

### **Fantasy and Spirituality in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Life of Pi***

Both Ang Lee's 2000 *wuxia* film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and his recent adventure film *Life of Pi* (2012) unravel their protagonists' journeys for self-discovery along the line of spiritual development. The former film, a transnational co-product with a Chinese-Hong Kong-Taiwanese-Malaysian cast, features a young girl's struggle between her desire for freedom and the confining patriarchal realities in society, as much as between the two opposite potentials that her intelligence and martial arts capability seem to have brought her: to become either a fearless and desireless heroine or a threatening rule breaker. The latter film, adapted from the original novel by the Canadian writer Yann Martel, presents the physical and spiritual toil of a boy, a born Hindu who loves God and practices Islam, in face of human and natural cruelty. In both films, the protagonists' coming of age is paralleled with a transcendent recognition of the limits of human life and an ensuing spiritual pursuit. And, in each case, a fantasy world – either the underworld of *Giang Hu* (aka *jianghu*), or a lifeboat drifting on the ocean with an imagined tiger in it – is employed to open up possibilities of spirituality. In this sense, Jen's jumping off the mountain at the end of *Crouching Tiger* and Pi's being saved and brought back to the regular world can be interpreted, quite ironically, either as a closure of fantasy or as a transcendental moment where the spiritual surpasses the physical.

#### **Cultivation, Transcendence, and the “True Heart”: Jen's Spiritual Dilemma**

Ang Lee's 2000 film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is not exactly a faithful adaptation of Wang Dulu's original novel dated 1941 to 1942, especially in terms of the characterizations of

Jade Fox and Jen. Unlike the treacherous and wicked Jade Fox in Wang's novel, who keeps seducing males around her to fulfill her dark ambitions, Ang Lee's portrayal arouses more sympathy for the figure by letting her point out that she has also been wronged by the world. Even Li Mu Bai, the loyal student of and avenger for Southern Crane, seems to be rendered quite speechless when Jade Fox reveals that Southern Crane betrayed her by sleeping with her but refusing to teach her secret martial arts skills. This transient sense of pity, however, does not prevent Li Mu Bai from finally taking her life to avenge his master's death. As Jen's first mentor to introduce her to the fantastic martial arts world, Jade Fox serves as a mirror for Jen, revealing that such strong-willed women warriors' self-realization are considered as threatening, and hence unacceptable, challenges in both the mundane world and the *Giang Hu*.

Ironically, in the Chinese literary and cinematic traditions, the martial arts underworld of *Giang Hu* usually provides an alternative arena for the restoration of justice. Jade Fox's denouncement of the gender-based double standards of the *Giang Hu* world, nevertheless, reveals that, for women, this supposed alternative arena is as unfair as the ordinary world. Therefore, while Jen later manages to overcome many mundane obstacles – such as those self-claimed proficient warriors victoriously defeated by Jen – and to reach higher and higher spiritual levels through all her adventures, her prospects of any ultimate resolution is rather doubtful, if not gloomy, at the very beginning.

At different stages of Jen's self-searching journey, Jade Fox, Yu Shu Lien, and Li Mu Bai all serve as her spiritual mentors, at least temporarily. Initially, it is through Jade Fox that Jen gets into deeper contact with martial arts and becomes absorbed into the fantasy world of the *Giang Hu*, one that is expected to set her free from the limitations of the mediocre life of a gentry girl and, specifically, from her arranged marriage, so that she will be able to bring her talents into

full play. In my reading, this could be seen as the first stage of Jen's spiritual development: the awakening of her desires and ambitions for self-realization. The fact that all these dreams can only be realized through the *Giang Hu*, however, permeates this theme of coming-of-age with a strong sense of unrealistic fantasy. In a way, Jade Fox and her teachings resemble the typical mentality of traditional male Chinese knight-errant summarized by James J. Y. Liu: "strong will and simple faith" (13).

