Globalizing the Locality: A Cultural Comparison of Ang Lee’s Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

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This joke provoked a wave of laughter during an award ceremony in the United States, but when I watched it on television, my response was a satiric sneer. This is because the phrase “crouching tiger, hidden dragon” in Chinese is an old idiom, which should rather be understood by its metaphorical meaning instead of interpreting it literally, as the joke teller did. The same joke created different reactions among audiences of different regions; similarly, the same film – Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (Crouching Tiger) – received diverse responses in the United States and China. The reviews from the USA were almost one-sidedly positive, yet in China, the film received only mediocre reviews, with the limited attention it drew among film critics.

Crouching Tiger is the most successful Chinese-language film in the West. Among all the awards Crouching Tiger received, the most notable ones are the two awards from the Golden Globe, including best motion picture, and four awards out of ten nominations in Academy Awards: Best Foreign Picture, Best Cinematography, Best Artistic Direction/Costume Design, and Best Original Music. It also pocketed several major awards in Hong Kong Film Awards and Taiwan Golden Horse Awards. In terms of box office, Crouching Tiger was also a big winner. It is the highest grossing foreign-language film in North America and Britain, making over 100 million U.S. dollars in box office revenue.

So why was Crouching Tiger such a hit in the U.S.? What were the critical issues that made it so well accepted and applauded in the U.S.? [read a plot summary of the movie in Appendix A]

Reviews from USA

Crouching Tiger received mainly positive feedback in the very first round of releases in the United States. American audiences were deeply impressed by the dance-like choreography and the intertwined love stories among characters. The reviews of the movie I explored are from respected and popular media including TIME, Sun Times, San Francisco Chronicle, Washington Post, CNN.com, and The New York Times. The praises involved the choreography and the romance of Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien, and Jen with Lo. Roger Ebert, the author of Your Movie Sucks, said that the film was “the best martial arts movies have nothing to do with fighting and everything to do with personal excellence”. Similar opinions were expressed by other critics. Tatara said that Crouching Tiger was more than a Kung Fu movie, it was a “sweeping, dream-like fable” with “a touching love story”. These critics were impressed by the sheer gracefulness of their actions. Ebert explained “as the characters run up the sides of walls and leap impossibly from one house to another, the critics applauded, something they rarely do during a film, and I think they were relating to the sheer physical grace of the scene. It is done so lightly, quickly, easily.” The fighting scenes, such as a roof-top chase, stepping on the surface of water to make jumps, and the famous bamboo top sword fight, were praised as marvelous, remarkable, and graceful.

Nonetheless, the reviews were not only about the spectacular moves in the choreography, but also about Ang Lee’s and Yuen Wo Ping’s ability to transcend the actors’ movements into something more emotional and sentimental. Yuen Wo Ping’s name was mentioned no less than Ang Lee’s, because his mastery in choreography direction was widely recognized. Most of the reviews praised the action scenes not only because the graceful movement of martial arts, but they also emphasized that Yuen Wo Ping was able to combine the beauty of movement with Ang Lee’s sensibility in expressing human emotion. As a result, the fighting scenes were “like conversations carried out almost entirely in movement”. Since Yuen Wo Ping was the choreographer of The Matrix, it is quite convenient to draw comparisons of the fighting scenes between the two films. It seemed that the action scenes in Crouching Tiger were thought to be better than those in The Matrix, because the martial arts movements were “bodily representations of the characters’ emotional viewpoints.”

Romance was another emphasis in the movie reviews across the U.S. The theme of unspoken and suppressed love between Li and Shu Lien is mentioned again and again in the film reviews. The critics regarded their love story as the “human element” in the martial arts film. This was considered to be very rare in comparison with other Asian Kung Fu movies released around that period, for example, Jackie Chan’s Rush Hour and Chow Yun Fat’s Bulletproof Monk. The romantic actions were thought to be a Western element in the film. According to Howe, Li and Shu Lien were “romantically constrained by custom,” which was a classic Jane Austen theme. Film critics were prone to draw comparisons between the romances in Crouching Tiger with Jane Austen because Ang Lee was the director of the novel’s adaptation, Sense and Sensibility. Although Crouching Tiger
explores two love affairs, the relationship between Li and Shu Lien is focused on more explicitly in the reviews than the passion between Jen and Lo. The unrealized\(^\text{11}\) and unresolved\(^\text{12}\) deep feelings between Li and Shu Lien was brought up in every review, yet the critics seemed to put more emphasis on this relationship over the young and passionate love between Jen and Lo. Although the romantic story of Jen and Lo took up a significant amount of time in the film, it is not the focus of the reviews, and interestingly, Jen’s politically arranged marriage was mentioned only once.

**Westernized Elements in Crouching Tiger**

*Crouching Tiger*’s success in a global market lies in the adaptation and adjustment of the Chinese culture to a multicultural and international environment. Ang Lee absorbed new elements into the Wuxia film genre—a traditional Chinese genre featuring chivalrous warriors serving justice according to their own codes, which I will provide a more detailed illustration in later sections—from Western culture, by so doing, he was able to attract audiences from the West. Ang Lee himself admitted:

> With *Crouching Tiger*, for example, the subtext is very purely Chinese. But you have to use Freudian or Western techniques to dissect what I think is hidden in a repressed society—the sexual tension, the prohibited feelings. Otherwise you don’t get that deep. Some people appreciated it; others don’t because it twists the genre. It’s not “Chinese.” But to be more Chinese you have to be Westernized, in a sense. You’ve got to use that tool to dig in there and get at it.\(^\text{13}\)

Lee suggests that he distorted the Wuxia genre to cater to Western tastes, but also to make it “more Chinese.” It is evident in the film reviews that what attracts the audiences in the U.S. is the inherent exoticism in choreography, combined with the familiar theme of love and romance. In the following paragraphs, I will compare the narratives of *Crouching Tiger* to the traditional Wuxia genre so that one can see how the Western elements in the film made it diverge from the traditional genre. There are two Western elements identified in the story: the entangled romantic relationships among the characters and the feminist theme of the story.

