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Toward a Genuine Feminism: Confucianism, the State, and Women in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

> *The relationship between men and women thus became one of absolute inequality* [through cosmic abstraction]. I cannot but sigh at this.
>
> — He-Yin Zhen, "On the Revenge of Women"

> JEN: You're not married, are you?
> SHU LIEN: What do you think?
> JEN: No! You couldn't roam around freely if you were.
>
> — Jen and Shu Lien, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

In the dialogue above from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), Jen (or Yu Jiaolong), the daughter of an aristocrat, reveals a poignant insight into the fundamental lack of freedom within marriage. Immediately prior, Jen reveals to Shu Lien (or Yu Xiulian), a seemingly independent and unmarried woman, that she will be married off to a prominent family—an arranged marriage that she says would only serve to benefit her father's political career. By asking, then, Jen subtly identifies the institution of marriage as a fundamental contributor to the "absolute inequality" between men and women lamented by He-Yin Zhen almost a hundred years ago in her essay "On the Revenge of Women." It is fitting that, as the film unfolds, Jen subverts every social norm she encounters that upholds the oppression of women. She not only "sighs" in frustration at this inequality but also moves, if only playfully at first, against these Confucian systems of oppression in order to find the freedom that she is so desperately seeking.

Directed by Ang Lee and released in 2000, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is, at its core, a *wuxia* martial arts film entwined with elements of romance based off Wang Dulu's 1942 novel of the same name. For context, *wuxia* refers to a popular Chinese genre about righteous, sword-using martial

arts warriors (*xia*) endowed with supernatural abilities, such as walking on water or flying. Set in a fictional late Qing dynasty China,[1] the film's narrative follows Jen, a protégé of Jade Fox (the main antagonist), as she steals the Green Destiny sword belonging formerly to Li Mu Bai (he gives it away to the Sir Te), a *wudan* swordsman,[2] and how she wrestles with the social repercussions that inevitably follow. The film contains scores of mesmerizing sword fights between Jen and characters like Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien, all of whom stand in her way of achieving freedom. To be able to fight these experienced *jianghu* fighters, Jen learns martial arts through a secret *wudan* manual stolen by Jade Fox from Li Mu Bai's master, whom Jade Fox also kills. Along the way, the film also develops a romance between the youthful Jen and Lo "Dark Cloud" (or Luo Xiaohu, a bandit she meets in her time in Xinjiang on the northwestern periphery of China) and between the older Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien, with the common theme between both being their transgression of the traditional Confucian marital order. Accordingly, the tragedy arises due to the existence of Confucianism that guarantees the failure of both romances. Through its explicit critique of Confucianism, then, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* examines, deconstructs, and effectively challenges systems of women's oppression through He-Yin Zhen's analytical category of *nannü* to espouse a genuine and multifaceted feminism. Beyond its decentering of Chinese cultural hegemony as a work of Sinophone cultural media, as Shu-mei Shih proposes, I argue that reading the film through *nannü* reveals *Crouching Tiger*'s underlying goal to decouple feminism from the state, allowing it to deliver a promise of liberation that is situated in the absence of the state entirely. Thus, the film creates a space that truly allows for the equality between men and women to arise and creates the possibility of a stateless feminist critique of patriarchal systems of oppression to emerge.

The film's centering of women warriors, or *nüxia* (literally female *xia*), has been highlighted by many scholars to pinpoint the story's feminist thrust. However, this feminism is often misidentified as a "Western feminism" that challenges and contradicts with the traditionalist and patriarchal elements of the East. William Leung, an English literature scholar, argues that "the juxtaposition of Eastern and Western knowledge, wisdom, and tradition" allows for the integration of feminism within *wuxia* movies, which

[1] Ang Lee has described the film as "a kind of dream of China" (A. Lee, *A Portrait of the Ang Lee Film* 7).
[2] The subtitles render this style of martial arts as *wudan* instead of *wudang*. To avoid confusion, I refer to it as the former. For the same reason, names of characters will also come directly from the subtitles.

was crucial in the film's success (49). Junchen Zhang, a doctoral candidate in linguistics at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, further claims that "Jen's rebellion against patriarchy "echo[es] Western values (feminism, individualism, freedom and equality)," suggesting that feminism is inherently Western ("Redisesecting Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger*" 109). Fran Martin, a professor of cultural studies at the University of Melbourne, sees the film as a quintessential representation of the globalization of third wave pop-feminism emerging from the "convergence of 'China' and 'the West'" that enables cross cultural understanding for Western audiences (159). Taking another approach, Catherine Gomes, a professor of communications and culture at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, argues that interpreting the film as feminist is possible only through the Confucian social order that prevails throughout the story (54). Similarly, Kenneth Chan, professor emeritus of English and film studies at the University of Northern Colorado, sees the film's feminist ambiguity as a tool to attack the Chinese patriarchy as well as to gain acceptance and recognition within the capitalist and consumerist world of film (14–15). Ken-fang Lee, a professor of comparative literature at National Chung Cheng University, views Ang Lee's efforts in adapting the story to a filmic form as an act of translation that, by interweaving feminism and challenging the notion of authentic Chineseness within the *wuxia* genre, provides a new perspective on Chinese cultural identity (292). Departing from the status quo, Petrus Liu, a professor of Chinese and comparative literature at Boston University, claims that the film is not a feminist tale at all. Rather, through a close reading of the original novel, he argues that the story, as a cultural product based in the May Fourth movement, challenges "Chinese feminism's failure to understand gender as a multifarious, heterogeneous, and often internally contradictory social formation" (P. Liu 71). In doing so, *Crouching Tiger* pushes against the nationalism that advocated for women's rights (which was predicated on essentialism) while simultaneously, through Jen's literacy and escape from her arranged marriage, embracing the movement's advocacy of literacy and free love to emancipate women. Countering the arguments to understand the film through the lens of "Western" feminism, which presupposes that feminism is an invention of the West, I argue that the film's focus on the experience and revolt of women in a Confucian society reveals a more nuanced and liberatory feminism centered in He-Yin Zhen's analyses of women's oppression.

Writing near the end of the Qing Dynasty (1907–1908) in response to liberal feminist thinkers that preceded the May Fourth movement, He-Yin Zhen's work focused heavily on the structures of women's oppression within not just Chinese society, but also in a transnational context as well. Specifically, it is her analytical category of *nannü* that I wish to take as a theoretical framework for analyzing *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. As explained by editors Lydia Liu et al., the concept of *nannü*, literally "man-woman," is a mostly untranslatable notion that refers to the "single conceptual mechanism . . . [lying] at *the foundation of all patriarchal abstractions and markings of distinction*" that creates not only inequality between men and women, but the social categories of "men" and "women" themselves (11).[3] He-Yin Zhen sees the power of *nannü* as its ability to map abstract, binary concepts onto "man" and "woman" to differentiate them, which can be seen in the film through the depiction of "inner" and "outer" spaces, the binary between heaven and earth, and even the dichotomy of martial arts knowledge. This abstract chasm that separates "men" from "women" not only allows the subjugation of women to occur by positing that women are fundamentally different from and lesser than men, but also allows oppression to evolve over time as the justifying distinctions remain ontologically stable. While today, the closest equivalent to *nannü* is the Western concept of "gender," He-Yin Zhen's understanding of *nannü* allows it to be far more comprehensive as it is "simultaneously an object of analysis and an analytical category" (14). *Nannü*, after all, is a concept originating within patriarchal Confucian discourses that has historically been utilized to justify women's oppression (the object of analysis) and a theoretical framework conceptualized by He-Yin Zhen to analyze how women's oppression arose (the analytical category). Ultimately, to tackle these systems, He-Yin Zhen advocates for the abolition of *nannü* and the entire system of distinction entirely—to, in her words, create the conditions where "the nouns 'men' and 'women' would no longer be necessary" (184). In this light, the film moves beyond the distinctions that drive inequality and eventually arrives in a place of true, absolute *equality*.

Furthermore, the response from global audiences and critics reveals the peripheral cultural status of *Crouching Tiger* and inversely, unveils the nationalist origins of Chineseness. The very concept of

[3] This is similar to a social constructivist understanding of gender as not biologically, but socially constructed. However, since biological sex was not a concept in late Qing China, He-Yin Zhen's analyses are instead rooted "within—and against—the indigenous Confucian tradition" (L. Liu et al. 17).