Yu Shu Lien, in a very different vein, teaches Jen about worldly wisdom and leads her to a more practical understanding of the *Giang Hu*. At their first encounter, Jen tells Shu Lien how much she admires the freedom enjoyed by martial arts masters of the *Giang Hu* world: "It must be exciting to be a fighter, to be totally free! ... I've read all about people like you. Roaming wild, beating up anyone who gets in your way. ... I'm getting married soon, but I haven't lived the life I want" (Lee et al. 40-41). Shu Lien's response, on the other hand, discloses that not only is the *Giang Hu* a tough and cruel world, but "Fighters have rules too: friendship, trust, integrity..." (Lee et al. 41). Shu Lien's role, while deeply embedded in the martial arts world because of her career and her social network, is heavily instilled with Confucian ideals of loyalty, reciprocity, and social obligations. It is under her influence that Jen returns the Green Destiny sword for the first time as a gesture of compromise. Later, when Jen, having escaped from her "husband's" house and defeated all the warriors encountered on the way, pays Shu Lien a visit, the latter offers her sympathy and comfort but also blames her for selfishly ignoring her familial responsibilities. Shu Lien's "sisterly advice" for Jen is that she should go back to her parents to negotiate a solution so that she can be reunited with her real lover Lo, a warrior-bandit from Xinjiang. Such a plan, nevertheless, arouses Jen's suspicion that she has been set up. Rather than

yielding to familial and rules, Jen is determined to continue the *Giang Hu* adventure on her own and thus turns against Shu Lien.

Finally, the Taoist master Li Mu Bai serves as Jen's ultimate mentor by significantly enhancing her fighting competence and, at the same time, guiding her back to the side of righteousness after a series of twists and at the cost of his own life. If, as Ya-chen Chen has pointed out, it is Li Mu Bai who eventually "puts an end to the expansion of Jade Fox's foxiness" (39), I contend that, by so doing, he also puts an end to the threatening dragon-ness in Jen (the "dragon"). In this light, the scene in the bamboo forest is more like a ceremonial admission test than a real duel. When Li tells Jen that he let her go in their earlier encounter because he wanted to see her "true heart," Jen sarcastically retorts, "What do people like you, who have gained too much worldly wisdom of the *Giang Hu*, know about the true heart?" The following contest, however, seems to confirm not only Li's premonition about Jen's teachability but, to a certain extent, Jen's recognition of it as well. A mentor-student bond is almost on the verge of establishment when Li points his fingers at Jen's forehead – an often seen form of spiritual transmission in the Taoist martial arts tradition. Apparently overwhelmed, Jen agrees that if Li can get the sword back in three moves, she will "follow him." Li's prompt grab of the sword, however, nettles Jen and breaks up the temporary bond between the two.

In some sense, Jen's refusal to acknowledge Li as her master at this point parallels her earlier rejections to her arranged marriage and to Shu Lien's advice, and paves the way for her later response to Lo's wish for her to "follow" him back to Xinjiang. In all these decisions, Jen chooses to pursue her own freedom and self-realization, rather than "follow" or succumb to rules, regulations, and assigned roles. Therefore, Jen is indeed on her way to her "true heart," only that her definition of it is not, at least not yet, the same as Li's. The turning point, of course, appears

when Li, upon rescuing Jen from Jade Fox and avenging his master's death, is about to lose his own life to Jade Fox's deadly poisoned dart. For Jen, this dramatic moment pulls her back to the right side of the good/evil divide, and finally culminates her reciprocal bond with Li and Shu Lien.

The antidote, unfortunately, arrives too late, and Li Mu Bai dies in the arms of his beloved Yu Shu Lien. As his life is departing, the Taoist martial arts master does not, as suggested by Shu Lien, use his last breath to mediate and seek for eternal transcendence, but, instead, confesses his long repressed love for her. Considering his whole life as "wasted," Li tells Shu Lien that he would rather be a drifting ghost to accompany her than transcend to the highest level of enlightenment as a lonely immortal being. By giving up spirituality for secular desires, such a confession takes an obvious departure from Li's own Taoist practices. On the other hand, however, it also reiterates Li's teaching to Jen about the "true heart." Echoing this is Shu Lien's final advice to Jen: "Whatever path you take in this life, be true to yourself." Shu Lien's request for Jen to go to Wudang Mountain for Lo, instead of going back to her parents in Beijing, also stands in sharp contrast to her earlier arrangement, indicating a revelation on her part that shifts the priority from familial and social obligations to personal happiness.

In his own preface to the screenplay later published in book form, Ang Lee writes:

My team and I chose the most populist, if not popular, genre in film history – the Hong Kong martial arts film – to tell our story, and we used this pop genre almost as a kind of research instrument to explore the legacy of classical Chinese culture. We embraced the most mass of art forms and mixed it with the highest – the secret martial arts as passed down over time in the great Taoist schools of training and thought.

What is the Tao, the "way"? Of course, if you can say it, it's not the real Tao. It's enigmatic, in that it can only manifest itself through contradictions, *through the conflicts of the heart* rather than through the harmony it seeks. (Lee et al. 7, italics mine)

Later in the book, Lee has a similar comment: “The true meaning of the film lies with the ‘Hidden Dragon.’ *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a story about passions, emotions, desires – the dragons hidden inside all of us” (*Crouching Tiger* 76).