The attraction of *Crouching Tiger* for American audiences lies in two places. First, it is in the fighting between characters. The dance-like martial arts movements, the gravity-defying jumps, the different ancient weapons characters use, the poetic beauty of the landscapes and the melancholy but melodic music, all of which are essential Chinese, is new and exciting to Western audiences. Second, it is in the entangled relationships between the characters, that Westerners would be familiar with. As the story unfolds, one sees the repressed love between Li Mubai and Shu Lien surface one moment and suppressed the next moment; it is not until the very end that they tell each other their true feelings. The passion between Jen and Lo contrast with Li and Shu Lien, making them enthusiastic and adventurous lovers. Lo followed Jen from the desert to the capital city, asking her to run away; while Jen is disgusted with her arranged marriage, she finally takes off on her own. The two relationships are given the most attention while downplaying Li Mubai’s revenge for his dead master. Unlike the original happy ending in the novel *Crouching Tiger*, the love stories in the film did not end well. Li Mubai died when expressing his love, and Jen jumped off a cliff, leaving her life or death unknown to the audience. The ending diverts from the original novel, and also from the traditional Wuxia genre, in which good persons mostly end up being happy. Because of the inconclusive ending, the theme of this film is no longer the righteous triumph over the evil, the common theme of Wuxia film, but a meditation on love and life. The grand showdown between good and evil is a very important theme in the Wuxia genre, since evil is recognized as people who break the unwritten rules of Gianghu, and the righteous should serve justice to uphold Gianghu rules. The theme might not resonate very much with those who did not grow up with the Wuxia genre and thus is downplayed in *Crouching Tiger*. However, the theme of individuals pursuing true love and freedom is emphasized, it seems to appeal more to the Western audiences because of the inherent individualism.

Meanwhile, the relationship between Li Mubai and Jen is ambiguous in nature as well. The fight between Li and Jen is always over the possession of the sword Green Destiny, a phallic symbol that implies certain sexual tension between them. There is no doubt that the young and rebellious Jen attracts Li, although Li makes it very clear that all he wants from Jen is to teach her, the delicate expression between them seems to suggest something more. Moreover, in the final confrontation between Li and Jen, the girl is standing in water and tries to seduce Li. Such tension is rare in traditional Wuxia films because the heroes and heroines are supposed to be a “wuxia”, a knight errand with chivalry graces, who ought not to be displaying affections towards other characters of the opposite sex.

Another obvious Western element in *Crouching Tiger* is feminism. Although female protagonists are not rare in the Wuxia genre the amount of attention given to female roles in *Crouching Tiger* is very rare.\(^\text{14}\) According to Lee, in earlier Wuxia films, the “good” woman warriors are often on the course of revenge for their parents or husbands who are pious and virtuous; and the “bad” women are often portrayed as flirtatious and dangerous.\(^\text{15}\) However, the female characters in *Crouching Tiger* are not simply...
virtuous or lustful, they are more complicated than the stereotypical gender images in Wuxia films. Three generations of females – Jade Fox, Shu Lien, and Jen – are feminists, each in their own way, and all of them are competent warriors while maintaining the grace of females in their own age.

Although Jade Fox is the villain in this film, she is an interesting character. In the first encounter with Li, Jade Fox calls Li’s master names because even if she slept with him, he refused to teach her the secret of Wudang swordsmanship. The outlook of Jade Fox reminds me of the image of a mad woman who is the victim of patriarchal rules in Giang Hu. When Jade Fox is with Jen, she looks more like a mother figure, and she has been teaching Jen martial arts since Jen was a child.

Shu Lien is the representation of a woman in the middle: she is a powerful warrior, a loyal friend, and a virtuous wife who would rather keep her honor codes to her late husband than to pursue true love. Shu Lien is an ideal woman warrior. As rebellious and arrogant as Jen, she regards Shu Lien as a role model and older sister at the beginning. The fight between Shu Lien and Jen can be interpreted as the symbolic struggle between the traditional and the adventurous. Shu Lien is more skillful in martial arts, but all the weapons she uses are destroyed by the invincible sword Jen steals from Li. However, the two make peace again at the very end, when both of them have found something they have been ignoring or despising for a long time. For Shu Lien, it is the honesty to face her love. For Jen, it might be the disillusion of a free life in Giang Hu, as when Shu Lien told her Giang Hu has its own rules that she cannot break.

The character of Jen, on the other hand, inherits some of Jade Fox’s cunningness and rebellious personality. Unwilling to submit to Li Mubai, she calls Wudang mountain, where Li was trained, a “whorehouse”. Shu despises male authority in general. One interesting scene of Jen is that she fights off an inn full of male gangsters with extreme ease. During the fight, she also composes a poem: “Who am I? I am… I am the Invincible Sword Goddess. Armed with the incredible… Green Destiny. Be you Li or Southern Crane (Li’s master)...lower your head… and ask for mercy. I am the desert dragon. I leave no trace. Today I fly over Eu-Mei. Tomorrow… I’ll kick over Wudang Mountain!”.