Chineseness is hard to define, but most commonly refers to the qualities of the extant Han people, including their language (Mandarin), culture, traditions, and civilization (Chun 112).[4] To engender Chineseness, such as through cultural works, there must be a reference to and a strict adherence to these qualities, which *Crouching Tiger* seemingly fails to do. As such, the global reception of the film was mixed, with it winning international acclaim while being simultaneously panned in mainland China and Hong Kong.[5] While international audiences raved over the floating, ethereal fighting sequences and the complex romantic narrative, mainland critics used those same sequences to proclaim its cultural inauthenticity towards a traditional *wuxia pian* (*wuxia* film) and Chinese culture. After all, the movie's slow moving pace and interweaving of romance within a traditionally "masculine" and action-driven genre led critics to not consider *Crouching Tiger* a "real" *wuxia pian*. The movie's pan-Chinese cast, which starred Michelle Yeoh (Malaysia), Chow Yun-fat (Hong Kong), Zhang Ziyi (Beijing), Chang Chen (Taiwan), and Cheng Pei-pei (Shanghai), only brought additional accusations of cultural inauthenticity due to their differing Chinese accents. As Sinophone studies scholar Shu-mei Shih identifies, the multiplicity of Malaysian, Cantonese, Taiwanese, and standard Beijing accents, for mainland Chinese audiences, eliminated the possibility for "the characters [to] live in a coherent [Chinese] universe" where only *Putonghua* (standard Mandarin based on the Beijing dialect) is spoken (2). Coupled with the fact that neither Michelle Yeoh or Chow Yun-fat spoke Mandarin and had to learn their lines phonetically, making it difficult to comprehend their dialogue at times, the accents could have only detracted from Chinese audiences' experiences of and thoughts about the film. Through the introduction of these different accents, then, the standardization of Chineseness shatters through the mismatch of visual identity (the actors all looked "Chinese") and auditory identity (their dialects/accents).

Interestingly, Shih uses the heterogeneity of Chinese accents to introduce the concept of the Sinophone, what she terms as a "network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of

[4] Mandarin is also known as *Hanyu* (the language of the Han people), *Putonghua* (standardized language), *Guoyu* (national language), and *Zhongwen* (middle language). This list, however, is not exhaustive.
[5] The film won four Oscars, including one for best foreign film. and had ten overall nominations. In addition, it won four BAFTAs, two Golden Globes, and has overwhelmingly positive reviews internationally.

continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries" (4). The peripheral nature of the Sinophone allows for these cultural works to challenge the perceived uniformity of Chineseness and frustrate the "easy suturing" of Chinese culture demanded by China-centrism (5). As a Sinophone cultural production, then, the charge of cultural inauthenticity levied against *Crouching Tiger* is in actuality a protest against its destandardization of the dominant Chinese culture. No longer is the Chinese identity homogeneous; rather, it is revealed to be inherently heterogeneous and complex, which does not fit the modernizing narrative of Chinese nation-state building to create a standard national identity (Chun 119).[6] In other words, there is not just one right way to be "Chinese" nor is Chineseness bound to any specific, clearly demarcated geographical space or territory, all of which is demanded by Chinese nationalist rhetoric in order to be Chinese.

In this sense, the dissatisfaction of Chinese audiences reveals the film's ulterior motive to destabilize cultural hegemonic and nationalist thinking. If standardization, through its unifying message, is the strength of the state, then destandardization is the weakness of the state that robs it of that power. Thus, it is also important to note that nationalism does not just standardize culture, but it also standardizes concepts like gender to further strengthen itself. As Petrus Liu and Lydia Liu et al. demonstrate, Chinese nationalism has historically brought in feminism as a tool for nation-state building and national enlightenment—to use women's rights to literacy and education to demonstrate their modernity and civilized status to the rest of the world (P. Liu 86; L. Liu 7, 33). The basis of this feminism is centered around the view of gender as an essential quality, as the property of a person that warrants the claims of personal rights (which can be regulated through the state) and "erases the social character of gender from view" (P. Liu 87). By locating gender within specific boundaries (gender essentialism), just like how cultural identity is bound to a particular homeland, the state molds the very definition of gender into a usable, legible form that has no basis in reality. In understanding gender through this lens, it becomes clear that the state simplifies the complexities of gender to be able to control and use it for its own modernizing and state-building purposes. Gender equality becomes a means toward the end of national

[6] The creation of Chineseness and Chinese culture was ultimately the result of state policies from both the PRC (mainland China) and ROC (Taiwan), who both see themselves as the "true" China. In other words, Chineseness did not originate naturally but was imposed by the state. For more, see Allen Chun's excellent article on this subject.

self-strengthening instead of an end in its own right, which cannot occur without a robust understanding of gender in the first place. Through the framework of the Sinophone, then, I argue that the film's peripherality allows it to elucidate a destandardized feminism that is not rooted in nationalist and essentialist discourses. Instead, it challenges the standardized conception of gender and of *nannü* to truly conceptualize what it takes to achieve true equality between men and women.

During the expository conversation between Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien at the beginning of the film, *Crouching Tiger* introduces the prevailing Confucian social order through numerous visible and audible signs, signaling its dominance over the world of the film. Beyond establishing who the characters are and what they do (Li Mu Bai is "made" into a *wudan* swordsman), the conversation reveals a crucial plot point within the movie: Li Mu Bai's desire to leave the world of *jianghu*, the separate martial arts world in *wuxia* fiction, after coming across a place of endless suffering through his meditative training (A. Lee 00:02:12–03:00). He then reasons that, in breaking off his meditation, there was something that his heart could not let go of that he needed to wrestle with (00:03:10). At this point within the film, it is not immediately clear what pulls Li Mu Bai away from enlightenment; as the film develops, it is revealed to be his love for Shu Lien, which is the only earthly attachment that he still holds. In response, Shu Lien briefly looks down and away in awkward silence, as if she were embarrassed. It is in this slight movement that Shu Lien, without uttering a word, not only recognizes the source of Mu Bai's failed enlightenment, but also betrays the societal norms that prevent such a love to even exist. While she is unmarried, she is a widow to Li Mu Bai's brother by oath who died fighting an unnamed enemy; this marital status prevents, under Confucianism and as expounded in the *Book of Rites*, a canon Confucian text, any pretense of love between the two as women are expected to remain faithful towards their husband "unto death" (He-Yin 112, 133).[7] Meng Si Zhao, her original husband, thus can be her only husband—by remarrying, by even entertaining the thought of another partner, Shu Lien would only denote her unfaithfulness to her one true husband. Therefore, by turning her gaze away from Mu Bai, if only slightly, Shu Lien resists his implicit advance and instead physically maintains that such a love is impossible. In doing so, she remains steadfastly faithful to Meng Si Zhao and the martial rules of the prevailing Confucian order.

[7] The page numbers here refer to the pages within Lydia Liu et al.'s translated collection of He-Yin Zhen's essays.

Fig 1. Standing under the towering Confucian banners, Li Mu Bai presents the Green Destiny sword to Shu Lien

The banners that suddenly appear in frame within the mise-en-scène of the room as the two rise not only link Shu Lien's resistance towards love to Confucian teachings, but also imply the dominance of Confucianism within the world of the film. The banners write out, in traditional calligraphy, Confucian couplets about the importance of following tradition, rites, and customs to ensure familial prosperity and harmony.[8] The vague messaging, although not explicitly mentioning the traditions that bind Shu Lien to her former husband, still implicitly recalls and reinforces the marital rules by invoking tradition and Confucian customs. The symbolic power of these banners, as noted by Junchen Zhang, thus helps to shape Shu Lien into a "Chinese woman with good [Confucian] virtues" ("Decoding Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger*" 44). I argue that the semiotic meaning of the banners goes further by not only instilling Shu Lien with proper morals, but also, through its imposing presence in the scene, underscores the shadow of Confucian moral values that impose themselves in the world of the film. Indeed, the banners take up nearly half of the background space while the interaction between the two occurs—with both Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai appearing miniscule in front of the sheer size of the banners. As such, through their dominating presence and their Confucian edicts to follow tradition, the banners are able to exert their symbolic teachings onto the characters, which indubitably mold the characters' thoughts and actions into the confines of following tradition. Their sudden introduction subtly reminds viewers that, in the diegetic

[8] Specifically, the outer set of banners reads, "Family obeys the traditions of ancient sages' rituals in Spring and Autumn sacrificial ceremonies" and "Hierarchy and order are key to the prosperous and long history of family's generations" (Zhang, "Decoding Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger*" 44).

space of the film, the banners and their symbolism have always been lurking behind the two during the conversation, further explaining Shu Lien's rejection of Li Mu Bai as her adherence to the Confucian doctrine. Shu Lien's embodiment of Confucian values is thus not a voluntary decision, but rather a result of the fundamental way in which society is structurally organized through Confucianism; she is merely operating metaphorically within the larger, unseen system and literally under the unseen teachings of the banners.

