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A Leap of Faith: Necropolitical Subjecthood in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

Ang Lee's landmark film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was ground breaking as a symbol of international collaboration, popular and critical success, and what many hoped indicated a new era for the *wuxia pian*. Despite its utter uniqueness, the film is not entirely neoteric. Rather, it is thoroughly grounded in the *wuxia* legacy. The narrative was derived from Wang Dulu's serialized *wuxia* novel by the same name and the cinematography was inspired by architects of the *wuxia pian* canon like King Hu and Li Hanxiang. *Wuxia* fiction is concerned with the stateless figure of the knight errant (*wuxia*). Within the underground world of the *jiang hu*, a strict code of ethics constructs the *wuxia*'s subjecthood in opposition to an Other.¹ In Lee's film, however, the protagonist, Jen, achieves subjecthood through her confrontation with death. The ambiguity of the film's final scene constructs Jen as an immortal martyr figure, strictly diverging from Wang Dulu's unequivocal conclusion. Nevertheless, the martyr's body is transformed into a weapon parallel to the function of the *wuxia*'s traditionally weaponized body, both in opposition to the mechanized Western military.² Lee's permutation of canonical *wuxia* resistance thus uniquely ties subjecthood to resistance, the body, and death.

At US\$127 million, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was the highest-grossing foreign-language film in American history. It was nominated for ten Academy Awards, received four and won Best Foreign Film and Best Director at The Golden Globes. The film's accolades go on,

¹ Liu, "The Vicissitudes of Anticolonial Nationalism," 59.

² Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 36, Liu, "The Vicissitudes of Anticolonial Nationalism," 22.

receiving international commendation.³ As a martial arts film, this critical and popular success was relatively unprecedented; in the West, *wuxia pian* were generally limited to art-house and cult followings, or stereotyped as purveyors of Chinese nationalism. For the Chinese diasporic community, *wuxia pian* have helped construct a sense of “Chineseness” outside of China.⁴ *Wuxia pian* are popular in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*’s divergence from the genre’s norms, however, disappointed many Chinese audiences.⁵

The association of *wuxia* fiction with nationalism arises from the genre’s anti-colonial tropes. The *wuxia*, martial hero, is not only presented with super-human abilities, but defies technologized Western imperialism with his or her body. Frequently, this takes the form of weaponless heroes defeating fire-powered foes. The genre, in essence, develops “an ideological fantasy that compensates for the real and historical oppression of racial minorities.”⁶ Petrus Liu refers to this phenomenon as “the inversion-thesis.” The post-colonial construction of race ultimately functions to “regulate the distribution of death,” which is, in and of itself, the expression of sovereignty.⁷ The figure of the martyr stands in opposition to this necropolitical sovereignty. Through the martyr’s confrontation with death and the destruction of their enemies, the very body of the martyr is transformed into a weapon.⁸

The specter of the imperialist and of Western military technology is notably absent from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. On the one hand, the imperial influences subliminally shaped the film’s production. Ang Lee self-consciously worked in the legacy of film makers like King Hu and Li Hanxiang whose mid-century *wuxia pian* helped build a diasporic Chinese identity for

³ Dilley, “Wuxia Narrative and Transnational Chinese Identity in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*,” 119.

⁴ Chan “The Global Return of the Wu Xia Pian (Chinese Sword-Fighting Movie): Ang Lee’s “*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*,” 3-4.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Liu, “The Vicissitudes of Anticolonial Nationalism,” 22.

⁷ Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 17.

⁸ Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 36.

Lee himself and many of Chinese heritage across the globe.^{9, 10} Lee has re-imagined and extended the *wuxia pian* to international audiences, sharing an image of “China that is fading away in our heads.”¹¹ The historical ethos of the film, without the figure of the West, constructs a romantic narrative of “unadulterated” Chinese-ness. Viewed under the post-colonial constructions of race, this imagined past functions similarly to the inversion-thesis. The film’s production itself is a post-colonial effort; crossing between Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Hollywood, starring actors from Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and produced by an international team. Though *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* lacks explicit allusions to the imperialism which influenced historic Qing politics, the film was produced and viewed in the post-colonial context – the influences of which may be invisible in the narrative but are inescapable in the film itself.

On the other hand, understanding Lee’s protagonist as a martyr requires a mortal enmity with an Other.¹² From the film’s outset, Jen is constructed in opposition to the *jiang hu* norms which would have her be a disempowered semi-object. The narrative opens with the arrival of Li Mu Bai at Yu Shu Lien’s headquarters (1:33). By framing the narrative with the *wuxia* and *nuxia*, Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien literally and figuratively have the power to shape Jen’s life story. This acknowledges the social power with which each *xia* is privileged. In her theft of Green Destiny and rebellion against gendered and social norms, Jen upsets to the normative power of these martial masters.

Jen is only introduced after over eight minutes of exposition have thoroughly set the stage. At this point, Yu Shu Lien enters Sir Te’s study only to encounter Jen, her back to the

⁹ Dilley, “Wuxia Narrative and Transnational Chinese Identity in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*,” 131.