Ang Lee intended to target a mixture of five different audience groups: “the art house crowd, the young, females, action lovers, and the popcorn mainstream”.[17] The action lovers target group might be attracted by the martial arts fighting; and the popcorn mainstream, presumably in Asia might be attracted by the star power of Chow Yun Fat and Michelle Yeoh. Young people and females might find their interests more in romance and the feminism theme, while the art house crowd might be drawn by Crouching Tiger’s exotica and poetic aesthetics. The target audience group is a mixture of people living in different cultures. To appeal to these groups meant mixing elements of Chinese and Western storytelling, making it no longer a pure and traditional Wuxia film, but a globalized local film. However, it is exactly such an act of departing from the so-called authentic and traditional Chinese Wuxia film genre which provoked negative reviews from China.

**Early Chinese Criticism in Comparison with Wuxia Genre**

So what were the critical issues that made Crouching Tiger a bust in China? Before answering this question, one must first have some understanding of China’s traditional genre of Wuxia, in which Crouching Tiger originated and diverted from.

**The genre of Wuxia.**

The story line of Crouching Tiger follows one stolen sword and two romances. A detailed plot can be found in Appendix A. The romance part is not generally emphasized in Wuxia films, but the story of retrieving a famous stolen object is indeed a traditional set for Wuxia film. Wuxia fictions and movies are deeply rooted in Chinese popular culture, the history of the former can be traced back to the Tang dynasty, around ninth century A.D.[18] According to David Bordwell, the author of Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment, a Wuxia is a “knight-errant” with “knighthly chivalry.”[19] Fictions, films, and TV shows telling the stories of Wuxia are referred to as Wuxia genre in general. The hero or heroine in Wuxia fictions and films is always a skillful fighter, he or she also has the sense of responsibility to serve justice and fight for the righteousness, the common good. Maio agrees that the spirit of a Wuxia is to challenge unjust institutions and never surrender to suppression and unfairness.[20] It seems that the two key characteristics of a Wuxia are supreme martial arts skills and a righteous heart, which share certain similarities with Western chivalry and Japanese samurai. However, Wuxia culture is influenced by Confucianism, which emphasizes collectivity over individualism.[21]

At the beginning of Crouching Tiger, Li Mu Bai expresses his willingness to leave Giang Hu (or Jiang Hu). Giang Hu is the world where all the warriors in Wuxia genre live. The literal translation of Giang Hu is “rivers and lakes.” It is an independent
world outside of the social system, “an alternative world in opposition to the disciplined world of home and country.” Although Giang Hu is more like an imaginary world, the background is often quite realistic. Historical references or allusions to actual persons and events add believability to the stories. Moreover, those stories often occur in day-to-day places in ancient China. According to Maio, Giang Hu’s “substantial reality” is usually in small inns, woods, temples or dark alleys. As Shu Lien points out in Crouching Tiger, Giang Hu has its own rule and laws. Morality and high martial artistry will be respected in Giang Hu, which is why Li Mu Bai has a great reputation in Giang Hu. He is not only a skillful swordsman, but also a noble person. If someone breaks the Giang Hu rules, someone such as Jen, the heroine in Crouching Tiger, punishment or revenge is often expected.

Early reviews in China.

With the concept of Wuxia genre in mind, it will be easier to see why the initial Chinese reviews, published around the time of its release, were not very favorable despite the unprecedented success of Crouching Tiger in the Western film market. Indeed, some Chinese movie fans implied that Crouching Tiger does not deserve the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language film because there were better Wuxia films than it. Before the announcement of the Academy Award, Crouching Tiger received little attention in China, the cinema box office was not as promising as it should have been, given the fact that all the actors were superstars in Asia. The box office of Crouching Tiger in Hong Kong and mainland China was around 3.3 million, compared to the 81 million in North America, at that time. Compared with a rating of 8/10 for the film in IMDb (The Internet Movie Database), the rating for Crouching Tiger in a dominant Chinese film site, MTime, is 6.8 out of 10, the general review of which is “just so-so, may as well see it” (Trans.). Initial reviews from Chinese viewers were not favorable, their condemnations or dissatisfaction concern mainly three aspects. The first and the most serious accusation towards Crouching Tiger is that Ang Lee distorted the true meaning of Chinese culture to cater to Western audiences. One of the most extreme condemnations was from Zhang Yimou, a famous film director who also directed the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympic Games. Zhang thought the film was made with “a misunderstanding of the tradition of the genre and with the complacent desire of making a film for foreigners.” Moreover, according to a research by Ken-Fang Lee, many movie viewers in Hong Kong also thought Crouching Tiger mainly satisfied Western viewers who did not know much about Chinese culture. The exoticness may appeal to Western audiences, but the homeland audiences will not feel the same.

Another widely debated issue concerning Crouching Tiger was the martial arts style, which many believed also distored traditional Wuxia genre. Unlike the one-sided praise in the U.S., the martial arts in Crouching Tiger encountered criticism in terms of both quality and the quantity. Compared to previous Wuxia films, Crouching Tiger has significantly fewer fighting scenes, and the motion of the fighters is soft and slow. Many viewers felt bored when watching those scenes, and claimed that the film was too slow, with too little action. Law Kar, a historian at the Hong Kong Film Archive, said in The New York Times: “In Chinese martial arts films you don’t let the action slow down; you just feed them more fights. Ang Lee knows how to weave inner drama with outer drama. That may be the Hollywood way.” Besides, although fighting on roofs and on top of bamboos was novel to Western audiences, those scenes are almost cliché for Chinese viewers. Furthermore, some viewers thought that flying from roof-top to roof-top was too unrealistic, and almost ridiculous.