When compared to Jen's rebellion, then, Shu Lien's Confucian musings reveal not just the larger system of *nannü* within *Crouching Tiger* but also a manner in which *nannü* manifests itself within the film. In their second conversation, as Jen laments about the freedom she wishes she had outside of her upcoming arranged marriage, Shu Lien lectures Jen to "respect the duties of women" like she has been doing in regards to her deceased husband (A. Lee 00:27:08). To reject marriage, as Jen wishes to do, is to abandon the duties that are not only necessary, but obligatory, for women to carry out. By contrasting freedom with marriage, then, the film reinforces a system where women are fundamentally unfree to begin with. Further, looking back at when Jen first announces her arranged marriage, Shu Lien congratulates her and claims that "[Marriage] is the most important step in a woman's life" (00:10:49). Through this line, Shu Lien essentially proclaims that the biggest goal in life for women is to be bound in a heteronormative relationship. Her rhetoric treats women as not people with desires (even though she admits that she too has a desire for freedom) but rather as objects, as pieces of property to be owned and dominated by men. It is essential to recognize that the unfreedom within marriage, as identified by Jen, is a direct consequence of and equivalent to the duties of women as proclaimed by Shu Lien. These duties, while never specified, imply the Confucian teaching that women must always follow a male figure—to belong to men—it is not hard to see how these duties revolve around the idea of the superiority of men. Through this lens, the "most important step in a woman's life" proclaimed by Shu Lien becomes not just marriage to a husband, but ultimately a woman's ultimate submission to a husband. He-Yin Zhen goes further than this implication of dominance and argues that these duties are a direct result of "the husband [being] made into heaven and the wife earth" within Confucian scholarship (128). In other words, the

social dominance of men arises from the necessity that the abstraction of heaven and earth brings—that men must be dominant because heaven rules over the earth and inversely, women must be subservient because the earth obeys heaven. Jen, in wanting to escape marriage, asserts the illegitimacy of heaven's rule over the earth, while Shu Lien, in still honoring her marriage, accepts the domination of heaven. Reading the film in this way, it becomes clear that Shu Lien's reactionary musings, which imply the necessary subservience of women, reinforce this primary, ultimate distinction between men and women; to put it bluntly, she reinforces and reproduces *nannü*. Her argument thus serves to dehumanize women, and by going further than just objectifying women, she recalls an impenetrable, abstract inequality that mandates the subjugation of women.

By espousing these patriarchal values, her rhetoric further parallels He-Yin Zhen's identification of the historical advocacy of these duties by women, used primarily by men, to subjugate all of womanhood. In her essay "On the Revenge of Women", He-Yin Zhen identifies a major source of women's oppression as precisely the way in which "[men] *seize upon the teachings promoted by a few women to control the bodies of all women*" (145). Expanding on her point, she tells the story of a wife, who, after husband fell gravely ill, still remained faithfully devoted towards him;

> [The wife's] mother wanted to marry her with someone else, but she said, "The husband's misfortune is my misfortune, how can I leave him? The Way of marriage is such that 'once having drunk from the same cup, there is no turning back'" (144).

In not merely espousing, but actualizing Confucian teachings, these women became the standard to which the virtues of womanhood were judged—to be a good wife is to, after all, emulate past subservience. As Shu Lien refuses to love Li Mu Bai, despite their evident feelings for each other, she becomes the exemplar of Confucian womanhood within the film. Her subservience to Confucianism serves not only to actualize the tragedy between her and Li Mu Bai, but also to demonstrate to Jen her proper place in society as a woman. For Shu Lien to willingly adopt such patriarchal attitudes towards women further shows how subtly ingrained these teachings are within society, to the point where deviation is treated as rebellion. She is not just operating under the banner of Confucianism; she has become the embodiment of

those values. The internalization of inferiority, then, could only be as a result of the structural dominance of Confucianism and its teachings that permeate, much like Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, from the upper echelons of male dominated society into the very minds of women. Yet, the insidious nature of this internalization arises from, as Shu Lien demonstrates, not the adoption of patriarchal values (which can be done with resistance) but rather the willing embrace by women of said values. It is one thing to resist the imposition of patriarchal thinking but ultimately fail to do so—it is another to welcome it openly and past even the brink of unhappiness. Returning briefly to the symbolic meaning of the banners, it becomes clear that it is not the banners themselves that dominate Shu Lien (she is still dominated by Confucian teachings); rather, in placing the banners there to begin with, she demonstrates that these cultural values have been normalized to the extent where it becomes righteous and virtuous to uphold them. Therefore, while Shu Lien appears to be an empowered and independent *nüxia*, her internalization of Confucianism and lecturing of Jen on the proper place of a woman exemplify how she has already been subsumed by the patriarchy to promote its interests.

As if to overload the audience with implicit references of Confucian inequalities, *Crouching Tiger* uses its cinematography and mise-en-scène to manifest an important distinction between the external and internal that is then mapped onto the very definition of femininity. Thus, while the distinction between heaven/earth in relation to marital rules is an important plot element in creating *nannü*, I believe that the spatial distinctions reflected here are the main way in which the film constructs and subsequently deconstructs *nannü*. The discussions between Jen and Shu Lien, for instance, have all taken place "inside": in Sir Te's study, Jen's personal study, and Shu Lien's room at her security compound. Jen's flashback to her time in Xinjiang further accentuates this distinction as the only women, Jen and her mother, travel inside a carriage while the men ride on horseback or walk. By relegating the women to the inside, the film is already implying the proper place of a woman within Confucian society. Further, the placement of the camera reinforces this notion of inferiority by rapidly switching perspectives as the caravan is attacked by Lo's bandits. The perspective flips from an inner vantage point looking out at the bandits (figure 2) to a vantage point looking inwards at Jen and her mother (figure 3), linked together by

the central focal point of the patterned carriage window and Jen's jade comb. Through the camera's transgression of the boundary between the outside and inside space, the film allows for the firm establishment of a boundary to begin with—a boundary that does not permit the diffusion of women into the space of the external. The juxtaposition of the camera's stability outside of the carriage versus its shakiness while portraying what Jen sees inside, beyond its capturing of the terror/excitement inflicted by the bandits, further differentiates between the consequences of the internal and external. For the inner to look outwards is to produce instability, while the outer has full stability to peer inwards. In other words, the space that one occupies produces inequality through their ability, or lack thereof, to move into other spaces. This reflects a crucial aspect of *nannü*, as elaborated by Lydia Liu et al. in their introduction to He-Yin Zhen's essays, that allows it to justify oppression by;

> [Introducing] *primary distinctions* through socioeconomic abstractions articulated to metaphysical abstractions, such as the external and the internal, or to such cosmic abstractions as yang and yin. (14; emphasis added).

As such, *nannü* refers to how "men" and "women" were socially, historically, and politically constructed through the arbitrary assignment of a multitude of abstractions to each category, which are then used to justify and enforce actual, real world inequalities. The assignment of husband to heaven and wife to earth, as discussed earlier, is an example of how *nannü* has been used to justify the subjugation of women. Here, the assignment of the concept of inner and outer, two distinct qualities that can only be understood in opposition to one another, becomes the justification for the cloistering of women. It is therefore not a coincidence that the concepts of external/internal are ubiquitous in Confucian scholarship, as can be seen from this line in the *Book of Rites*: "A woman does not speak of affairs outside" (He-Yin 136). The metaphysical distinction between inner and outer therefore, in the exegesis of Confucian texts, interweaves itself with the distinction between what is masculine and feminine. It is not only that a woman is expected to stay within the inner sphere of the home, or in this case a carriage, but that the very concept of the "inner" becomes a feminized space and the "outer" becomes masculine. The distinction of women and men is thus, in part, a socially constructed phenomenon in which the production of space

plays a key role.[9] Indeed, in "On the Question of Women's Liberation", He-Yin Zhen points out that wives are often referred to as *neiren*, which literally means "inner person" (70). The confinement of Jen and her mother within the carriage, then, represents not just the social confinement of women to the interior, but also the literal assignment of the inner to the very idea of womanhood.

