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Lost in Translation:

American Critical Audience and the Transnational Chinese Swordswoman

Catherine Jean Gomes

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, Hero and House of Flying Daggers* are significant films in cinema as they broke American box office records when they were released. However, for many American film critics, it is the figure of the Chinese Swordswoman who fascinates and stands out the most. In *Crouching Tiger*, the Asian Swordswoman takes the form of three characters: the young and talented although morally confused swordswoman Jen Yu (Zhang Ziyi); the veteran *Wudan* swordswoman Yui Hsui Lien (Michelle Yeoh), and the elderly and bitter swordswoman Jade Fox (Cheng Pei Pei). *Wudan*, as it is explained by Ang Lee in “*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*”: Portrait of the Ang Lee Film, is a form of martial arts that signifies inner strength (134). In *Hero*, the Asian Swordswoman figure is characterised by the heroic yet vengeful Flying Snow (Maggie Cheung) and the swordswoman apprentice/servant Moon (Zhang Ziyi). The Asian Swordswoman is represented in *House of Flying Daggers* by Mei (Zhang Ziyi), a member of a rebel group called House of Flying Daggers, who goes undercover as a blind dancer in a brothel.

Surveying film responses instead of the films themselves provides insight into the codes the American critical audience utilizes when translating texts that are transnational and in this case, gendered. The Chinese swordswomen are transnational as the films they appear in are transnational. Although they are Mandarin Chinese films that are filmed in China and utilize Chinese history to fuel their narratives, *Crouching Tiger, Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers* are not strictly products of Chinese cinema. Instead they are transnational pan-
Asian/Hollywood productions that have also become successful international blockbuster films. This is most obviously the case for *Crouching Tiger* which boasts producers from China (China Film Co-Production Company, Asia Union Films and United China Vision), USA (Columbia Pictures Film Production Asia, Good Machine International and Sony Pictures Classics), Hong Kong (EDKO Film International) and Taiwan (Zoom Hunt International Productions).

Moreover, Sony Picture Classics is a Japanese-owned company. Director Ang Lee is Taiwanese while one of the film’s scriptwriters – James Schamus – is American. The cast is made up of transnational Chinese actors: Chow Yun Fat is from Hong Kong. Michelle Yeoh is Malaysian; Zhang Ziyi is from China while Chang Chen is Taiwanese. Likewise, both *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers* have transnational Chinese casts even though the production companies are from Mainland China and its colony Hong Kong. In *Hero*, Jet Li and Zhang Ziyi are China-born but Tony Leung Chiu-Wai and Maggie Cheung are from Hong Kong. In *House of Flying Daggers*, again Zhang Ziyi hails from China but Andy Lau is from Hong Kong while Takeshi Kaneshiro is a Taiwanese national – half Taiwanese and half Japanese. Such areas of filmmaking inevitably leave a transnational imprint on the figure of the Chinese swordswoman and the way she is consumed by popular press and specialist film commentators.

A study such as this indicates the challenges film reviewers face when confronted with the complexities and fluidity of cultural representation brought about by transnational products. My analysis of American popular and specialist film reviews of the Chinese swordswoman suggests that she is not read from an Asian centred or an Asian specific lens that understands her as metaphors for the community that she represents, but from a fabricated structure that struggles to make sense of the physical strength of the gendered “foreign” Asian woman. This imaginative structure features both localized knowledge of Hollywood conventions on strong
and beautiful women with a yearning to make allegorical links to contemporary China. Somewhat “forgetting” that the Chinese female fighter is a transnational figure, American critics cling onto the familiar in their decoding of the Chinese swordswoman, thus revealing the difficulties they encounter when engaging with texts that present nuanced representations of transnational Chinese communities such as Chinese America. These critics, in other words, read the Chinese swordswoman from an Orientalist lens where the Chinese woman is positioned as powerless in the historical and conventionalised East-West relationship. Postcolonial theorist Edward Said notes that Orientalism takes place when the West interprets the East on the West’s own terms. In other words, the Chinese American culture and people are interpreted within American notions of what it thinks and envisions Chinese America to be. This envisioning of Chinese America is often romanticised where the beauty of Chinese culture, geography and people are emphasised.