When Crouching Tiger won Academy Awards, it received a lot of news coverage. However, most of the reports about Crouching Tiger in Chinese mainstream media focused mainly on its awards (i.e. “Crouching’ Tiger makes HK award killing”), box office, and other economic influences (i.e. “Tiger movie makers hunt for deals at film fair”), rather than the story itself. There is no doubt that Crouching Tiger was one of the biggest winners of that year, it received 4 Academy Awards, and another 73 wins, among its 91 nominations. The earliest news from Chinese media I can trace back to is after 2001. It seems that before the Academy Award ceremony, little attention was paid to the film in Chinese language news media. It appears that Chinese reviews of Crouching Tiger regarded it as just another Wuxia film, among thousands. An article in China Daily said “movie fans showed little excitement when the movie was announced as the winner of the best foreign film award, though the award ceremony itself drew huge attention.” It is not an exaggeration to say that winning Academy Awards made Ang Lee’s name appear on the headline of every Chinese newspaper overnight.

The attention Crouching Tiger received raised hopes that the film would “reactivate,” or “light up” Hong Kong’s film industry. The film was also used as a promotion for film producers to make better deals at film fairs, as well as free advertisement for tourism. In the news, Crouching Tiger was seen as an action movie that brought an economic boost to the Chinese film industry, but not a successful art-house or popular film in China. Despite the fact that Crouching Tiger was a big hit in other Asian
areas such as Thailand, Singapore, and Korea, in China, the birth place of Wuxia film, its box office was far less than the other Hollywood made movie, Mission Impossible 2, released around the same time. The initial responses from Chinese audiences were unfavorable both in terms of box office and audience reviews.

However, several years later, some film viewers in China began to look back at Crouching Tiger with a more accepting attitude. To illustrate such change, I collected five most frequently hit online film reviews that might be able to represent the new readings on Crouching Tiger from two major Chinese film review websites Mtime and Douban. These reviews were not written by prominent film critics in China, but by ordinary film viewers. Although there were still condemnations on the film, positive voices began to emerge, some of which echoed with the film reviews in the United States, and some even dug deeper than the American reviews.

### Table 1: Links to Relevant Movie Trailers

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<tr>
<th>Traditional Wuxia, New Dragon Inn trailer</th>
<th><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rB92WVTuXuQ">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rB92WVTuXuQ</a></th>
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<tr>
<td>Crouching Tiger trailer</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEaGtsiA0y0">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEaGtsiA0y0</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>An imitation of Crouching Tiger film: Hero trailer</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_y9Ka0RJT">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_y9Ka0RJT</a></td>
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What happened during these years? What brought about the change in attitudes towards Crouching Tiger? I shall address these two questions separately in the following sections.

**Re-visiting Crouching Tiger: Chinese reviews after the Oscar Nominations**

Despite the criticism towards the film, Crouching Tiger was a phenomenal film for the Chinese film industry in general. The victory of the film accelerated the globalization process in the Chinese film industry. The following section is a discussion of a time period after the Academy Award ceremony of Crouching Tiger, during which the harsh criticisms towards the film declined and more Crouching-Tiger-like films mushroomed. Mark Landler wrote in The New York Times: “in the copy cat world of cinema, it was inevitable that someone would try to replicate the success of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon.” The article covered a very interesting phenomenon in Hong Kong International Film and Television Market after Ang Lee’s triumph. The film market was by then filled with martial arts movies with a “Dragon” and “Tiger” in their titles. The film buyers from prominent Hollywood film companies, such Miramax, MGM, and Columbia pictures, were looking for Asian films that had potential to become the next Crouching Tiger. In a word, the imitation of Crouching Tiger flooded the film market in Hong Kong.

Barbara Robinson, the managing director of Columbia Pictures said: “Everybody is looking to make the next ‘Crouching Tiger,’ It’s the same as if you have a hugely successful volcano movie. You suddenly get three movies about volcanoes”. So it is not surprising that there were famous directors making serious attempts to repeat Crouching Tiger’s glory. Curiously enough, Zhang Yimou, one of the most furious attackers of Crouching Tiger, made his first martial arts film right after Ang Lee. The cast of the film Heroes included Zhang Ziyi, one of the leading actresses in Crouching Tiger, as well as Tony Leung, Maggie Cheung, and Jet Li, all of whom are highly reputable in China and around the world. Heroes did have its moment when it was nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film in the Academy Awards, however, the victory did not arrive upon Zhang Yimou. Afterwards, Zhang made his second attempt by filming The House of Flying Daggers.

Meanwhile, Chen Kaige, who shares equal popularity in film making with Zhang, released his martial arts film The Promise, only to receive a failure in both box office and film reviews. Similar attempts in making another award winning martial arts film included yet another Zhang Yimou’s film Curse of the Golden Flower; Feng Xiaogang’s The Banquet, an adaption of Hamlet into the setting of ancient China; and the later films like Fearless, Yip Man, to name only a few. All these films are Wuxia genre martial arts films, the shadows of Crouching Tiger are evident. The imitation films tried to take up and apply what appealed to the global audience in Crouching Tiger. The choreography designs of these films focus more on the emotion and aesthetics than the action; the scenery of ancient China become somewhat
mythical and poetic, and less realistic; the narration of the relationships among characters take up a more significant amount of time than the martial arts action. But the fact is that most of the Crouching Tiger imitations could not be put onto the same level with Crouching Tiger.