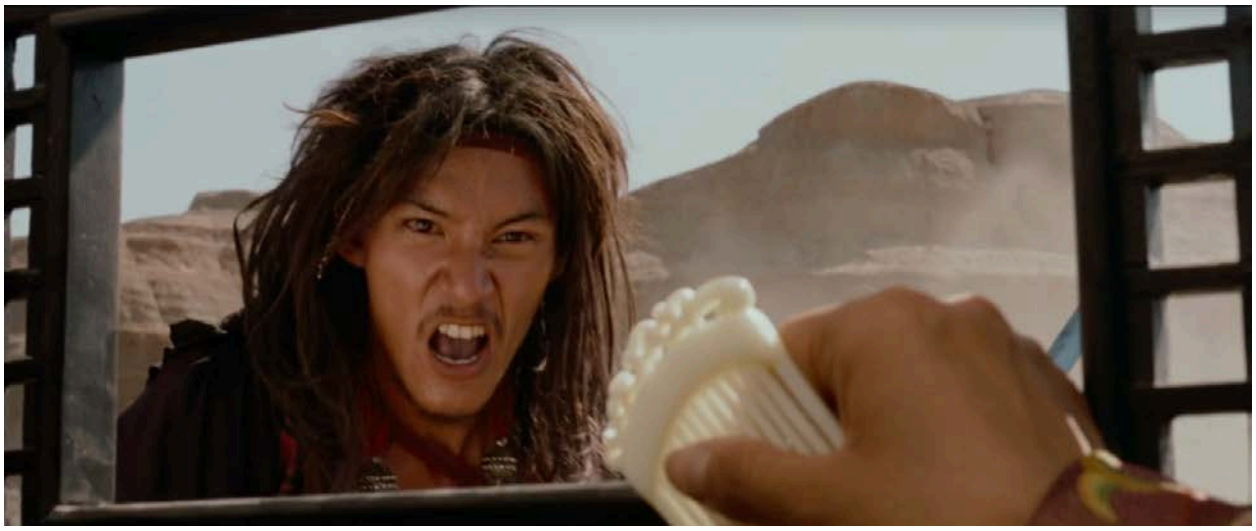

Fig. 2. A point-of-view shot from Jen's perspective inside the carriage looking out at Lo

Fig. 3. Jen and her mother peer outwards from the carriage as the bandits attack

Through Jen's performative ignorance about martial arts and Shu Lien's martial arts knowledge, the film attempts to link martial arts ignorance to femininity and martial arts knowledge to masculinity, which creates the grounds for a new *nannü* distinction to arise. In the initial meeting between Jen and Shu Lien, Jen dons a vibrant, traditional dress and wears two pink flowers in her hair, which all contribute

[9] This recalls Henri Lefebvre's argument in his book *The Production of Space* that space is socially constructed. Here, I use this concept to argue that space itself can be mapped onto "man" and "woman."

towards her perceived beauty. Her feminine charm is contrasted with Shu Lien, who dresses simply in a monotone gray. Hsiu-Chuang Deppman argues that the flowers, combined with an aptly placed vase in the background of the scene, cultivate Jen for visual appeal, objectify her appearance, and bind her within the institution of marriage (24). The "arranging" of Jen's life as symbolized through the flowers thus speaks further to her confinement to the "inner" sphere, which allows her beauty to blossom. Her beauty comes not from the flower itself, but rather through its symbolism that speaks to her confinement to the oppressive *nannü* distinctions. Here, I cannot help but see a connection between the film's analyses of *nannü* to Petrus Liu's social constructivist reading of Wang Dulu's novel. Gender in the novel, according to Liu, is delineated through the social norms governing the relationship between a character and martial arts; for example, Jen's performance in pretending to not know martial arts, as Liu argues, crucially helps in constructing her femininity and beauty, which is described in terms of flowers, nature, and the "biological" (78, 81). Meanwhile, Shu Lien, who knows and practices martial arts, is consistently described as "strong," "handsome," and "masculine" (79–80). While more implicit, if I extrapolate Petrus Liu's arguments to the film, I believe that these attributes can still be seen in the filmic adaptation and, more importantly, further tie femininity to the inner realm through the performance of martial arts knowledge. It is in this context that *nannü* thus adopts martial arts knowledge as a third category of distinction; by preventing, or at the very least not allowing for, the acquisition of martial arts knowledge, womanhood becomes nothing more than ignorance.

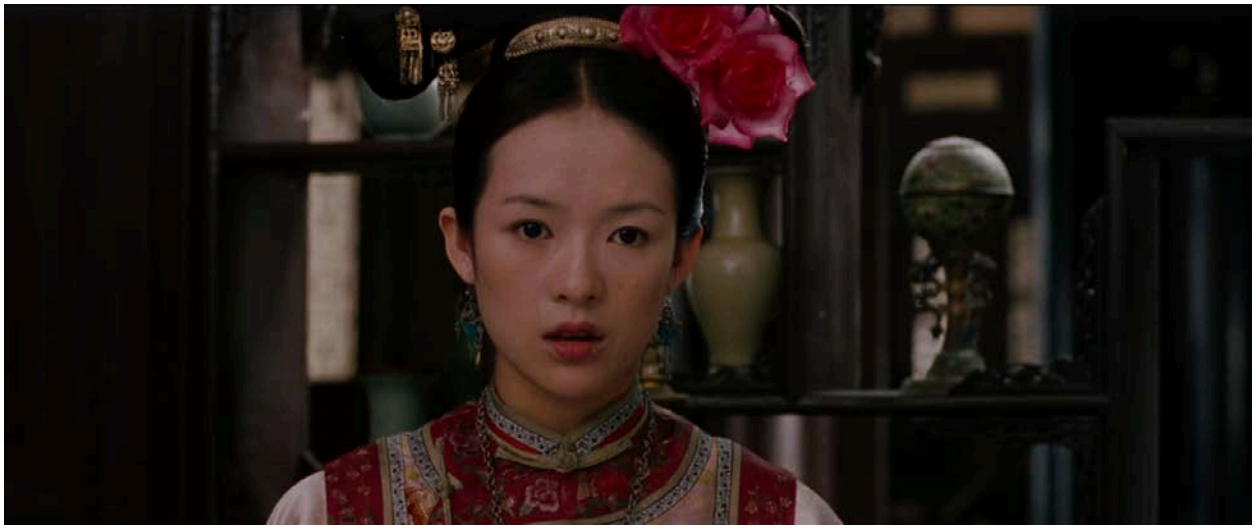

Fig. 4. Jen's normative beauty is shown through her traditional dress and the two pink flowers placed in her hair

Fig. 5. Shu Lien's simple gray attire contrasts with Jen's elaborate dress as she wields the Green Destiny sword

In the film, despite Jen's insistence that she has practiced with swords before (with a platoon in Xinjiang), which directly foreshadows her actual *wudan* ability, she still pesters Shu Lien on martial arts with "basic" questions about the *jianghu* life. These questions act as not just an expository function for the viewer but also a red herring that misleads audiences into thinking that she has only "played" around with weapons before; in other words, while she knows and fantasizes about the world of martial arts, of *jianghu*, she is yet to enter it. This ignorance of martial arts is exemplified further when Shu Lien makes a remark as Jen writes out her name in calligraphy that "calligraphy is so similar to fencing," to which Jen replies, "Maybe it is. I wouldn't know" (A. Lee 00:25:19–21). As Jen had just stolen the Green Destiny sword for the first time and sparred with Shu Lien the night before, the narrative purpose of Shu Lien's statement is to reveal to Jen that, to put it simply, she knows. Jen's reply is thus a performance of ignorance; an act that separates herself from the *jianghu* world and allows for her perceived conformity to the inner. Crucially, it is only in these moments of performance that Jen is able to express her aforementioned beauty through her attire—her beauty depends on her ignorance of masculinized martial arts. The function of her performance is not only to link the feminine to social actions, like Liu argues, but also to assign martial arts ignorance, which arises due to confinement, to the category of women itself. Viewed another way, women are defined precisely because of their lack of power (martial arts) that invites domination by those with power (men).