Chinese America is a transnational Chinese community because its members share a common ethnic and national (Mainland Chinese) heritage, are diasporic Chinese and whose Chinese culture and identity have been touched in someway by non-Chinese influences. These non-Chinese influences can emerge from the host nation and/or surface out of modernity and globalisation. Aihwah Ong and Donald Nonini, for example note that ethnic Chinese who have migrated to North America contribute significantly to their host nation in terms of society, culture, economy and landscape. Their work, moreover, illustrates the challenges faced by the Chinese in North America to maintain cultural identity through remembering such as the practice and performance of rituals. Whatever contributes to the making of Chinese America as a transnational Chinese community, the end result is a rich, diverse and evolving entity. Reading the Chinese swordswoman within the context of Chinese America as transnational
Chinese could possibly indicate certain attempts at understanding Chinese American issues and concerns. Such sentiments reveal maturity and evolution in race and ethnic relations in multicultural America. However while American film reviewers fluently write on American and perceived Mainland Chinese influences of the Chinese swordswoman, they find difficulty distinguishing the more obvious transnational (Chinese) links. This lack of exploration of Chinese America is surprising since the ethnic Chinese are a populous community in multicultural America. The Chinese have become one of the most visible ethnic communities in America through birth and recent immigration trends. Many American-born Chinese can trace their ethnic lineage back to the 1800s when numerous émigrés from China entered America as cheap labourers working on railroad construction and in the gold mines. Since then ethnic Chinese from China and elsewhere have been attracted to America for a variety of economic, social and political reasons. Chinese permanent and temporary migrants from the homeland and elsewhere together with American-born Chinese have become integral members of their host nation’s society, involving themselves in diverse areas such as local community, business, academia, entertainment and politics. Technology has also assisted in bringing transnational Chinese productions – particularly those from Hong Kong – into American households through the VCR in the 1980s and more recently, through new media outlets such as DVDs and online communication and broadcast sharing tools.

Through an investigation of American popular and specialist film criticism on the swordswomen from *Crouching Tiger, Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*, this essay suggests that American film reviewers miss the opportunity to utilize the transnational Chinese swordswoman as an effective tool to read Chinese America. Instead of recognising the links between this transnational Chinese figure and Chinese America, reviewers choose to decode
her within familiar and conventional frameworks of gender and nationality. While such familiar structures are helpful in aiding the general American viewing public in recognising and possibly identifying with these physically strong women and therefore raising the popularity and accessibility of these Chinese female fighters, they do not push the boundaries that allow for nuanced interpretations of Chinese transnationalism.

Not Quite Transnational: the Chinese Swordswoman as Narrative Device and Problematic Hero

Some popular reviewers read the Chinese swordswoman as an object of romance for narrative and plot purposes. Carla Meyer of the San Francisco Chronicle observes that House of Flying Daggers is primarily a romance between Mei and Jin who are “the prettiest pair ever to grace the Tang dynasty” (E(5)). A.O. Scott of the New York Times comments online that, while revolutionary intrigue dominates the beginning of the film, the narrative is soon reduced to a love triangle between Mei, Jin and Leo. Likewise in Hero it is Flying Snow’s tragic romance with Broken Sword that is often the subject of film critics’ discussion. Richard Corliss of Time Magazine entitles his online review of Hero “In the Mood for Swordplay”. This title, derived from the Wong Kar-wai romance In the Mood for Love, signifies his impressions of romantic heroism in this martial arts epic. Maggie Cheung (Flying Snow) and Tony Leung Chiu-Wai (Broken Sword) also played star-crossed lovers in In the Mood for Love. In his review, Corliss also states that Hero is a film that demonstrates “the ways love may find its fulfilment only in death.”

A possible reason why film critics locate romance as a central theme in House of Flying Daggers is because of the intentions of its filmmaker Zhang Yimou. Zhang Yimou intended the
film to be consumed by Western audiences (Tong 7(B)). In doing so, he could have possibly injected Western-style narratives of romance into his films to make them palatable to Western audiences. The romances between Mei and Jin and between Flying Snow and Broken Sword have similar Western-style Romeo and Juliet tragically fatal endings. Romance is also used as a thematic device. The romance between Mei and Jin, for instance, is navigated by placing self-happiness before self-sacrifice for community. In Chinese-language martial arts films, particularly those with production links to the Hong Kong film industry prior to the 1997 British handover of the colony to China, displays of love lost, personal sacrifice and the maintenance of ideology for community benefit are generic and somewhat unyielding themes. Romance in Hong Kong martial arts films was used to support these ideas.