Maybe it is because of the disappointment with each film that was claimed to be the next Crouching Tiger, when reviewers look back at Crouching Tiger, their attitudes started to change subtly. Negative reviews are not much different from the reviews in the initial responses towards Crouching Tiger: slow pace, distortion of the traditional Wuxia genre to cater Western tastes. One more notable accusation is that the actors’ real accents are too much a distraction for Chinese audiences. Most Chinese audiences recognized the heavy accent of the actors.\(^4\) Although some argued that the accents represent cultural diversity,\(^5\) Chow Yun Fat and Michelle Yeoh’s Cantonese accent, and Chang Chen’s Taiwan accent were inconsistent with the characters they represented, who should speak something closer to standard Mandarin.\(^4\) The actors’ accents were too strong to be understood easily. A reviewer admitted that even as a Chinese, he or she could not fully understand the scripts without looking at the subtitles, and I shared the same experience. Besides the accents, one reviewer said: “The actors have too many accents that shouldn’t be there, but they lack something that should be there, for example, facial expressions, and proper pace in speaking.”\(^3\) Lu also drew attention to the actors’ accents, who agreed that “their accents breach the rule of plausibility and verisimilitude and indeed elicited giggles from Chinese audiences watching the film.”\(^4\)

However, positive reviews about Crouching Tiger also started to emerge from film audiences. Some ten years later, the reviewers looked back at Crouching Tiger and found themselves agreeing with the Western praise of the poetic sceneries and the aesthetic beauty of the choreography. The fighting was now seen as “elegant and beautiful,” instead of “slow and unrealistic.” One reviewer agreed with Tan Dun, the music composer of Crouching Tiger, who said that the Kung Fu in Crouching Tiger was not supposed to beat up people’s body, but to “touch their souls.” Another reviewer thought the fighting scenes were the realization of what’s written in the original novel, including the characters’ thoughts and emotions, the music further enhanced the excitement in the fight. The review then provided examples of different fights between different characters to show how the fighting style changed along with characters’ emotions. Even for those who thought the fighting scenes were not as good as the classic martial arts films, Crouching Tiger was supreme in the genre because of its deep and profound humanistic meanings.

In many of the new reviews, reviewers tried to explore the deeper cultural implications hidden in Crouching Tiger. Most of the reviews in this category were written in Chinese, so I provide a partial translation or summary of their reviews. Some believed that the film is “a bridge linking Oriental and Occidental cultures”.\(^3\) One reviewer thought that Crouching Tiger meditated upon a deeper and richer meaning of Wuxia films, going beyond the simplistic fighting. Some even regarded Crouching Tiger a revolutionary Wuxia film that transcended Wuxia genre.\(^3\) Supporters of this claim argued that the humanistic connotation was unprecedented in the history of Wuxia films. One wrote “the main storyline of the film differs from ordinary Wuxia films’ good fights evil, although the conflict between Li Munbi and Jade Fox belongs to that category, this conflict is no longer the center of the story; on the contrary, the relationship among Li Munbi, Shulien, and Jen is the focus.”\(^3\)

Another review noted the focus of Crouching Tiger was on the inner struggle in the characters, which enriched the film. The Taoism theme of Crouching Tiger was also highly praised by the reviewers. For example, in the dying scene of Li Munbi, he told Shu Lien his true feelings about her: “I would rather be a ghost, drifting by your side… as a condemned soul…than enter heaven without you.”\(^5\) In many reviews, his death alone, with Jen’s jumping off the cliff, revealed the ultimate theme of Crouching Tiger: the emptiness and vailness of human life, which was the core of Taoism. One of the reviewers argued against the criticism that Crouching Tiger’s actions defy the law of gravity, the reviewer saw the unrealistic martial arts style as a metaphor for the Taoism belief. The warriors jumped on top of bamboo trees as if they could fly, because they wanted to fly out of the cage in their own heart.\(^5\) In general, later reviews from Chinese audiences paid more attention to the cultural implications of Crouching Tiger and less to the choreography. Such emphasis resonates with the more accepted praises that the film is revolutionary in Wuxia genre.

**Globalizing the Crouching Tiger**

It is intriguing to discover such a turn in the film reviews in China. The time gap is especially interesting because it seems that as time goes by, more and more positive reviews emerge, especially when the reviews were so dramatically negative when it was released in theatres, even after Ang’s victory in Academy Awards. The change of attitude in Chinese viewers can be seen as another result of globalization, in that the local culture is eventually globalized and somehow merged with the global trend. Although the concept of globalization is often thought to be the process of Westernization or even Americanization, this film
seems to suggest the opposite. In their paper, Wu and Chen argue that the success in the United States of *Crouching Tiger* – a mandarin subtitled, Chinese martial arts film – is the result of a global-local alliance in production that successfully established “cultural authenticity” to the Western audiences while it still managed to maintain a certain sense of familiarity to Western audiences.\(^{52}\) *Crouching Tiger* is an example of the glocalization or hybridization theory, wherein the process of globalization is a plural, multidimensional process instead of a one-dimensional process.\(^{53}\) During this process, Western culture does not take over or standardize other cultures into one big, unified world culture; instead, other cultures absorb Western elements into their own, and the non-Western cultures exert unique influences to Western culture as well. The way *Crouching Tiger* successfully captured American audiences and permanently influenced the Chinese film industry seems to be a suitable example to illustrate this process.