Within the film, the essence of its message is probably best revealed by Li Mu Bai’s comment on the *Giang Hu* and the human heart when he and Yu Shu Lien sit at a table in a shed on their way to look for Jen and the Green Destiny sword. “*Giang Hu* is a world full of crouching tigers and hidden dragons. Isn’t it the same with the human heart?” (translation mine). Not only are Li’s words highly suggestive in relation to the title of the film, but they directly point out the dual themes of this revisionist martial arts movie: it’s about the human heart as much as about the *Giang Hu*. And it is by no means a coincidence that Jen’s and Lo’s original names – Yu Jiaolong and Luo Xiaohu – in Wang Dulu’s novel literally means “dragon” and “tiger.”

In terms of the characterization of Jen, while apparently following such a familiar trope of the bildungsroman, Ang Lee’s film disturbs and complicates the straightforward coming of maturity presented by the original novel, and rewrites it into a spiritual journey tainted with ambitions, desires, uncertainties, and doubts. Similarly, by leaving off the final ending of the novel – in Wang Dulu’s novel, Jen miraculously survives the jump and joins Lo for a brief but suggestive conjugal night – the film introduces more ambiguities about the supposed gap between fantasy and reality. With the tearful Lo watching her in despair and accompanied by a sad melody in the soundtrack, Jen takes a flying leap off the bridge and rides the wind down towards the abyss. The legend told by Lo about faithful hearts making wishes come true now seems more like wishful thinking, resembling Jen’s earlier immature view of the *Giang Hu*. Jen’s

own solemn facial expression, nevertheless, could also be read as a hint at her final transcendence: going through all these experiences and sufferings is similar to the self-cultivation practiced by Taoists. At a much earlier point of the film, Li Mu Bai describes the sense of enlightenment he receives after meditation training, which leaves him in a deeply silent condition where time and space both disappears.<sup>1</sup> While Li feels no bliss but an endless sorrow at this critical moment, what Jen is experiencing in the last scene is not clearly revealed, thus left to the judgment of the audience. As Whitney Crothers Dilley has pointed out, the ambiguous ending of the film invites multiple readings: as a feminist rebellion, as a classical tragedy, and so on (141). Or, as in James McRae's interpretation, Jen's final jump can be considered a suicide caused by her heartbreaking realization that an "extreme type of freedom comes with a hefty price: the loss of the relationships that make this life worthwhile" (37).

### **Fantasy, Reality, and Belief: The Question of Choice for Pi and His Listeners**

*Life of Pi* is also a story about a tiger that crouches within the human heart, and it also tells about the inner struggle of the protagonist in front of externalized dangers and threats – only that this time the hazards are encountered when drifting on the sea. Just as there are ambiguous tensions in *Crouching Tiger* among Taoist transcendence, Confucian responsibilities, and the *Giang Hu* mentality of the traditional Chinese knight-errant, Pi's survival story is imbued with tensions among fantasy, reality, belief – in God as well as in humanity – and, most important of all, choice.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Zeng Zhaoxu (aka Tseng Chao-hsü), Li's hesitation at this moment is caused by his honest realization of the gap between his Taoist spiritual development and his remaining attachment to the secular world (34-5).

Like in the novel, the protagonist's adventures are narrated from a first-person retrospective point of view. Raised as a Hindu, Pi, in his early teens, starts to incorporate Christianity and Islam into his religious practices. Instead of viewing the three religions as conflicting and incompatible, the boy attempts to break through narrowly-defined boundaries and get connected to a universal divine love that cares for humanity as a whole – as is often seen in a spiritual bildungsroman, Pi's adventures and growth feature a series of trials and revelations. While the zoo run by the family manages to provide them with a relatively affluence life for more than a decade, financial difficulties finally force Pi's father to decide to move the family to Canada and sell their animals there. Getting separated from his beloved girlfriend is heartbreaking for Pi, but it seems trivial compared with all his later losses and sufferings. And it is from here that the story bifurcates.

In Pi's first version of the story, a few days after setting off, the Japanese freighter encounters a storm and sinks, with his parents and his brother still onboard. Pi manages to escape in a small lifeboat, but also on the boat are a hyena, an injured zebra, an orangutan, and a tiger. The brutal kills the zebra and the orangutan but is killed by the tiger. Dangerous as it is, the tiger keeps Pi's spirit from sapping and accompanies him till the end of the sea voyage. This first narrative makes up the major part both of the novel and of the film.

