

Creativity at Work:

The simultaneous
success and
disappearance of
Hong Kong martial arts
film

- analysed through costume and
movement in 'Crouching Tiger,
Hidden Dragon'

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Abstract

Keywords

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The simultaneous success and disappearance of Hong Kong martial arts film, analysed through costume and movement in 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon'

In this essay, I wish to examine the relation between body, movement and costume in Chinese martial arts film. I propose to see fight choreography as dance, and I rush to say that this is a totally unoriginal claim on my part; practically any book or commentary on the martial arts genre will use the word dance, either literally or evocatively. There are good reasons for this, as I will discuss below.

The wider context for the analysis is the way in which the martial arts tradition that has developed in Hong Kong has been upgraded and been acknowledged by international audiences. The paper focuses on the film 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon' which was a turning point because it brought Western mainstream audiences to a Chinese martial arts film for the first time.

Simultaneously, it changed the genre from a Hong Kong to a more general Chinese genre. Strictly speaking, 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon' is not a Hong Kong film, but a People's Republic-Taiwanese-U.S. co-production, primarily targeted at a Western audience. However, the film self-consciously draws on Hong Kong action cinema; it features Hong Kong stars Chow Yun-Fat and Michelle Yeoh (Malaysian-Chinese martial arts actress who has featured in many Hong Kong martial arts movies before she played the Bond girl in 'Tomorrow Never Dies'), just as the crew was working under senior Hong Kong filmmakers, such as martial arts director Yuen Wo Ping and director of photography Peter Pau. Ang Lee - Taiwanese, New York-educated director who has had considerable success both in Asia and in the West - emphatically stated that 'Crouching Tiger' is the realization of a childhood dream to make a martial arts movie. This is a clear reference to the role Hong Kong film has played as a culturally distinctive low-cultural genre with a following among Chinese of different nationalities, but with little legitimacy in Western cultural hierarchies. Indeed, Ang Lee delighted in representing familiar tropes of the genre: grotesque weapons and fantastic deeds, fights are located in familiar settings - for example, a tavern and a bamboo grove - and the theme of master-apprentice relation forms a main interpersonal dynamics. To be sure, 'Crouching Tiger' gives these tropes a new twist in terms of virtuosity or psychological subtlety, but this is not unusual; any genre develops by commenting on itself.

In the international English-language promotion of the film, Ang Lee and Michelle Yeoh have repeatedly stated their affection for the genre: 'This is something very familiar to us; it is something we all know and have loved from childhood' (Crouching Tiger 2000). I conceptualise this attachment in terms of cultural intimacy, though in a slightly different way from Michael Herzfeld who first coined the concept (1997). The statement is based on a distinction of 'us' and 'them' - the Chinese who are familiar with the genre and the Westerners for whom it was largely unknown. In this respect, the film

took on the task of repackaging a parochial Chinese commercial genre for a Western art-house audience. That it has been largely successful is obvious from the fact that it has won over forty film awards, including four Oscars for the Best Foreign Language Film, Music, Cinematography and Art Direction. But whereas Western audiences welcomed 'Crouching Tiger' as an innovative and surprising movie, for Chinese it inevitably invoked questions of the past. Not only did the film invoke the 'old time' in which martial arts movies are set, it also invoked personal memories of cinema-going, novel-reading and kung fu fantasies that have been an essential part of Chinese popular culture. Such memories include the geography of the Cold War with the isolation of the People's Republic and the Chinese diaspora in which Hong Kong was crucial for the dissemination of Chinese popular culture in East and Southeast Asia, although as a centre it has held little national or high-cultural legitimacy.

Today Hong Kong is no longer a British Colony, and China is in the process of becoming as a new economic, political and cultural superpower in the region. In the same period, the martial arts genre has been going upmarket, in the sense that it has gained unprecedented national and high-cultural legitimacy. For example, after her debut in 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon' actress Zhang Ziyi starred in Zhang Yimou's internationally successful martial arts films 'Hero' (2002) and 'House of Flying Daggers' (2004) which were pure mainland productions, both in terms of content and production teams.

My argument is that as martial arts films have become internationally successful their connection with Hong Kong has become invisible is an instance of what Ackbar Abbas (1997) has identified as the political, economic and cultural 'disappearance' of Hong Kong after the 1997 Handover after which Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China. While the British colonial government never intended a nation-building, social and cultural life in Hong Kong did develop in distinctive ways since 1950 – the development of a vibrant film production centre, the third largest in the world, is a good example of this. But unlike most other colonial rules, that end with independence and the birth of a new nation, Hong Kong's colonial period ended with an ambivalent return to a motherland which was institutionally and culturally alien, and with only a scanty 50-year protection of Hong Kong people's distinctive way of life, written into the joint agreement made by Margeret Thatcher and Deng Xiu Peng in 1984. This includes political rights and open society that characterised Hong Kong of the 1990s but which since have come under attack by the Beijing-appointed government.

My argument about the cultural disappearance of Hong Kong is to some extent consistent with Lii Ding-Tzann argument that the transnational expansion of Hong Kong cinema is a kind of marginal imperialism, characterized by the principle of yielding to the other. By contrast, he sees Hollywood expand through domination of the other (Lii 1998). Because of these two forms of globalization are complementary, there is only a competition, but also but an interaction between two major filmmaking centres. Lii's analysis helps us understand the move of many top Hong Kong film makers to Hollywood for longer or shorter periods – including director John Woo's films after 1993 including 'Hard Target' (1993), 'Face/ Off' (1997), 'Mission Impossible 2' (2000) and others, Michelle Yeoh's role as the Bond girl in 'Tomorrow never dies' (1997), Yuen Wo Ping's work as the martial arts director for 'The Matrix' (1999) and the 'Kill Bill' (2003), Jacky Chan's 'Rush Hour' (1998) and 'Shanghai Noon' (2000), Jet Li's 'Romeo Must Die' (2000), and Chow Yun-fat's role as the king of Thailand in 'Anna and the King (1999). 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon' stands as a middle point in this process – with its Mandarin soundtrack and its remake of a Chinese genre for an international art-house audience.

But the topic of this working paper is not the relationship between Hong Kong and Hollywood, but the relationship between Hong Kong and Mainland China, more specifically the contradictory process by which Hong Kong films on their way to international fame have lost their embeddedness in Hong Kong, as Hong Kong itself is in the process of disappearing both as a political entity and a cultural centre. Before I turn to the cultural analysis of how this process was written into the 'Crouching Tiger's content I will explore the production processes, which also carried elements of different production systems. The analysis is based on the experience of a costume designer.

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