**Globalization verses Glocalization/Hybridization**

A common belief of globalization is that the world is becoming standardized through “a technological, commercial, and cultural synchronization” from the West.\(^{54}\) Giddens believes that globalization is one of the consequences of modernity, in which local developments are largely shaped by events happened in a distance, pressuring to “local autonomy and regional cultural identity.”\(^{55}\) In his view, globalization will result in a unified largely Western world with no “others.”\(^{56}\) This approach defines globalization is the same as Westernization, or even Americanization due to the capitalist and industrialist nature of modernity. In a word, the view suggests that the economic success of America equals cultural triumph. Globalization puts cultural diversity to an end, replacing various local cultures with the dominant American culture worldwide.

The view that globalization equals Americanization or Westernization is problematic. As Storey points out, the expansion of American commodities to the rest of the world doesn’t necessarily mean the expansion of culture because commodities are not the same as culture.\(^{57}\) Moreover, the commodities exported to other countries are modified to suit local needs, and their cultural value is changed accordingly. Even when the commodities remain the same, people from different cultures might interpret their meanings based on their own values. As such, Storey rebuked the globalization/Americanization claim, saying that “globalization involves the ebb and flow of both homogenizing and heterogenising forces; the meeting and the mingling of the ‘local’ and the ‘global’”.\(^{58}\)

Roland Robertson uses the term “glocalization” to distinguish his view from the commonly believed idea of globalization.\(^{59}\) The term glocalization means “the simultaneous interpenetration of the ‘global’ and ‘local’.”\(^{60}\) Robertson uses the term to refer to the tailoring and advertising of goods and services on a global basis, where the consumers are from differentiated local markets. This interaction between the exported goods and local culture is what Robertson called “the invention of consumer traditions.”\(^{61}\) That is to say, the authenticity and tradition of local culture is not constantly unchanging, but rather, all local cultural traditions will change under the impact of exchanging global goods. Globalization, in Robertson’s words, can be seen as “the compression of the world,” in which cultures penetrate with one another, absorbing each other’s influence and, in turn, create or involve into some new “local” cultural traditions that are not purely “local” any more.\(^{62}\)

Pieterse uses the concept of “hybridization” to argue against the claim that globalization is equal to Westernization. Cultural hybridization is the mixture of Asian, African, American, and European cultures.\(^{63}\) Hybridization emphasizes the mixing of cultures instead of the separateness of them, it focuses on the “fluidity, indeterminacy, and open-endedness” of globalization.\(^{64}\) He believes that the process of globalization is a multidimensional process that unfolds in multiple realms. Globalization opens up people’s choices by showing the variety of cultures at practice, making them aware of their ethnic and cultural identity that was once taken for granted; and meanwhile allowing them to find other cultural practices that they can incorporate into their own. More choices also mean that local values and lifestyles can be reconstructed in order to connect and share with the global values. According to Malcolm Waters, this process is motivated by symbolic exchanges, “cultural entities that are circulated and recycled simultaneously in many locations throughout the globe”.\(^{65}\) Film and music, for example, are very important forms of symbolic exchanges.

The above theories suggest that globalization is not the one-way influence from the more dominant Western culture to less influential ones. Instead, the process is mutually influential and affective. On one hand, Western culture mingles with the local cultures by means of “symbolic exchanges,”\(^{66}\) making the latter more and more acceptable to the former’s ideology and social norms. On the other hand, less-dominant cultures find their ways into Western world, contributing to the making of a multicultural West, or, an America of multiculturalism. *Crouching Tiger* is a suitable example for illustrating this process. First, the Wuxia genre was altered in *Crouching Tiger* in order to create a sense of universality and familiarity to reach for broader audiences. Second, the Chinese audience learned to accept the *Crouching Tiger* version of a Wuxia film by establishing the film as the re-invention of
Wuxia tradition, from which audiences and filmmakers can generate a deeper reading of such locality than before. Aside from the film, the director Ang Lee himself is another example of a hybridized cultural being.