In this sense, the space of *jianghu* resides in the external both because it exists outside "normal" society and because it, as a realm of power, also exists outside the feminized inner. Shu Lien, who operates within this world, then can be considered as "masculine" as she is able to traverse both the external and the internal through her martial arts skills, which defies the limiting definition of femininity. While she is not extensively masculinized as much as in the novel, her masculinity, apart from her simple monotone dress, is briefly alluded to in a crucial piece of dialogue when she returns to her security compound. Talking to Ah Wai, one of her employees, she asks if his wife gave birth to which Ah Wai responds, "Yeah, a baby girl . . . I'll be happy if she's *half as strong as you* (01:26:37–42; emphasis added). Moving beyond the obvious implications of her martial arts prowess, this word choice reveals the association between the masculine and the "outer" space of the world as a space for martial artists to operate. This connection allows for the reconciliation of Shu Lien's conservative sentiments—for a woman to transgress the normative gender boundaries and be accepted by society, her transgression must not be detrimental to the overall system that confines women. In other words, the crossing into the exterior is acceptable for Shu Lien both because she is not feminine (not "inner") due to her knowledge of martial arts and because of her ingrained conservatism that helps to keep other women in check, which ultimately means to keep women inside. It is not only her rhetoric, however, that justifies her gender transgressions as Shu Lien's strength is literally used multiple times in an attempt to prevent Jen's rebellion—such as by preventing Jen's escape by physically holding her down. Through Shu Lien's use of violence to confine Jen, then, the masculine's ability to wield violence must be understood in relation to and against the powerlessness of the feminine. In doing so, the purpose of Shu Lien's martial arts knowledge and demonstrations is to map epistemological power onto the category of men to justify women's oppression. That is to say, the mapping of martial arts power to men is precisely to facilitate women's oppression by endowing violence to only one side of the *nannü* binary.

Besides justifying oppression, the other reason I bring up the ignorance of martial arts as yet another contributor to the construction of women and femininity through the system of *nannü* is not to overburden an already established point, but to point out the strategic overdetermination of the category

of women present within the film.[10] By establishing the numerous ways that "women" have been defined, redefined, and positioned against "men," the film reveals not just the wide-reaching structural power of *nannü* that manifests itself in different ways, but also how these numerous factors create the illusion of the natural, which cannot be challenged. Thus, in recognizing that beauty and femininity are not essences of womanhood, but rather a socially constructed product resulting from the primary *nannü* distinction, the film allows for the possibility to then challenge the very distinction between men and women—to challenge the concept of *nannü* itself.

Fig. 6. Jen's head sticks outside the carriage as she stares down Lo, who has just stolen her jade comb

The initial challenge against the structural system of *nannü* arises, without much surprise, from Jen's rebellion against and escape from her confinement within the space of the inner. Her transgression against the boundary between the inner and outer occurs, uncoincidentally, during the establishment of said boundary during Lo's attack on the caravan. After Lo snatches Jen's jade comb from her hands and winks mischievously, Jen rushes out of the carriage, commandeers a horse, and gives chase through the barren desert (00:54:43–56:27). As if to reaffirm that the boundary has been crossed, the film cuts from the stability of the centered window frame to an asymmetrical framing of Jen's head protruding diagonally out of the carriage, which implies the destruction of normality. Through the off-centered and oblique depiction of her actions, a sense of unease permeates to the patriarchal system that derives its

[10] Overdetermination refers to the concept that an effect or event has multiple causes. Here, I use it to suggest that women, through *nannü*, are defined by multiple hierarchical dichotomies that always position women as lesser than (and in relation to) men.

power from the mapping of the inner to women; she literally juts out from the normative boundary that prohibits this *nannü* transgression. While this scene occurs nearly halfway through the film, by taking the temporal space of the film into account, it is actually the first of Jen's boundary transgressions as it occurs through her expository flashback. It is here in the limitless space of the outer, then, that she is finally, for the first time, able to reveal her hidden martial arts skills; she no longer needs to perform to the expectations of the inner that have confined her for her entire life up until that point. Yet, at the same time, the pursuit of the comb which initiates her entrance into the outer leads scholars like William Leung to argue that Jen has a "confused desire to rebel: she chases after the thief . . . [because] the comb is hers" (46). In that sense, she is unsuccessful in disrupting the inner/outer distinction as her end goal is to repossess a symbol of the inner, of her own confinement as a woman. Taking the temporal space of the rebellion into account, while the rebellion may be "confused," I argue that the desert functions as a space of learning, a liminal space almost, that allows Jen her first tantalizing taste of freedom. Her movement is not limited by any social constraints (including the bandits, whose advances are thwarted by her martial arts which she can now openly perform) within the limitless expanse of the Gobi desert. Even her romance with Lo allows Jen to experience what love for the sake of love feels like, which foregrounds her future rejection of an arranged marriage. At the end of her journey in Xinjiang, she eventually does give up the comb to Lo, with the promise that he will return it once they are reunited. As such, her brief experience of freedom must have revealed the limitations of her past life—the stifling of movement and love—and allowed her desires to expand to a world unlimited by any social codes. As the narrative unfolds and Jen returns back to a world governed by Confucian ethics, this transformative experience shapes her future rebellions and actions into a pursuit of the freedom she experienced back in Xinjiang.

Following her lessons within Xinjiang, Jen rebels further within the normative Confucian world by stealing the Green Destiny sword, which allows her to challenge the monopoly of power held by men. The night after her first discussion with Shu Lien, the Green Destiny sword is stolen by a masked figure (Jen) clad in all black. Here, Jen once again escapes the confines of the inner to flee into the outer world, but this time she is met with fierce resistance. A chase and scuffle ensues, with Jen and Shu Lien flying

over the rooftops of Beijing amidst the starless night, but Jen eventually escapes with the sword in hand (A. Lee 00:15:15–20:58). Beyond an escape from confinement, I see her theft as a challenge to the martial arts knowledge/ignorance binary mapped onto men and women. The theft of the sword endows Jen with a seemingly invincible status—after all, the Green Destiny sword can cut through anything with relative ease and come out completely unscathed. Paired with her martial arts skill, gained through a stolen *wudan* manual, Jen ascends to the top of the power structure formerly dominated by men; after all, she carries the strongest weapon within the diegetic world of the film. Through her invincibility, then, she resists the supposed powerlessness that has been socially mapped onto femininity. That is to say, her theft frustrates the definition of women as the group to which men can inflict violence by attempting to reclaim that very ability to its uppermost limit.

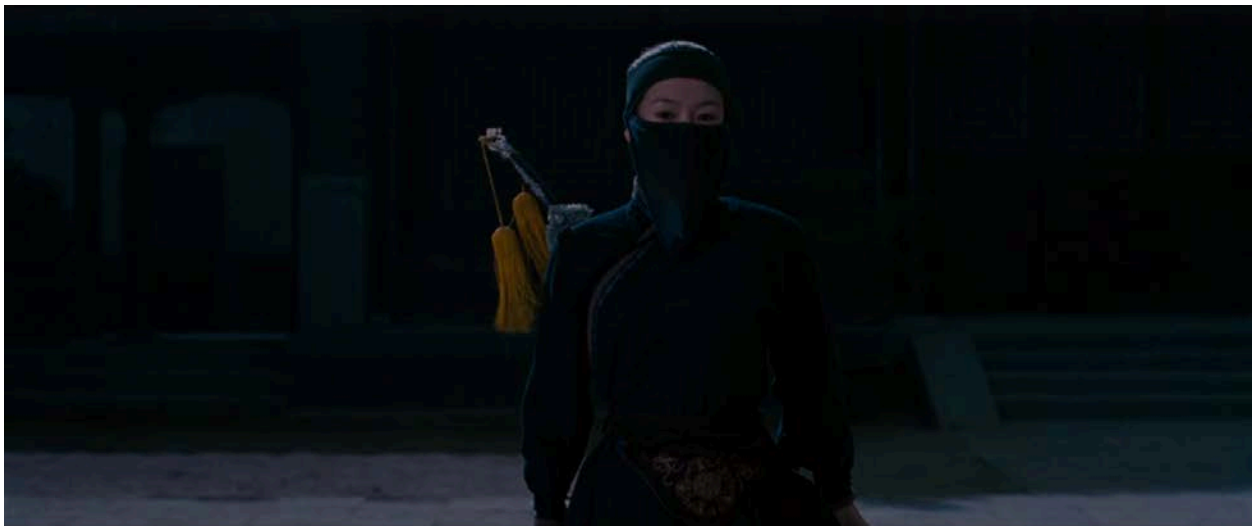

Fig. 7. Jen, who is dressed in an all black disguise, steals the Green Destiny Sword in the middle of the night