While some critics read the transnational Chinese swordswoman as a narrative device for plot development, others who write for both popular and specialist publications recognize her as a much more complex and mosaic character. Considering her a problematic female hero – specifically describing her as displaying anti-heroic behaviour – many critics are of the opinion that she complicates and challenges their understanding of female heroism and feminism within Western frameworks. Almost exclusively referring to *Crouching Tiger*, critics find Jen Yu and Jade Fox particularly fascinating because they challenge patriarchal power and authority. To illustrate, Stephanie Zacharek of the online magazine *Salon.Com* observes that Jen Yu is “never completely readable” and that her character “strings” audiences along. Nevertheless it is this ambiguity of character that Zacharek admits is “one of the movie’s pleasures.” This questioning of Jen Yu as problematic hero is also echoed by Stephen Short of *Time Magazine*, who wonders if Jen Yu is a “fearless heroine or ferocious killer” (166). While film commentators and reviewers raise the question of Jen Yu’s heroic qualities, they tend to
agree that she is a female hero even though a problematic one. Writing about Jade Fox, film commentators note she is perhaps the most fascinating yet problematic female protagonist in the film as she is both hero and femme fatale. Gary Morris writes in *Bright Lights Film Journal* that “[w]ith her hefty figure, ravaged face, and palpable desperation as she feels Jen Yu slipping away from her grasp”, Jade Fox gives *Crouching Tiger* “an unexpected poignancy and power.” On the other hand, Matthew Levi, also writing for *Bright Lights Film Journal*, suggests that Jade Fox is dangerous because her ambition is subversive. This subversion comes about because Jade Fox transgresses the feminine-masculine divide with her ambition to learn *Wudan*, the martial arts text that is forbidden to women in the film.

Jade Fox’s subversion makes her a problematic hero and can thus be considered a femme fatale. After all, the femme fatale’s strength and power come from questioning and challenging the patriarchal establishment. Often, the femme fatale is similar to the female hero in ambition, strength and cunning. The difference between the femme fatale and the female hero is the femme fatale’s lack of adherence to the values of the dominant culture and society of which she is part. Often this culture and society is shaped by masculine values. The femme fatale thus questions and challenges this culture and society by hurting the male hero through the process of undermining his power and authority rather than supporting him as the female hero would do (Fries 71-2).

Jen Yu and Jade Fox are arguably read through a lens that highlights the dominant ideologies of powerful women present in Hollywood films. Such readings suggest that Hollywood’s physically strong women are allegories for issues such as feminism and the difficult state of gender relations in contemporary society (Inness 160-76; Tasker 3-25; Buttsworth 185-99; Crosby 153-78). The figure of the Hollywood female warrior thus becomes
representative of the ambivalent position women have in Western society. Film reviewers’ reading of strong female characters in films such as *Crouching Tiger*, for instance, is linked to their knowledge of strong women in Hollywood. Hollywood has iconized the warrior woman in characters such as *Alien*-fighting Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) and *Terminator: Judgement Day*’s Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in the 1980s and early 1990s, and later in the 1990s and early 2000s, in quintessential female warrior heroes Xena (Lucy Lawless), Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar), Lara Croft (Angelina Jolie) and *The Powerpuff Girls* Blossom (Cathy Cavadini), Bubbles (Tara Strong) and Buttercup (Elizabeth Daily). These female Hollywood characters have ignited varied discussions amongst American film critics and film and gender studies scholars on their problematic representation. On one level these characters are independent and strong, hence allowing for feminist readings. On another level, however, these individuals are also portrayed as vulnerable, requiring the assistance of men for emotional and physical support.

The Chinese swordswoman, nonetheless, is not American but transnational Chinese. In her essay “Far Away, So Close: Cultural Translation in Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*”, Lee Ken-fang, for example, argues convincingly that the Chinese Swordswomen Jen Yu and Jade Fox are allegories for the changing gender dynamics within the global transnational Chinese community (281-95). Reading Jen Yu and Jade Fox as femme fatales, Lee suggests that their behaviour questions and challenges patriarchal notions of dominance and power by their independence and by following their ambitions. Jade Fox, for example, is a powerful woman because she “has her own will and wants to enjoy her freedom” (290). Lee’s readings of power through resistance could perhaps indicate the inevitable changing of gender
dynamics in transnational Chinese communities. Rather than being a scorned woman, Jade Fox thus becomes a character that “empowers and inspires women” (290).