**Ang Lee: A Hybridized Life, Filmography, and *Crouching Tiger***

The director Ang Lee’s life is interestingly hybridized. His experience in both China and the U.S. made his film a unique blending of the East and West. Ang Lee was born in Taiwan in 1954. He moved to the United States in 1978, where he continues to reside. Lee received his BFA at the University of Illinois and his MFA in film production from New York University. Although he chose to stay in the United States after graduation, Lee’s films are deeply rooted in Chinese culture. He once said: “I was born in Taiwan, but my mother is from Jiangxi Province and my father from Beijing. So I was intensively trained with Chinese traditions, and I hope this shows through in my works.”67 His family upbringing, combined with his training in Western style filmmaking, make Lee a unique figure that is influenced by both Chinese and American cultures, who can “speak to those two cultures in a way no other director has.”68 Indeed, Lee’s education and family background make him into a cross-cultural and transnational film director, who is called “the guy in the middle, between two worlds”.69 Some of Lee’s award-winning films mediated on the cultural difference between China and the U.S. The most famous among them is his “Father Knows Best” trilogy. *Pushing Hands* (1992) is the first of this trilogy, as well as Lee’s first feature. It is about the culture shock of a Tai Chi master who moved to the United States to live with his son. In 1994, the second part of his trilogy *The Wedding Banquet* was awarded the Golden Bear award in Berlin Film Festival and the Best Foreign Language Film in the Academy and Golden Globe awards.70 *The Wedding Banquet* is also about the life of Chinese-American: the main character tries to hide his homosexual tendency by marrying a Chinese woman who wants a U.S. green card. *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) is the last of the “Father Knows Best” trilogy, which again was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film for the Academy Awards and the Golden Globes. The story goes back to Taipei, Lee’s home town. Chinese cooking and family relationships are the main themes of *Eat Drink Man Woman*. After seeing his early works, producer and director Sydney Pollack invited Lee to make Jane Austen’s novel *Sense and Sensibility* into a film. In 1995, *Sense and Sensibility* was nominated for seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Lee’s last two pieces before *Crouching Tiger* are *The Ice Storm* (1997) and *Ride with the Devil* (1999), both entirely American subjects, in which Lee demonstrated his ability to film topics closely related to American culture. Both Lee’s film and Lee’s life are examples of hybridization the locality. The film brought Wuxia genre to a broader audience and revolutionized the genre; while Ang Lee mixed Western filmmaking techniques with local Chinese culture and created hybridized films.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I collected and compared the film reviews of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* from American film critics, Chinese newspapers, and ordinary Chinese audiences. The comparison between American reviews and initial reviews from Chinese newspapers showed a drastic divergence in the film. American reviews highly praised the splendid choreography and the heart-broken romance story; yet Chinese reviews focus more on the economic success while criticizing the authenticity of *Crouching Tiger*. Ang Lee added some Western touches to this mandarin-speaking, subtitled film to attract American audiences. His emphasis on human emotion in the relationships among characters gives the film a sense of universality. Meanwhile, feminism themes also contributed to the positive reviews from the U.S. However, using such elements made the film a non-traditional Wuxia film. Chinese audiences were disappointed and skeptical about such changes, which led to negative initial reviews. The years after awards were given to *Crouching Tiger* are marked by piles of imitations that either aimed to earn money from the Western market, or to make another Oriental impact on the award ceremonies around the world. Because of the emergence of these films, *Crouching Tiger* became the representation of a new generation in Wuxia films, a more globalized version of Wuxia genre. As such, the reviews afterwards are getting better and more profound.

*Crouching Tiger* is an example of glocalization/hybridization that the process of globalization is mutually influential among cultures. If the film *Crouching Tiger* is a case to globalize the local, the change in audiences’ attitudes toward the film could be a result of accepting the globalization of local culture, in Roberson’s words, accepting the “creation of locality.” Indeed, what has been globalized by Ang Lee is not the Wuxia genre, but a mixture of Chinese Wuxia elements with Western filming storytelling and themes, the core of which remains the same, but the means of filming have changed accordingly. I have noted previously that Lee himself agrees with the idea that his film is twisting the Wuxia genre, but he also emphasizes that the purpose of doing so is to explore the deeper human emotions using Western filming methods. Such methods are critical for the film to be accepted in the West. Meanwhile, the method is dangerous in that hybridity often comes along with a sense of loss of purity, loss of wholeness, and inauthenticity for the local people, which might be account for the initial negative response evoked by *Crouching Tiger*.71
The various imitations of *Crouching Tiger* – good or bad – in a way reiterated the significance of this film. Such imitations, together with *Crouching Tiger*, became a wave of newly interpreted Wuxia films, in which human emotions are highlighted, the fighting is embellished, and more attention is paid to the poetry of a scene than the violence – the very elements that appeal to Western audiences. There is no denying that the directors of these new Wuxia films were ambitious and wanted to reproduce Lee’s success in the global stage. Their eagerness to be recognized globally resonates with the film viewers in China, according to Chan, “reveal a cultural anxiety about identity and Chineseness in a globalized, postcolonial, and postmodern world order.”72 Instead of harshly criticizing *Crouching Tiger*, the film makers seemed to have found their own ways of coping with such anxiety – the anxiety of the loss of Chinese authenticity in Wuxia films – to revolutionize the genre and make distinctions with the previous Wuxia tradition. This wave of imitation might be what Robertson (1995) called “the invention of the tradition.”73

As a result, *Crouching Tiger* become the transcendental film that brought the Wuxia genre into a new era. So the inauthentic and Westernized film became the new authenticity and new tradition for Wuxia films.

After re-visiting the film and watching the imitations, the film reviewers seemed to agree with Ang Lee more than before.

The film is a kind of dream of China, a China that probably never existed, except in my boyhood fantasies in Taiwan. Of course, my childhood imagination was fired by the martial arts movies I grew up with and by the novels of romance and derring-do I read instead of doing my homework. That these two kinds of dreaming should come together now, in a film I was able to make in China, is a happy irony for me.74

Lee’s dream China is enigmatic and mysterious, and the romance in the story is filled with a sense of emptiness and powerlessness against fate. It is not a coincidence that when audiences re-view the film, some of them found Zen and Taoism connotations in *Crouching Tiger*, since Lee’s vision reflects the very essence of Taoism: emptiness. I noticed that in almost all of the American reviews, the depiction of the romance did not mention the Taoist themes, this might be due to their lack of knowledge about the philosophy of Taoism. However, most positive reviews written by Chinese audiences discussed the influence of Taoism in *Crouching Tiger*. This is only one example of the different readings between China and America. Ironically, although Chinese audiences later came up with a richer reading of *Crouching Tiger*, American reviewers were the first ones to like and accept the film. The reason for this might go back to the notion of “the invention of tradition.”75 For Chinese audiences, there is already a deep-rooted tradition of Wuxia films, which made it more difficult for them to accept a globalized version of Wuxia film; while the American audiences are more willingly to take up the exotic martial arts film because they lacked experiences in the Wuxia genre. In other words, Chinese audiences took a longer period of time to understand Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger* as a new Wuxia film. The film is a mixture of Western elements in Chinese genre, making the traditional Wuxia genre no longer a pure local culture. The initial disappointment from Chinese audiences turned into acceptance, sometime later. This can be seen as the result of exchanging global goods, so that the authenticity and tradition of local culture has changed accordingly. However, in the second reading of *Crouching Tiger*, positive reviews explored more profoundly the themes and implications of the film than American reviews. The delay of acceptance, along with the richer reading on *Crouching Tiger*, might be the process for the Chinese local to re-produce and re-create the Wuxia tradition to cope with the changes brought about by globalization.
Appendix A. The plot of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