¹⁰ Chan “The Global Return of the Wu Xia Pian (Chinese Sword-Fighting Movie): Ang Lee's “*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*,” 3.

¹¹ Dilley, “Wuxia Narrative and Transnational Chinese Identity in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*,” 132.

¹² Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 36.

camera (8:30). This establishes Jen in the passive position, an object to be walked in on, while Shu Lien is the active subject followed by the camera. The scene is distinctly confrontational, denoting Jen as out of place and requiring that she justify her presence. Despite this out-of-place-ness, Jen's robe matches the study's beige tones, further pacifying Jen in association with the objects around her. When she turns to Shu Lien, however, a red flower in her hair disrupts the earthen palette.¹³ The small splash of the passionate and disruptive color alludes to Jen's hidden divergence from social norms: her martial skill.

Not only is red disruptive to the palette, its association with Jen's lover, Lo, codifies its subversive implications. Jen's red motif climaxes in a flashback to Jen's first meeting with Lo (54:45). In the desert, Lo is clothed almost exclusively in warm, red hues.¹⁴ These are less disruptive to the desert's warm ambiance, but still indicate a divergence from social norms. Not only does Jen's desert excursion physically displace her from social obligations, it is a space where Jen may freely employ her martial prowess, and it directly contradicts the gendered forces she is subjected to. Jen's father, Governor Yu, has arranged a political marriage for her. The arrangement positions Jen as a semi-object passed from man to man as a conduit of socio-political power in the spirit of Gayle Rubin's sex/gender system.¹⁵ Jen's red-coded dalliance with Lo defies her father and the sex/gender system which would render her impotent.

The repercussion of these transgressions is a brush with death. After running away from Lo, Jen stumbles through the desert, half alive (1:02:30). This is the direct consequence of Jen's rejection of the limitations imposed by her father and his social world. Were Jen the paradigmatic woman-object she would not be in the desert, alone, on the brink of death. Her

¹³ Bellantoni, "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," 210.

¹⁴ Bellantoni, "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," 212-213.

¹⁵ Rubin "The Traffic in Women," 157-210.

confrontation with death thus asserts subjecthood in contradiction to her default semi-object status. Because of Jen's "refusal to accept the limits that the fear of death would have the subject respect," she is then confronted with the death-possibility itself.¹⁶ Granted, this death does not come from a centralized sovereign power. The desert's red cast implicates it as a space of opposition to (decentralized) sovereign power, the borders of which are interrelated with the borders of sovereignty. The desert and the limits Jen challenges there are then defined by the borders of sovereignty mapped onto the landscape.

Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai attempt to reign in Jen's rebellion and either return her to the authority of the State or subsume her into the *jiang hu*. Shu Lien argues that as an aristocrat's daughter, Jen "is not one of us" and that her pursuit of martial training is contingent upon her husband's unlikely approval. This re-invests in the gendered norms of the State, to which Shu Lien, an unmarried *nuxia*, is only partially beholden. Moreover, Shu Lien attempts to conceal Jen's martial ability and theft of Green Destiny in an effort to avoid scandal for the Yu household. This ties her more directly to the State than to stateless institutions like Wudan. Li Mu Bai, alternatively, advocates for Jen's acceptance into the Wudan school. In doing so, Mu Bai acknowledges her challenges to State sovereignty but seeks to impose the *jiang hu*'s stateless set of limitations.

The canonical construction of the *jiang hu* is characterized by strict values. Shu Lien reminds Jen of this when she tells her that "without rules, we wouldn't survive for long" (10:30). The normative rules of the *jiang hu* construct a system of laws based on a "higher order of ethics than the laws of the state."¹⁷ The social relations of "friendship, trust, integrity" which shape these stateless ethics construct the *xia*-subject in relation of an Other, a fellow *xia* (10:27). Full

¹⁶ Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 16.

¹⁷ Liu, "The Vicissitudes of Anticolonial Nationalism," 59.

subjecthood is achieved by conforming to this code of ethics within social relationships.¹⁸ Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai are the paradigmatic *nuxia* and *wuxia*; their stifled romance evidence of their ethical obligation to their fallen brother, Shu Lien's betrothed, and the *jiang hu*'s social relations. Their responses to Jen's disruption, however, deny her subjecthood. Relegating Jen to either the State or the Wudan school would treat Jen as an object and deny her any agency in choosing her future. Moreover, by objectifying Jen, Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien preclude her ability to develop obligations to and relationships with social Others. The power Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien assert over Jen denies her canonical subjecthood.

Prevented from forming her own social relations and obligations in the *jiang hu*, Jen turns to her mentor's understanding of the martial world. Jade Fox tells Jen that the martial life is one of "kill or be killed" (47:17). This is the logic of the survivor, not the sovereign. The survivor derives satisfaction, rather than horror, from the death of the Other as it affirms the survivor's own enduring life. In opposition to the mutually obligated subjecthood of the *jiang hu*, the logic of survival posits each as "the enemy of every other."¹⁹ With this rationale, Jen runs away before her marriage can be consummated, dresses as a man, and wreaks havoc in the traditional *wuxia pian* fashion (1:21:57). This lifestyle, however, is unsustainable for Jen and she seeks refuge in the sisterly bond she forged with Shu Lien (1:27:44). Jen moves from the oppositional survival-based killing to the mutuality of *jiang hu* ethics. In the brief moment of refuge with her martial sister, Jen is told she "can run from marriage, but not [her] parents" (1:28:34). Once again, Shu Lien acts as a conduit between the *jiang hu* and the State. In this instance the three logics of the survivor, the canonical *jiang hu*, and the State clash.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 36.