Responding to the question about the credibility of his story, however, Pi provides a second version of his adventures, in which he has to witness the ship's cook kill his mother and a sailor and in which he himself kills the cook and eats his flesh. As Pi states, the differences between the two stories neither have anything to do with the tragic consequences of the shipwreck nor exert any impact upon the understanding of the shipwreck. The distinction, instead, lies in the maintenance of human dignity as much as in the conscious choice between

belief and disbelief in humanity and God. Therefore, when he respectively asks the Japanese investigators in the novel, and the Canadian writer in the film, which version they prefer, it is relieving to get a consensus choice – the one with the tiger. To this Pi adds, “And so it goes with God.”

The most breath-taking as well as heart-stirring part of Pi’s adventures, obviously, is his drifting on the sea accompanied by a dangerous Bengal tiger, who is imagined but in many ways very “real.” Ironically, the most spectacular sometimes also tends to be the least realizable on the screen. Before the news got around that Ang Lee was going to make a movie adaptation of *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel’s Booker Prize winner was considered by many as “unfilmable.” The most obvious challenge, unsurprisingly, is how to present the sea voyage on a small life boat, with a teenage boy and a huge tiger on board. As Pi’s fantastic experiences on the sea are indispensably related to his attitude towards humanity and God, the realization of these scenes on the big screen are essential for an inter-media translation from literature to film. In an interview with Chandra Steele, the director admitted that despite feeling “seduced” from the very beginning, it was after about one year of hesitation that he finally decided to “give it a try.”<sup>2</sup> Eventually, the film’s huge box-office success and winning of the Academy Awards brought Ang Lee tremendous applause for his exquisite use of 3D technologies to visualize Pi’s incredible journey. Meanwhile, however, the film’s skillful use of the cinematic language to visualize the tensions among fantasy, reality, and belief seems not to have attracted much scholarly attention. This later aspect, I argue, makes a vital contribution to the film’s reinforcement of Pi’s spiritual dilemma and solution.

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<sup>2</sup> See Steele, “Ang Lee on How the Technology behind Life of Pi Changed His Filmmaking” <<http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2416315,00.asp>>.

Ang Lee's film adaptation, to begin with, makes a decision not unlike Pi's other listeners: a choice between the two versions. While visualizing Pi's fantasy adventures with the tiger, the film presents the second – the “real” – story to the audience only through Pi's narration to the Canadian writer. The preference for humanistic fantasies over traumatic realities, echoes Pi's call for an understanding that is able to “go with God.” And, at the same time, the selection of spectacular experiences on the sea makes the film one that is able to go with the big screen as well. The film's visual presentation of the remarkable beauty of nature is highly suggestive of its protagonist's spiritual development. The first four minutes of the film is devoted to a pictorial introduction of an idyllic zoo presented to the audience against a soothing Indian melody, thus setting the tone of the movie as one closely related to the soul. Even when drifting on the sea, Pi is still able to appreciate the divine-like beauty that he catches with his eyes. The spectacular night scene of jellyfish and whales, which brings him to envisage his mother and the sunken ship, for example, seems to be inviting the audience to embark on similar cathartic adventures of their own. If Pi's adventure on the sea is one that will, as both the novel and the film claim, make people believe in God, this transforming power comes from not only the need to survive, and understand, all the trials and sufferings, but also from an overwhelming sense of awe aroused during the journey.

At a news conference on *Life of Pi*, Ang Lee made it clear that his film was not aimed at being a pure art house film: “As an art house film, you can explore the philosophical issues... But for a popular film, we also need to make the audience feel touched, and that was the difficult part.”<sup>3</sup> In a highly empathetic manner, the film embeds Pi's spiritual journey into a narrative framework, where his interview with the Canadian writer – presented with two series of

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<sup>3</sup> See the Associated Press article “Ang Lee Says ‘Life of Pi’s More than Art House Film”” <<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/ang-lee-life-pi-more-art-house-film>>.

shot/reverse-shots at the beginning and the end of Pi's narration – guides the audience through the shift between fantasy and reality, until the question about belief and choice is eventually raised.

Like *Crouching Tiger*, Pi's preferred version of the story also has an ambiguous closure of its protagonist's spiritual adventures. In this narrative, the journey on the sea ends when the boat is pushed ashore in Mexico by winds and currents, with himself saved by the local people and the tiger – his alter ego – disappearing into the jungle. Such an apparent conclusion of the boy's suffering and struggles on the sea, nevertheless, allows an alternative reading of it as a return to the mundane world from his spiritual journey. Towards the end of the movie, the Canadian writer gets to know that Pi is married with a wife and two children. Upon the comment that "So, your story does have a happy ending," Pi replies, "Well, that's up to you. The story is yours now."