The film starts with its title in Chinese characters, the pattern of which is a still shot of a green and peaceful bamboo forest. Li Mu Bai (Chow Yun Fat), a warrior who is considered to be one of the best sword masters of the time, comes to visit his long-time friend Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh). The two have a long yet unspoken passion for each other, but some past incidents made it impossible for them to speak of their love for decades. Li wants Shu Lien to give his legendary sword, the Green Destiny, to his friend in Beijing, because he wants to leave the life of endless fighting. Shu Lien is reluctant to take his sword at first, but later she is convinced by Li and leaves for Beijing. Upon her arrival, Shu Lien is introduced to the daughter of a high rank officer, Jen (Zhang Ziyi). Jen expresses her admiration of Shu Lien’s life as a free warrior – Jen says, unlike Shu Lien, she has to obey her parents’ decision to marry a higher ranked politician – but Shu Lien tells here that Giang Hu (martial arts life) has its own rules and laws, no one can live truly free.

That night, the sword Green Destiny was stolen by an agile thief and during the fight to stop the thief, Shu Lien seems to have an idea of the identity of that thief. Meanwhile, there is a rumor in Beijing that Jade Fox (Cheng Pei Pei), the murderer of Li Mu Bai’s master, is hiding in Jen’s residence. Having learned about this, Li Mu Bai wants to avenge his master and confronts Jade Fox in the night. Just as Mu Bai is about to defeat Jade Fox, the thief, with Green Destiny in hand, comes into the scene and helps Jade Fox to escape. By now, the identity of the thief has been unveiled to the audience, she is no other but Jen; and Jade Fox seems to be her master of martial arts. The next day, Shu Lien asks Jen to return the sword and she will not press charges against Jen.

However, when Jen tries to return the sword in secret, Li catches her on the scene. He likes Jen’s potential in martial arts, and offers to be her master. However, Jen rejects him rudely and takes off with the sword again. In Jen’s flashback, we see a romance story between Jen and a desert bandit Lo (Chang Chen), which ends up in Jen leaving Lo because of her family responsibility. In the day of Jen’s wedding, Lo shouts desperately to Jen: “Come with me to the desert! No one marries you but me!” He is thus chased by the guards from Jen’s house, but Li and Shu Lien help him escape. Not to audience’s surprise, Jen runs away from her husband and disguised herself as a male to enter her dream world: a free life of Giang Hu.

Nevertheless, as Shu Lien told her before, Giang Hu has its own rules and laws. Because she is unaware of these codes, Jen’s arrogant attitude and rude behavior irritates a lot of respected martial artists. She then turns to Shu Lien for help, but when Jen learns that Li and Shu Lien are following her father’s requests to bring Jen back home, she feels betrayed and a fight breaks out between them. Jen uses unlawful tricks to hurt Shu Lien and again runs away. Li Mu Bai traces her into a sea of bamboo where they fight each other on the top of those bamboos. Li still tries to persuade Jen to follow him as his apprentice, but Jen doesn’t seem to care. Jade Fox shows up to rescue Jen.

The last battle is between Jade Fox and Li Mu Bai in the cave where Jen and Jade Fox hide. The vicious Jade Fox is defeated and killed by Li, however, Li himself is poisoned by Jade Fox, as well. In the last moment, Jen leaves for the town, promising to bring back the antidote for him. So Shu Lien and Li are left alone, waiting for Jen’s return. At the final moment of his life, Li decides to tell his true feelings about Shu Lien, and he dies in her arms.

Yet the tragic love story does not end here. After Li’s death, Jen takes Shu Lien’s advice and goes to Wudang Mountain to meet Lo. She stands in a bridge, underneath is a deep abyss covered with thick clouds. She recalls Lo’s legend about “a faithful heart makes wishes come true”, then asks Lo to make a wish.

LO

(closing his eyes)
To be back in the desert, together again.
Jen smiles, turns, and leaps into the clouds. they seem to catch her gently, before she disappears into them.
Lo remains standing, a smile on his face, tears rolling down his cheeks.
THE END. (p. 139)
(Endnotes)


8 Ebert, “Crouching,” 1.


10 Tatara, “Crouching” 1.

11 Ebert, “Crouching,” 1.


13 Ebert, “Crouching.”

14 Howe, “Keep Your Eye.”


17 Lee, “Far away.”

18 Sunshine, Crouching, 113.

19 Qtdd. in Pham, “Asian Invasion,” 128.

20 Sunshine, Crouching.

21 Qtdd. in Sunshine, Crouching, 112.


23 Maio, “Globalization.”


26 “Flick.”


29 Liu, “Ang Lee’s,” 397.

30 Lee, “Far Away.”


34 Landler, “Lee’s ‘Tiger.’”; Liu, “Ang Lee’s.”

35 Sunshine, Crouching.


38 Landler, “It’s Raining” 1.

39 Landler, “It’s Raining.”


41 Landler, “Lee’s ‘Tiger.”

42 Landler, “It’s Raining,”1.
Qtd. In Landler, “It’s Raining.”
Lee, “Far Away.”
Lu, “Crouching Tiger.”
“Flick,” 1.
Lee, “Far Away.”
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