**Crouching Tiger, Hero and House of Flying Daggers Are Transnational (Chinese) Films**

The Chinese film industry no longer produces solely Chinese productions but also transnational films in collaboration with Hollywood and/or other Asian cinemas. These transnational collaborations affect all aspects of financial and creative input into these films. For example, while *Crouching Tiger* is made on location in China, it is the product of production companies in Hollywood (Columbia Tristar), China (China Film Co-Production Corporation) and Japan (Sony Pictures Classics). The film was edited in both China and the United States while the orchestra music was recorded and produced in Shanghai (Sunshine 144). The film also boasts a transnational ethnically-Chinese cast with Chow Yun-fat (Hong Kong), Michelle Yeoh (Malaysia), Zhang Ziyi (China) and Chen Chang (Taiwan). Likewise, its crew is also transnational. The film’s director, Ang Lee, is Taiwanese-born but Hollywood-based. Its action choreographer is the legendary Hong Kong martial arts choreographer Yuen Woo-ping, who also worked on Hollywood blockbusters such as *The Matrix*. *Crouching Tiger*’s Hong Kong cinematographer Peter Pau has worked extensively with Hong Kong filmmakers John Woo and Tsui Hark. American-born Asian singer CoCo Lee sings the title song “A Love Before Time” composed by Chinese national Tan Dun and Americans Jorge Calandrelli and James Schamus (Sunshine 144). Ang Lee also brought his long-time film collaborator James Schamus, an American who has worked with him as screenwriter for many of his other Taiwanese (*Eat Drink Man Woman*) and Hollywood (*The Ice Storm*) productions (Schamus 130). Schamus worked on the script — based on a book by Chinese novelist Wang
Du Lu – together with his writing partners China-based Wang Hui Ling and Taiwanese film critic Tsai Kuo Jung.\(^7\)

While *Crouching Tiger* may well be one of the biggest joint productions in the history of cinema, *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers* are themselves also significant for their transnational connections, albeit more modestly so. For example, American distributor Miramax screened the film in the U.S., the United Kingdom, Africa and Australia while Alliance Atlantis Communications distributed the film in Canada. The film also had an international film and editing crew who hailed from China, Hong Kong, America and Australia. The cinematographer, for instance, was Australian-born but Hong Kong-based Christopher Doyle. In addition, the cast of *Hero* was made up of transnational Chinese who have appeared in films outside China. Jet Li and Zhang Ziyi are Chinese nationals who have relocated to the U.S. while they make films in China, Hong Kong and Hollywood. Tony Chiu-wai Leung and Maggie Cheung are popular Hong Kong-based actors who are internationally renowned after appearing as the leads in *In the Mood for Love*.\(^8\)

Similarly, *House of Flying Daggers* is a film that is not solely a product of China. Instead it is a made-in-China film where the production companies are from China (Beijing New Film Picture Company and Zhang Yimou Studios) and Hong Kong (Elite Group Enterprises), the film was distributed globally by major Hollywood studios such as United International Pictures and Warner Brothers as well as by Japan’s Sony Pictures Classics. In addition, the costumes in *House of Flying Daggers* were designed by Japanese designer Wada Emi who has worked on Hong Kong martial arts swordplay productions *Bride With White Hair* and *The Storm Riders* (“Emi Wada”). *House of Flying Daggers* composer, Shigeru Umebayashi, is also Japanese (“Shigeru Umebayashi”). Like Wada, he has worked on non-
Japanese productions such as Hong Kong auteur Wong Kar-wai’s 2046. Like Hero and Crouching Tiger, the cast members of House of Flying Daggers are eclectically international. The cast, for example, are trans-Asian, including Kaneshiro Takeshi, a Taiwan-born Japan-based actor with Japanese and Taiwanese heritage; popular Hong Kong actor and singer Andy Lau; and China-born Zhang Ziyi. A major reason why these films became popular with Western mainstream audiences is that they are made within the paradigm of Hollywood blockbusters; visually spectacular big-budget films. Crouching Tiger, for example, was made with a budget of US$15 million while Hero and House of Flying Daggers cost US$31 million and US$20 million respectively (Leung 42; Fuchs). While House of Flying Daggers may not have done well in American cinemas (US$11 million), the high budgets for Crouching Tiger and Hero paid off significantly as Crouching Tiger earned US$150 million in total U.S. box office and video takings while Hero earned a total of US$55.6 million from the U.S. box office and video rentals. Crouching Tiger was in the top ten position in American cinemas for fifteen weeks. Hero was likewise successful, being the first Chinese language film to hold the number one position in American theatres. It held this position for the first two weeks after opening in the United States. House of Flying Daggers was the least successful of the three films, its highest ranking at the box office being of fifteenth (“Box Office and Rental History for Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon”; “Box Office and Rental History for Hero”; “Box Office and Rental History for House of Flying Daggers”).