Seen from this light, it hardly matter that the official report from the Japanese investigators remains extremely ambiguous about their reception of Pi's first story, vaguely concluding that that "his story is unparalleled in the history of shipwrecks" and that "Very few castaways can claim to have survived so long at sea as Mr. Patel, and none in the company of an adult Bengal tiger." The fact that the report allows various interpretative possibilities of Pi's story: "as an adventure tale, ... as a coming of age story... as a religious allegory... as diasporic biography" (Burns 189) by all means further centralizes the question of choice, and this time, it's a question for the audience.

### **Conclusion: Fantasy, Spirituality, and Cinematic Reality in the Cultural Dimensions of Globalization**

With Michelle Yeoh from Malaysia, Chang Chen from Taiwan, Zhang Ziyi from Chinese mainland, Chow Yun-fat from Hong Kong, the multinational cast of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* probably has made the cinematic experience a little unusual for many among the Chinese-speaking part of its audience. As Shu-Mei Shih has described, the many different accents of the actors and actresses might “brea[k] down the fourth wall of illusion even before the camera obscura of illusion had a chance to establish itself,” thus making it “a real challenge to be convinced by a love story in so many accents” (2). Or, as Julianne Pidduck has put it, “Although Lee’s strategy evokes Mandarin as the authentic Chinese language of myth, the film’s uneven linguistic flow led to a mixed reception among Mandarin speakers worldwide” (400). Further contributing to this apparent sense of inauthenticity, as Kenneth Chan has pointed out, is Ang Lee’s playful reconfiguration of the conventions of Chinese martial arts cinema. Its employment of feminist politics and explicit hints at sexual tensions cast in a Freudian light, for example, tended to be resisted by “those purists who consider certain traditions of the genre sacrosanct” (Chan 4). Thus, if film critic Richard Corliss has been right about the director’s intention to achieve “a blending, not a collision, of Eastern physical grace and Western intensity of performance, of Hong Kong kung-fu directness and British attention to behavioral nuance” (Lee et al. 9), it certain was a very challenging job.

On the other hand, however, Ang Lee’s revision of the martial arts traditions, together with the divergent responses to it made by audiences from different geo-cultural background, also provides an excellent case to re-examine the various fantasies associated with the production and reception of “Chinese” martial arts films. As Arjun Appadurai argues in *Modernity At Large*, “The new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models” (32). Ang

Lee's re-presentation of Jen's spiritual pursuit effectively responds to such cultural complexity and the resulting fragmented expectations from difficult audiences: while experimenting with various strains of ideologies, the film maintains an ambiguous open-endedness that disrupts conventional center-periphery readings and challenges the normal boundaries between fantasy and authenticity.

Similarly, *Life of Pi* undermines the conventional boundaries between "authentic" religions, ethnicities, local ideates, as much as the audience's own expectations, anxieties, and fantasies around such center-periphery models. On the one hand, the film's nostalgic touches on an indigenous India – as shown at the beginning of the movie – remind us of Fredric Jameson's keen observation of postmodern aesthetics, which is imbued with a sense that "the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good," and where " 'culture' has become a veritable 'second nature'" (*Postmodernism* iv). On the other hand, nevertheless, the fact that the protagonist's trans-religious spiritual quest begins long before the family physically embark on their transcontinental voyage questions the "authenticity" starting from the very beginning. Such interactions among what Arjun Appadurai refers to as "ethnoscapes," "mediascapes," and "ideoscapes" lead to multiple layers of ambiguities, hence restructuring cultural fantasies and reshaping the understanding of cinematic reality. Consequently, audiences coming from different geo-cultural backgrounds are invited to, as Pi does with Richard Parker, read out of the film the projections of their own feelings, thoughts, and imaginations. Like the narrative with the tiger, cinematic fantasies, rather than cinematic reality, seems like a preferred choice.

With a "tourist-friendly" (Jameson *The Geopolitical Aesthetics* 119) visual style that interprets the phantasmagorical as the highest level of reality – the "true heart" in *Crouching Tiger* and the narrative that can "g[o] with God in *Life of Pi*, these two films accommodate

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nuanced readings and leave the choice to the audience. Thus Jen's search for self-realization and Pi's pursuit of a livable life also metaphorically parallel the filmmaker's endeavors to establish a multicultural cinematic language for his targeted global audience.

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