aggressive and sensitive, than men. The character of Jade Fox shows how destructive can a woman be who has the great power and the freedom of obligations offered her by Confucianism. All life of Jade Fox is dedicated to crimes (she is a famous criminal, as the viewer can learn from two scenes: when an officer (whose wife, the master of Kung Fu, had been killed by Jade Fox) tells about his mission to catch her and when Jen and her mother sees the papers with Jade Fox's face. This character embodies the women who want to become free as men are. However, who still remains psychically as women that is why they neither can lead the traditional life of women. This is because they think that it will make them enslaved by their obligations; nor can be men (even if they could change themselves physically, their emotionality and the unstable mind as well as the impulsive behavior will remain with them as determinative factors of their deeds). Jade Fox also wants to have a disciple which could substitute her daughter. In such a way, she realizes her maternal instinct. But after the fight with the officer and Li Mubai, she saw that her disciple was much a more powerful warrior than she had been. Jade Fox's disappointment concerning this situation is represented by her last monologue after her death, when she accuses Jen. Women, whose mind is still female but with a social position is as of the male, are very dangerous for the society. It shows an example of Jade Fox.

Jen represents a much more exaggerated character than her teacher. She is stronger, younger, more talented and smarter than Jade Fox. She is from a wealthy aristocrat family. At last, her character is much more detailed, because she is the main character of the narrative. The main problem of Jen is to make the decision. She can choose the future her family has prepared for her, i.e. the marriage with a representative of another wealthy and aristocrat family, the life of an obedient wife and a mother, etc. The first appearance of Jen in the film is connected with her depression and the fear of indefinite destiny as well as the uncer-

tain future life with her future husband. She is seeking the place to stay alone in the house of her neighbor. During the film, she is congratulated with her engagement by Li Mubai and his friend Shu Lien. However, these congratulations do not make her happy. A flashback shows that some time earlier Jen has met Lo, a Turkic bandit. He fell in love with her and then came to her in order to escape together to his desert. The scene when Lo came to the room of Jen through the window showed this. Earlier, she said that wanted to be with Lo and asked to save her in the desert (the end of the flashback). But when he came she rejected his offer and stayed at home. During the wedding ceremony, Lo tried to persuade Jen to change her mind and leave the ceremony in order to become his wife, risking his life; but she did not respond him. What is the reason of such a change in Jen's relation to Lo? There is only one answer: she wanted to become free in the highest degree. Thus, firstly, she needed Lo for this purpose because she was not so strong and experienced to be alone without any support. When he returned Jen to her family, she understood that she could not trust him. Then, this was the main event of the film, which allowed her to realize her dreams. Shu Lien was asked by Li Mubai to deliver his legendary sword, the Green Destiny, to Beijing, where Jen was living. She stole the sword and became invincible; thus, she had no need in either wealthy husband or Lo to be free and to do what she wanted. But Jen was faced with the problem mentioned earlier concerning her teacher Jade Fox. With the Green Destiny, she was stronger than any man (except the owner of the sword, i.e. Li Mubai). However, her mind was still female: emotionally unstable, aggressive, uncertain, irrational, and unfair. It can be demonstrated by two scenes: the first of them is the fight in the public house. The victims of her uncontrolled aggression told Li Mubai about this situation, "We politely asked for a friendly match, but she showed no respect and attacked us. Everyone came by to teach her a lesson, but her sword was just too powerful". "I have traveled everywhere, but never met anyone so uncivilized" ("Crouching tiger, hidden dragon," 2000), added the monk, who also had suffered from her sword. Another scene is the fight between Jen and Shu Lien, when both rivals

showed their hate and wrath. Through the prism of Confucianism, the main consequence of these facts is that women must be obedient; in another case, they become the cruel and unstoppable force which destroys everything on its path. When Jen has lost her sword and two teachers, i.e. the former one and the potential one, Jade Fox and Li Mubai, she met her lover Lo. But she needed only one is the power to be independent. She could stay with Lo before she had felt the taste of total freedom. She got with the Green Destiny, but after that the state of someone's wife could not satisfy her. So the last decision she made this to jump from the Wu Dang's mountain. "Jen's flight – from her obligations in the mortal world as well as from the field of vision of the film's viewer – signifies an extension of the radical (and distinctly 1990s pop-feminist style) rebellion that has been her defining characteristic throughout the film" (Martin, 2005, p. 159), mentions Fran Martin. The conclusion of her article ***The China Simulacrum*** concerns the connection between Chinese "tradition and (post)modernity, and Chinese legends and global pop-feminism" (Martin, 2005, p. 159). In my opinion, the characters of Jen and Jade Fox are entirely traditional, but interpreted through the prism of the postmodern culture. All scenes mentioned show the main dangers of feminism, of such situations when women have lost their traditional life position. Nobody can return it for them. Such women become wrathful, destructive and, first of all, they have no sense of life, because their desire of freedom always increases, when their unstable mind and the lack of power do not allow them to afford such degree of freedom. ***Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*** is one of the most anti-feminist films in the world history.

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