The makers of Crouching Tiger, Hero and House of Flying Daggers readily admit that they had Western audiences in mind when they made these films (Schamus 130). However, while Crouching Tiger’s filmmakers admit that narrative was a fundamental tool that attracted audiences, Zhang Yimou’s credibility and reputation in the Euro-America and Australia is
based on his visually enticing cinematography. *Judou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, for example, are films that put Zhang Yimou on the cinematic map as producing visually beautiful films. Hence when *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers* were released, Western “art house” audiences, in particular, were expecting the visual feasts they had grown used to in Zhang Yimou’s earlier films. However, it was not only the “art house” fans that were waiting in anticipation for these films; mainstream audiences were also equally anticipating consuming *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers* in the theatres because of their experience with *Crouching Tiger* (Chan 57).

The Chinese swordswoman is obviously a transnational product due to her pan-Asian and American (Hollywood) influences. However, instead of decoding her from a complex transnational Chinese framework that implicates Chinese America, many American popular and specialist film critics only recognize her from Hollywood-tinted lenses, specifically commenting on her role as Western-derived narrative device or problematic heroine within a Hollywood ideological gender-society framework. What about the actresses who play these swordswomen? How do American critics read them? Do reviewers recognize her as a transnational product or do they still read from a Hollywood lens? What are the implications of these reviews on Chinese America? To answer these questions it is necessary to look at two of the most discussed Chinese swordswoman actresses in the American popular press: Zhang Ziyi and Maggie Cheung.

**Sexualising the Chinese Actresses Zhang Ziyi and Maggie Cheung**

American popular reviews often sexualize the Chinese swordswoman through the actresses who play her, often emphasising glamour, beauty and sensuality. Discussions on the glamorous Chinese actress – like discussions on her as a problematic heroine – rely on existing
Hollywood frameworks to guide critics in their responses. Charles Taylor of Salon.Com, for example, describes Maggie Cheung’s performance in Hero as comparable with the legendary stars of the silent film era. He observes that Cheung exudes “a poetry and mystery that’s Garboesque” as even “her eyes are capable of transmitting hauteur, disdain, wounded eroticism and unutterable sadness.” Likewise, Manohla Dargis of the New York Times finds Zhang Ziyi’s performance in House of Daggers to be reminiscent of classical Hollywood glamour (1(2)). Dargis states: “There are images of Ms. Zhang in Flying Daggers….with her alabaster skin and dark pooling eyes, her body adorned in rich brocades, and bathing alfresco while discreetly veiled by green woodland; Ms. Zhang doesn’t just look bewitchingly lovely; she looks like an MGM pinup (1(2)).”

Popular film reviewers draw parallels between the films and Hollywood noting that Hero and House of Flying Daggers present a return to classical Hollywood glamour. An anonymous article published online by the UPI NewsTrack entitled “Chinese Filmmakers Embrace Glamour” claims these films are evidence of a return to classical Hollywood glamour. This classical Hollywood glamour, according to Dargis, ceased with the end of the studio system in the 1950s and the death of glamorous film actress Marilyn Monroe in 1962. The UPI NewsTrack article observes that the “current crop of Chinese filmmakers has gone back 60 years to create a generation of Classical Hollywood-style glamour films” (n.p). Likewise, Dargis also observes that “[t]he era of lustrous screen sirens lives on, thousands of miles from Hollywood” (1(2)). Dargis states:

These days no one does glamour better than Chinese filmmakers. In American film, where violence invariably trumps sex, glamour tends to surface in period stories like L.A. Confidential, where the director Curtis Hanson explored the distance between
gleaming false fronts and hard-boiled reality. David Lynch wields glamour to similar if more disturbing effect in films like *Mulholland Drive*, while Steven Soderbergh likes to put an old-studio polish on bagatelles like *Ocean’s Twelve*. Meanwhile, in the major Chinese cinemas - those of China, Hong Kong and, to an extent, Taiwan - glamour is serious business. Much as it was in Classical Hollywood, glamour in contemporary Chinese film is a device, a disguise and a luminous end in itself. (1(2))

Dargis explains that her understanding of Hollywood glamour is based on glamour photography during the Classical Hollywood period. She observes that classical Hollywood glamour was promoted by glamour photographers “who created the shimmering images that sold the stars and their movies to the public” (1(2)). Dargis clarifies that it was through glamour photography that Hollywood film stars were immortalized as icons of glamour. Dargis observes that the rise of the Chinese screen goddess is due to Chinese filmmakers being able to recreate the Hollywood glamour of the 1930s and 1940s (1(2)). However, other cross-cultural film critics who describe Maggie Cheung and Zhang Ziyi as embodiments of classical Hollywood glamour do so by eroticising these Chinese actresses.

While some American popular press critics choose to look at glamour, others concentrate their efforts on the sensuality and beauty of the actresses – specifically – with many linking physical power with sexuality. For example, Jami Bernard of *New York Daily News* and James Berardinelli of *Reelviews* both write that Zhang Ziyi is as seductive as she is physically powerful. Bernard observes that although Zhang Ziyi as Mei is “meltingly beautiful”, she is also “quick on her feet” and “downright ambidextrous.” Bernard implies that Mei’s beauty hides her martial arts skills, an ability that mystifies and clouds the judgement of the male
authorities. Bernard argues that Mei’s ambidextrousness mirrors that of Zhang Ziyi herself, whose allure lies in her “seeming delicacy” hiding “a roundhouse kick that could knock out a mule.” Berardinelli notes that Zhang Ziyi is “more than just a pretty face” as she “captures the arrogance and vulnerability of Mei perfectly”. Zhang Ziyi, Berardinelli explains, can be “sexy and seductive one moment,” but “deadly the next.” Claudia Puig, of USA Today, points out that swordplay heightens Zhang Ziyi’s sexuality. She observes that while Zhang Ziyi may have played a “strong-willed and courageous young warrior” in Crouching Tiger, she has “an even more powerful and luminous presence” in House of Flying Daggers. This “powerful and luminous presence,” Puig notes, is illustrated in the way that Zhang Ziyi easily shifts from “bewitching and elaborate dance” to “masterful swordfighting.” While these critics do not explore Zhang Ziyi’s sexuality beyond the obvious, others provide more nuanced and informed readings linking the Chinese swordswoman to China. Such readings choose to examine Zhang Ziyi’s sexuality as a metaphor of changing culture in China. Writing for The New York Times, Jean Tong observes that House of Flying Daggers “may be the first large scale Chinese movie to assert a frank, liberated approach to sex” (7(B)). She theorises that while the film’s sexual scenes, such as a drunken Jin (Kaneshiro Takeshi) tearing Mei’s (Zhang Ziyi) dress in the brothel, may be playful and innocuous by Western standards, these scenes reflect the sexual revolution that China’s youth is currently experiencing (7(B)). Chinese sociologist Zhou Xiaozheng, from Beijing’s Renmin University notes that Chinese youths between the ages of fourteen and twenty are now having their first sexual experience at the age of 17.4 years, while those between twenty-one and thirty were doing so at the age of 21.9 years (10(Asia)). Zhou echoes what others in the academy assert: that the sexual revolution amongst Chinese youths is due to the “opening up of Chinese society and early arrival of puberty in the young” (10(Asia)).
Tong notes this relaxing of sexual mores when she cites film academic Wendy Larson who observes that sexuality in Chinese-language cinema is not playful as it is in Western cinema. Rather, sexuality is “an expression of revolutionary passion, or it’s linked to loyalty to your tradition or your martial arts group” (7(B)). Tong reflects on Larson’s observation by noting that Chris Berry also observes that China’s ideology has changed from the old ethic of “production and building the country up” to one of consumerism and wanting “to have fun.”