Through the possession of the Green Destiny sword, Jen's theft also formally marks her entrance into the *jianghu* martial arts space, which signals that she views it as a potential tool for self-liberation against the patriarchy. However, this view is quickly demolished as she discovers the reality of *jianghu*, thus uncovering it as an additional place for Confucian teachings to flourish. Through, yet again, Jen and Shu Lien's first conversation, Jen identifies the *jianghu* from her interest in martial arts novels as a potential space for her to be "totally free" (A. Lee 00:10:04). Indeed, through her possession of the Green Destiny sword, Jen is able to traverse through the world of martial arts with relative ease, save fighting Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien. In this space, Jen clearly sees the possibility to gain the freedom that she once had

back in the deserts of Xinjiang—to be able to move around at will, without any limits that force her to stay within certain boundaries. However, as Shu Lien warns Jen repeatedly, the *jianghu* world is not entirely free as "[f]ighters have rules too" (00:10:07). While it is never explicitly mentioned what these rules are, beyond generalities like loyalty and friendship, it is not unreasonable to infer that their origins begin with Confucianism. In *wuxia* fiction, *jianghu*, translated literally as the rivers and lakes, is a space where the *xia* operate. This space is fundamentally disconnected from the institutions of the state, family, and country that perpetuate inequalities between men and women but not from Confucian values like righteousness and loyalty, which command the *xia* to fight for the collective good (P. Liu 6; K. Lee 284; Gomes 51). The rules to which Shu Lien refers to can also be interpreted as inherently hierarchical in nature—with Confucianism comes the idea of reciprocal relationships, or the idea that people have certain duties to each other, like the duties of a wife to a husband. In the *jianghu* world, these would include the responsibility of an apprentice to respect the master or a younger fighter to respect an older, more experienced fighter. Jen, upon meeting other *jianghu* fighters (besides Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai), discovers this firsthand when she is met with a thinly veiled threat to "understand" and respect their authority after she decided to ignore them (A. Lee 01:17:33).[11] Here, the reciprocal relationship, as Jen appears to be inexperienced and younger, mandates Jen to have respect towards the "more experienced" fighters—by not doing so, Jen's actions then call for and justify retribution.

Moving even beyond the statelessness of *jianghu*, Sir Te's comments to Governor Yu, Jen's father, to use the "*jianghu* underworld" to secure his position within Beijing betrays the co-opting of martial arts into the space of the state (00:12:52). Accordingly, in the rest of the film, Sir Te uses both Shu Lien's and Li Mu Bai's services to discreetly recover the sword, save his reputation, and avoid potential disturbances. In other words, he uses experienced *jianghu* fighters, with whom he has personal relationships with, to serve his interests. While the original purpose of *jianghu* fighters, or *xia*, was to help protect the common people as a Robin Hood-like figure, in later *wuxia* fiction, they have been made as protectors of the state and the rich to enforce order and the status quo (K. Lee 284; J. Liu 41). Sir Te's

[11] The fighters' line roughly translates to "not understanding us means consequences." This line is rendered in the subtitles as "We have ways of making you understand."

reliance on *jianghu*, then, reflects the historical transition from the statelessness of *jianghu* as read about in *wuxia* novels by Jen (in a sort of meta-reference) to the appropriation of the *xia* within that sphere for the services of the Confucian, patriarchal state. By subverting Jen's expectations, the film reinforces the strict hierarchy of Confucianism that prevails throughout the entirety of society, including within *jianghu*, which eliminates the possibility of finding freedom within the outer realm of martial arts for Jen.

The fight between Jen and the *jianghu* fighters in the tavern, then, allows her to destroy the limitations of Confucian hierarchies within the martial arts world and necessitates the need to move beyond *jianghu* to truly achieve liberation. While Jen orders an extensive amount of food (which never arrives) in the tavern, dozens of fighters spill onto the balcony noisily and challenge her for disrespecting their authority. She proceeds to, as Kenneth Chan astutely puts it, "kicks butt" (12) by easily defeating the various fighters and even sends them flying off of the balcony with ease. She does all of this whilst reciting a poem where she proclaims, "Be you Li [Mu Bai] or Southern Crane [Li Mu Bai's master] . . . lower your head . . . and ask for mercy" (A. Lee 01:24:01–08). From her actions and her words, it is clear that she takes no orders from the *jianghu* fighters, all of whom are men. Instead, by proclaiming that they should be bowing to her, she initiates a complete reversal of the expected reciprocity under Confucianism that demands her respect as an inferior. Through this attack on the Confucian social structure that permeates into the *jianghu* sphere, then, Jen directly challenges the inequalities of hierarchy itself and identifies it as yet another unseen pillar of oppression. After all, the subjugation of one group acts as justification for the subjugation of all oppressed groups. Through this recognition, Jen's challenge parallels the ideas of He-Yin Zhen, who sees *nannü* as "always already a kind of class making" that was primarily responsible for the creation of rigid hierarchies like the family and the state (L. Liu et al. 17).

Put simply, the hierarchy between men and women was the original "class" that was used to reinforce further class distinctions and hierarchies. If the state is to be understood, under Confucianism, as the "family writ large" (S. Chan 412) and *jianghu* is also to be understood, with Sir Te's comments, as an extension of the state, then the inequalities that permeate throughout the Confucian social ordering of the *jianghu* are nothing but the very inequalities that exist between wife and husband—the ruler and the

ruled—that are reinforced by *nannü* distinctions. This is something that the *jianghu* fighters do not understand as the motivation behind their qualms was not because of her *nannü* transgression (she, after all, donned men's clothing throughout her "stay") but because Jen violated a fundamental aspect of Confucian values. Indeed, the bruised and battered fighters all nod their heads in agreement after Shu Lien informs them that the reason Jen attacked Shining Phoenix Mountain Gou was because he shared the same surname (Gou) as her to-be husband (A. Lee 01:25:30).[12] In this comedic turn, there is a moment of recognition of the marital injustices that permeate through Cofucian society—yet they fail to see the origins of said injustice as the exact same as the hierarchical relationship they claim was violated by Jen. As such, the space of the *jianghu*, through the dominance of Confucian values, fails to recognize the totality of women's oppression and subtly reinforces the values of the patriarchy instead.[13] Through this subtle messaging, *Crouching Tiger* rejects the use of the state through *jianghu* to achieve the freedom that Jen dreamt of—the emancipation of women—and identifies it as a key pillar in upholding the patriarchy.

Fig. 8. The chaotic aftermath of the tavern fight between Jen and the masculine *jianghu* fighters

The failure of literacy and class status to emancipate Jen, because of its pseudo-revolutionary ambition, reveals the need for a more liberatory approach to challenge Confucian patriarchy. The main reason why Jen is able to learn *wudan* martial arts so quickly, without a formal teacher, is because of her literacy granted due to her social status as an aristocrat. This is not lost on Petrus Liu, who notes that the

[12] The surname of Jen's to-be-husband is technically Lu, however the subtitles render it as Gou.

[13] This failure to recognize the origins of women's oppression can also be seen in the May Fourth nationalist movement and other liberal feminist movements that only move to inscribe women's rights into existence.

"true force that emancipates Jiaolong [Jen] . . . [is] her privilege as an aristocratic woman who has access to literacy" (81). On the other hand, Jade Fox, who stole the secret *wudan* manual but could not read it, was limited in her progress and only discovered it vis-à-vis Jen's first duel with Li Mu Bai. Therefore, it makes sense that Jade Fox's last words, which occur inside an abandoned factory, call out Jen's class trickery by asking rhetorically, "You know what poison is? An eight-year-old girl, full of deceit" (01:44:51–45:03). Beyond just deceit, Jade Fox's biting comment crucially identifies the chasm of class that favored Jen as poison—to answer her question, poison is thus *class* deceit. Taken together, these point to the film perpetrating literacy as the means to liberation through advanced martial arts skills—this is precisely why Petrus Liu argues that the story is invested within the liberal May Fourth feminist movement, which did promote literacy. Yet, as I have argued, Jen's integration into the space of *jianghu*, which is the result of her literacy, does not constitute emancipation but rather an exploration of possible spaces of freedom. While there is no doubt that it is her literacy that allows her to explore in the first place, it is important to note that she does not find the freedom that she seeks within martial arts—she is always limited by the social norms that persist throughout the diegetic space of the film. This limitation recalls the aforementioned function of *nannü* as the original class making distinction, wherein the difference between men and women preceded economic and social class, which allows for Jen's literacy to be read as an inadequate tool of liberation against the power of *nannü*. It does not matter that she has transcended economic class—the *nannü* class will always act as a "glass ceiling" to which Jen, as a woman, can never transcend. Thus, it can be assumed that the failure of literacy towards emancipation stems from its failure to distinguish and target the primary producer of distinction from its progeny of inequality.