Ultimately, Jen returns to the violent enmity of the survivor. When Shu Lien reveals that she has collaborated with Li Mu Bai, Jen interprets this as a violation of their sisterly trust (1:29:44). Similar to her mentor, Jen developed a mortal enmity with Li Mu Bai. When Mu Bai invited her to join the Wudan school in an attempt to include her in the *jiang hu*, Jen threatened to use what he teaches her to kill him, jabbing that “Wudan is a whorehouse” (46:05). Within the bounds of necropolitics, Li Mu Bai asserts a calm sovereignty, accepting the risk of death. Jen’s rejection of his offer and subsequent enmity with Mu Bai is rooted Jade Fox’s animosity towards the misogynistic Wudan school. Jade Fox’s antagonism bears a similarity to the stateless subjecthood in that it is rooted in its own form of feminist ethics, which she feels Southern Crane violated. Rather than a righteous rivalry, however, Fox regresses to killing, the lowest form of survival.²⁰

Jade Fox seeks freedom through killing. She tells Jen she can free herself by “get[ing] rid of anyone in our way, even your father” (47:16). Jade Fox thus poses an existential threat to both the State and the *jiang hu*. Thus, Jade Fox she challenges the sovereign limits of both worlds and is subjected to civil death. She is the outlaw of the outlaws and her life is threatened by both worlds’ sovereign monopoly on death. Her disregard for the life of the Other leads her to betray Jen. She drugs the girl in order to lure Li Mu Bai to his own death (1:42:40). This betrayal reveals the inherent insecurities within logic of the survivor. Though she succeeds in poisoning Mu Bai, in and of itself a violation of *jiang hu* ethics, she dies in the process. Rather than construct subjecthood in the face of her own death, this completes the civil death in which she already lived.

²⁰ Ibid.

The dual murder of Jade Fox and Li Mu Bai leaves Jen master-less and between worlds. Under the logic of the survivor, Jen's vivacity ought to be reaffirmed in her witnessing the death of the Other, in this case Jade Fox. However, her unspoken obligation to Fox prevents her from fully Otherizing her mentor and affirming her own vitality. Jen's participation in the logic of the survivor has ended. Jen is granted entrance to Wudan at the behest of Mu Bai. This is an expression of the sovereign ability to "dictate who may live and who must die;" Jen may live, but Jade Fox must die.²¹ Jen is not offered viable subjecthood at the school, rather, she is left at its mercy, with the threat of her father ever looming over her. Concomitantly, Jen's disruptive reds are absent from Wudan. Though she now merges with the subdued cool tones of the mountain, Jen's body is transformed into a disruptive symbol (1:52:54). Jen never fully embraced the *jiang hu* ethics and is at odds with the *xia* for her gender and aristocratic birth. In the spirit of the martyr, Jen's body, a symbol of her disruption of the *jiang hu*, "becomes a piece of metal whose function is, through sacrifice, to bring eternal life into being."²²

The final scene leaves the audience suspended with Jen in the grey space between heaven and earth, populated by formless clouds and un-nameable colors, in the limbo between life and death. Unsure whether she is falling or flying, the audience finds an entrancing calm. The anxiety which ought to accompany Jen's potentially suicidal leap is subdued by the use of cool colors and sentimental music (1:54:38). With no definite resolution, Jen is suspended in the minds of the audience as an ethereal and eternally undead figure.

In this instance, Jen encounters and embraces the death-possibility. This is the ultimate assertion of subjecthood and challenge to the sovereign allocation of life. Jen's leap alludes to the tale of a man who jumped from the mountain but, saved by a god and his own faithful heart,

²¹ Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 11.

²² Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 37.

floated away (1:11:35). The ambiguity of the scene refuses to define whether Jen dies or floats away. In the limbo, however, Jen challenges her own mortality which, even if she dies, achieves a supremacy over death and a moment of eternal life.²³ The ambiguity of the scene reifies the eternal liberation Jen's leap produces.

Wang Dulu's original novel has Jen survive her leap and travel to Xinjiang, where she births her and Lo's child.²⁴ Ang Lee's diversion from this denouement re-frames the construction of sovereignty within the narrative. Through the lens of necropolitics, "one is free to live one's own life only because one is free to die one's own death."²⁵ The ambiguity of Jen's leap then asserts her freedom to die and thus to live her own life. Throughout the film Jen engages with different constructions of sovereignty and subjecthood, all of which ultimately delimit her expression of life and death. It is only through the ambiguity of Lee's final scene that she can achieve a successful construction of subjecthood.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Dilley, "Wuxia Narrative and Transnational Chinese Identity in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*," 119.

²⁵ Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 38.

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