Returning to Jen's reclamation of martial arts knowledge, which also ultimately fails to bring about emancipation, it becomes clear that the film pushes its feminism beyond the realm of the state to find true equality. Within the film, Jen is never able to win a duel between Shu Lien or Li Mu Bai, the bastions of masculine power. Even as Jen is armed with the Green Destiny sword, Li Mu Bai is able to easily disarm Jen not once, but twice during their fights. Combined with Li Mu Bai's initial parting with

the sword, the ease with which he is able to strip Jen of her newfound power speaks to his immense baseline *wudan* prowess. The power invested within men, while not evenly distributed, proves to be so fundamentally entrenched within society that Jen's resistance is almost futile. In other words, the centuries of oppression and the creation of hierarchical distinctions through *nannü* frustrate a quick reclamation of power in the hands of women. Here, I see a parallel between He-Yin Zhen's vision of women's liberation, which advocates not the liberal feminist reclamation of masculine power to create equality, like Jen attempts to do, but rather a complete liberation "from the rule of man and from the rule of woman" (70). He-Yin Zhen rejects the use of women's rule to achieve equality for two reasons: because of the deep rooted origins of men's rule, which is reflected through Li Mu Bai's prowess, and also because women's rule would *also* recreate disparities, which is reflected in Jen's power over Jade Fox. In this manner, true equality between men and women can only arise when power and powerlessness, or martial arts knowledge and ignorance within the film, are no longer mapped onto the definitions of men and women. In other words, hierarchical power itself must disappear such that both the patriarchy and the women, who are oppressed, cannot justify and reproduce inequalities. Instead of a liberal and nationalist feminism that focuses on using state power to achieve equality, then, this must be achieved through the complete rejection of the state. Returning to Petrus Liu's denunciation of *Crouching Tiger*, it becomes even more abundantly clear that Jen's exploration of the world of liberal feminism is not an endorsement of its values but rather a mechanism to recognize the totality of its failures. She is not able to use power or literacy to achieve equality, after all, and must find a new path towards liberation.

Figs. 9 a–b. Jen floats leftwards through the spacelessness of the clouds while the camera pivots to track her descent

The shocking final leap from Wudan Mountain, combined with the floating cinematography, allows Jen to reject the real and finally achieve freedom through her.[14] After finally being reunited with Lo on Wudan Mountain, a place she vowed to topple earlier in the film, she then proceeds, without providing a reason, to jump off the Mountain and into the cloudy abyss. Multiple scholars, like Kenneth Chan, Ken-fang Lee, and Fran Martin, have interpreted this as a hopeful leap that liberates Jen from the restrictions of the world she departed from (K. Chan 14; K. Lee 291; Martin 159). Specifically, Ken-fang Lee powerfully argues that the leap creates a "more fluid, transforming way of constituting her [cultural] identity" in a direct rejection of patriarchal Chinese values (291). Building on this interpretation, I argue that the leap is Jen's final, liberatory act that also frees her from the limitations of *nannü* and allows her to move beyond nationalist conceptions of feminism. By not depicting her landing, which would occur in real life, the film is simultaneously ambiguous about Jen's fate and also reveals that her final destination, if there is one to begin with, is independent of both the filmic and real world. Taken quite literally, then, Jen's jump goes beyond the hierarchical dichotomy of the inner/outer and heaven/earth, allowing her to inhabit a space that is completely untethered from such distinctions. Her lack of attachment thus rejects the arbitrary mapping of *nannü* to any specific, opposing places, much like how her cultural identity is delinked from the geopolitical space of "China." In doing so, Jen liberates herself from nationalist and statist conceptions of identity that are necessarily tied to an essence, to a place. Her liberation does not

[14] The scene on Wudan Mountain was filmed on Mount Cangyan and not on the actual Wudang Mountains.

exactly create the "positive forms of freedom" that allows for the pursuit of personal fulfillment as articulated by Hsiu-Chuang Deppman, but rather the "mere anarchy"[15] that she denounces as not complex enough to describe Jen's actions (32). I, along with He-Yin Zhen,[16] would disagree with this characterization of anarchism and move towards a more nuanced understanding of it as a fundamental rejection of hierarchy, which is ultimately necessary to achieve women's liberation from the primary hierarchy created by *nannü*. Through this understanding, her leap becomes anarchic; after all, since Jen flies through the emptiness of the abyss and, more importantly, refuses to land, she is relinquishing any and all forms of spatial hierarchy that would otherwise tie her down—she becomes stateless and is not limited in her movement. As such, the camera (which also embodies the audience) must swivel and pan downwards as Jen falls leftwards beyond the very limits of the camera, separating her absolute freedom from even the camera's tracking shot. Not even the camera can convey where she is as there is no possible, physical way to portray a space that does not yet exist. If there is no reality in which Jen can exist—not normal Confucian society, not *jianghu*, not even Xinjiang (all of which would tie her down)—then she must carve out a new space, a place outside of contemporary reality and of the state, for her to find true, limitless freedom.

Lo's wish for the two to return to Xinjiang before the leap recalls a historical process of migration that further reveals Jen's true intentions to challenge the mutually reinforcing systems of the patriarchy and the state. Back in Xinjiang, Lo tells Jen a story about a boy who made a wish to save his gravely ill parents and proceeded to jump from a mountain. He knew the wish was granted when, as Lo recounts, he "floated far, far away, never to return" (A. Lee 01:11:05). Just before Jen jumps, then, she recalls this story and tells Lo to make a wish, to which he responds with, "Return to Xinjiang again, together" (01:54:04).[17] While literally unfulfilled, I argue that this wish, in a metaphorical sense, has been fulfilled as Jen is indeed seen floating away unharmed. Physically, Jen's leftward drift reflects the location of Xinjiang in the western, or left, periphery of the Chinese nation-state; in this sense, Jen is subtly, but not

[15] Here, I believe that Deppman is referring to the colloquial definition of anarchy as pure chaos.
[16] For He-Yin Zhen, anarchism was inseparable from feminism as she saw the state as "the guarantor for the reproduction of social hierarchies" that, by definition, could not help to realize social justice (L. Liu et al. 23).
[17] Lo literally says "*hui xinjiang*," which has been translated above. The subtitles omit referencing Xinjiang and instead render it as "To be back in the desert, together again."

completely, guided towards the freedom she once tasted in the desert. However, if Xinjiang is considered as not a place but an idea, then her leap becomes a reflection of a historical process of fleeing from the state into stateless and more egalitarian territories. Political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott notes that the harsh terrain and mountains of an area he calls "Zomia" in southeast Asia have been "havens of refuge for peoples resisting or fleeing the state" for centuries (13). While the desert region of Xinjiang borders on the edge of this stateless zone (and scholars disagree over whether or not it was a destination for refugees), I propose instead that it is the idea of Xinjiang, as a barren, remote, and ultimately difficult-to-navigate area, that recalls the idea of Zomia as an area inaccessible to the state.[18] To return to Xinjiang, then, is to flee from the hierarchies of the state, from the family writ large that reinforces the fundamental inequality between men and women; this is exactly what Jen does in her reality-defying jump. By embodying the idea of Xinjiang, Jen is not attaching herself to the place, which still contains elements of the patriarchy,[19] but rather to the promise of freedom that it once offered her.

The description of the peoples of the desert as "barbarians" further clarifies this promise by clearly separating Xinjiang from the vicinity of the state. Describing the importance of her comb during her time with Lo in the cave, Jen argues to him that "A barbarian like you wouldn't understand," implying that he was detached from civilization while she, a Manchurian, was fully civilized (A. Lee 01:06:04). Here, a clear contrast between ethnicities is drawn through their relationship to civilization—to "Chinese" culture. Yet, as Jen acclimates to the desert, she too dons Lo's ethnic clothing, which, as Kenneth Chan notes, "signifies Jen's shift from embracing the respectability of mainstream Han society to fully obeying the inner promptings of her heart" by identifying with the peripherality of Lo's ethnicity (10).[20] I contend that not only does Jen obey her inner desires here, but also that her identification with the very people she denounced as "barbarians" reveals that the lack of state domination, not the lack of civilization, defines the concept of barbarians. As Scott points out, the key to assimilating "raw barbarians" was not a process

[18] Both Jen and her father's forces have trouble navigating through the desert. Jen gets lost after trying to escape Lo and Governor Yu's men are never able to locate Jen, which speaks to the impenetrability of Xinjiang to outsiders.
[19] Upon initially encountering the bandits, who approach her menacingly with less-than-innocent motives, Jen starts to make quick work of them before Lo halts the bandits' attack.
[20] Interestingly, Jen's actions prompts one of the *jianghu* fighters to proclaim, "I've traveled everywhere, but never met anyone so uncivilized" (A. Lee 01:25:17). This stems directly from her rejection of their authority and contributes to the political, not cultural, distinction between "barbarian" and "civilization."

of introducing modern culture but rather a process of introducing total submission to Han rule (120).[21] In this light, Jen's flight to the idea of Xinjiang is even more so a rejection of her submission to state hierarchies, which reveals that the space she carves out for herself is clouded and indescribable because modern Confucian society cannot comprehend the lack of subjugation—just like with the label of "barbarian."[22] The peripheral nature of her goals simply will not allow it as her search for freedom destabilizes the legitimacy of gender, social, and class hierarchies that comprise Confucian civilization and derive themselves from the inferiority of women. Through this reading, the film's ambiguity over Jen's fate becomes purposeful by elucidating the impossibility of imagining a new world within the confines of the old—the abolition of *nannü*, then, can only blossom once the normativity of societal submission has been deconstructed. Ultimately, a major goal of the film becomes, through its occupation of the periphery of Confucian thought, to challenge the falsity of the normative—to reveal that a hierarchical societal structure, be it Confucian or otherwise, can only be upheld through socially constructed distinctions that have no basis in reality.

Fig. 10. Lo admires the limitless expanse of the Xinjiang desert

[21] Raw and cooked were terms used historically by the Chinese state to describe ethnic groups residing on its periphery and denoted a group's willingness to submit to the rule of the state. Raw refers to groups that were "untamable" while cooked refers to those that were in the process of becoming civilized, which meant they were much more favorable to the state. For more information, see Magnus Fiskesjö's article "On the 'Raw' and the 'Cooked' Barbarians of Imperial China."

[22] While today these peripheral ethnic groups are formerly recognized by the PRC, Fiskesjö notes that this recognition only exists because it allows the state to paint itself as a civilizing force for these groups, thereby justifying the Chinese state's existence ("Rescuing the Empire" 43). In this light, society cannot comprehend Jen's resistance against subjugation precisely because its existence is built on suppressing the periphery. There is no attempt to understand the periphery because that would destroy a major justification for state control.

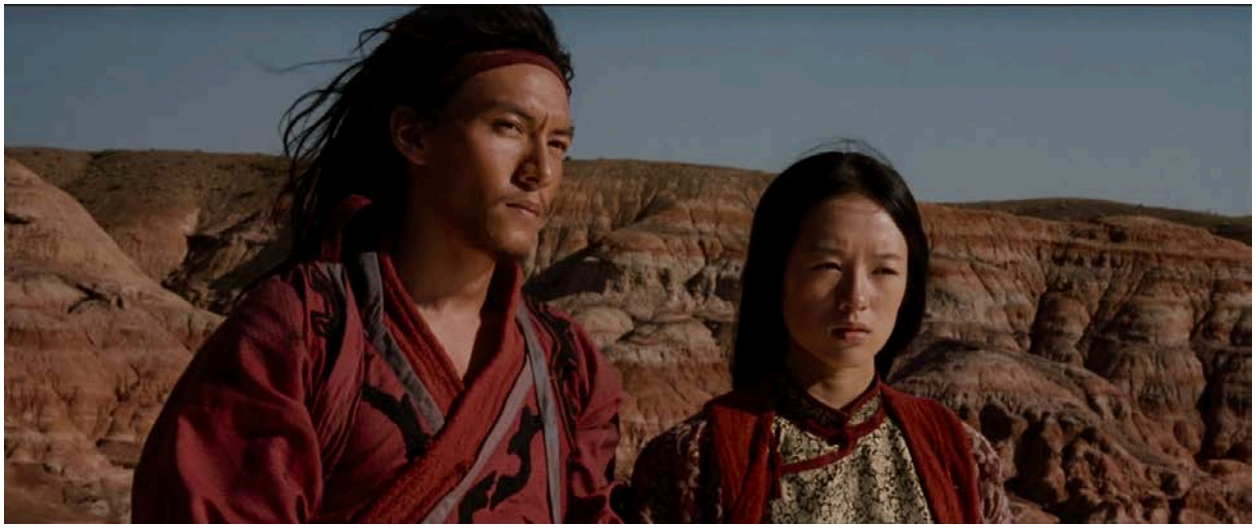

Fig. 11. Lo and Jen, who both are wearing free flowing ethnic clothing, stand together in the desert

Through the use of He-Yin Zhen's analytical category of *nannü* to read Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the film's more radical yet largely unnoticed feminist possibilities come to fruition. By placing women and men within certain dichotomous spatial and epistemological contexts, the film elaborates on a larger system of *nannü* that drives an inescapable and fundamentally unequal chasm between the categories of "women" and "men" that justifies the oppression of women. Through Jen's various attempts to escape this system of oppression, *Crouching Tiger* then advances towards a complete rejection of *nannü* by rooting its feminism within a stateless framework linked to the historical fleeing of the state and a rejection of hierarchical power. This rejection thus cannot occur without the complete spatial reorganization of society, as seen with Jen's death defying leap of faith, where all distinctions between men and women are eliminated. This feminism also stands at odds with Western liberal feminism, which has historically advocated for the promotion of women's rights predicated on gender essentialism to achieve equality—indeed, by viewing the film through a Western feminist lens like multiple scholars have done, the film's discourses surrounding the source of women's oppression effectively vanish. Only through the lens of *nannü*, then, can *Crouching Tiger* move towards elucidating and challenging the totality of women's oppression.

As such, through this ambitious undertaking, I believe that the film occupies a peripheral position within not only Chineseness and Chinese culture, but also the dominant discourses of feminism in regards to the state that allows it to more effectively challenge the institutions of oppression. In doing so,

Crouching Tiger demonstrates the liberatory potential of the periphery, which provides the crucial tools to analyze and challenge hegemonic structures of power. Indeed, as multiple scholars, like Shu-mei Shih and Jason G. Coe, have pointed out, the Sinophone itself also is a type of what Deleuze and Guattari termed "minor literature" in which peripheral (minor) groups use dominant (major) cultural frameworks, in this case language, to destabilize and deconstruct the major (Shih 31; Coe 110).[23] The major, after all, through its standardization and distortion of reality (such as gender or cultural identity) to produce its own "authenticity," is able to reproduce its power over the minor by effectively erasing it from existence. In response to the standardization of the major, then, the minor has the ability to destabilize the standardized reality of the center by refusing to conform—by refusing to stick with the official narrative presented. By purposely rejecting the center's purported reality, the minor can not only create mere discomfort but actively challenge the major's normative realities. Through this view, the only way towards women's liberation (but not solely limited to women) is not through the center, which upholds the very inequalities between men and women, but rather through the periphery, which in and of itself is erased by the realities of the major. In other words, the liberation of oppressed groups (the periphery) must therefore come from themselves instead of relying on the willingness of the oppressors to grant them freedom. Women, having suffered under the oppression of the Confucian family writ large (the state), cannot expect those same institutions to grant them equality. Returning to the film's feminist discourses, then, by refusing to view *Crouching Tiger* through the reductive and standardizing framework of nationalist Western feminist rhetoric and instead seeing it as a minoritarian work through the lens of *nannü*, the film allows for a genuine feminism that is attuned to the intricacies of the systems of women's oppression and centered, ultimately, in the goal of equality to come to fruition.

[23] Similarly, I believe He-Yin Zhen's essays and analyses can also be viewed in this light, albeit not as cultural works, but as peripheral works that exist against Confucianism by using its concepts (*nannü*) against itself.

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Appendix A – Figures

Appendix B – Chinese Character Index

Ang Lee 李安

Guoyu 国语

Hanyu 汉语

He-Yin Zhen 何殷震

jianghu 江湖

Li Mubai 李慕白

Lo Xiaohu 羅小虎

Meng Sizhao 孟思昭

nannü 男女

neiren 内人

nüxia 女侠

Putonghua 普通话

Wang Dulu 王度庐

Wohu Canglong (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) 卧虎藏龙

wuxia 武侠

wudang 武当

Xinjiang 新疆

Yu Jiaolong 玉嬌龍

Yu Xiulian 俞秀蓮

Zhongwen 中文

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