Popular writing on both Zhang Ziyi and Maggie Cheung as illuminating a glamorous Hollywood past or as objects that blend physical power with beauty and sensuality seem to do a few things. Such writing again looks to Hollywood structures to read the actresses who play Chinese swordswomen. Like the Chinese swordswoman, these actresses are also transnational as my earlier discussions on *Crouching Tiger, Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers* as transnational productions have pointed out. The writing also reveals that both the actresses and the films are placed in China-centred rather than transnational Chinese position. In other words, reviewers acknowledge only the Mainland Chinese link rather than the more inclusive transnational Chinese dimension which would consist of other Chinese-dominated nations such as Hong Kong and Chinese diasporic communities such as Chinese America. Hong Kong, after all, has a very strong link with physically strong and powerful cinematic female figures.

**Female Warriors as Sites of Discussion for Community**

The transnational Chinese woman is strongly connected to the figure of the female fighter of Hong Kong cinema – a cinema that has a symbiotic relationship with its people. Cinema captures the essence of the Hong Kong people and this female fighter plays an important role in these productions that can be traced as far back as the 1920s. In the 1960s and
1970s the female fighter was a figure that represented stability as Hong Kong society faced cultural change, as she was often portrayed as the upholder of tradition in a society in flux due to industrial growth. In the 1980s and 1990s, she was an ambivalent figure as she signified stability and confusion. She connoted stability because she was a familiar figure in Hong Kong cinema. However, she was also adopting unusual characteristics such as gender confusion. This gender confusion became a signifier for Hong Kong people’s fears of uncertainty. This uncertainty was at the prospect of being handed over from British capitalist rule to Communist Chinese rule.

One of the first films featuring a female fighter was released in 1925, around the time of the nationalist May 30th Movement. *Heroine Feifei* was a Shanghai-made film that showcased a female protagonist engaged in martial artistry (Arons 27; Ho 40). *Heroine Feifei* was made by Shaw Runje/Runje Shaw, one of the founders of Tianyi Film Company which later became the Shaw Brothers Studio, the largest production company of Hong Kong films. However Hong Kong films featuring strong female figures, particularly female knights-errant such as *The Swordswoman of Huangjiang*, were soon to follow. It was during this period (1920s to 1930s), argues Zhen Zhang, that martial arts films featuring the female knight-errant manifested “the cultural ambivalence toward ‘science’ and ‘democracy’ propagated by the May Fourth ideology,” capturing “the popular imagination of the time” (Zhang). The “power” of the female knights-errant, Zhen suggests, became a signifier of this cultural ambivalence in the post-May Fourth Movement. Female protagonists were thus integral to the films and functioned as emblems of wider socio-cultural dynamics.

In the swordplay films of 1960s Hong Kong, too, female figures played important roles. Although swordswomen are warriors, they are portrayed either as femme fatales or as
subordinate and secondary to men, particularly in the 1960s and early 1970s (Koo 30-32). Women portrayed as femme fatales were women who challenged men and patriarchal control (Koo 30-32). These women, who were demonized in 1960s films such as *One-Armed Swordsman* and *The Magic Snowflake Sword*, were eventually killed. The ideal women in swordplay films of the 1960s and early 1970s era were swordswomen who were aware that the harmony of society could only be maintained through their subordination to the Chinese patriarchy (Koo 30-32). These women, like those in *The Deaf Mute Heroine*, were rewarded by being portrayed as heroic through sacrifice. They were often rewarded with marriage to the heroic male character after attempting to sacrifice their own lives for the greater good of the hero or village (Koo 32).

This theme of female subordination is also evident in films by King Hu, the legendary Hong Kong filmmaker who championed and promoted strong and skilful swordswomen protagonists. The first film to feature the swordswoman in a leading role was *Come Drink with Me* (Logan 153-54). In this film, the protagonist Golden Swallow was played by a young Cheng Pei-pei in her first leading film role. Golden Swallow is the emissary, soldier and daughter of the local governor. She has arrived in a village to negotiate her kidnapped brother’s release from a group of bandits led by Jade Faced Tiger (Hung Lieh-chen). While Golden Swallow’s exceptional skill is displayed in a tense scene at an inn and a spectacular fight scene at the bandit’s headquarters – a converted Buddhist monastery – the character’s strength is undermined by the presence of the masculine hero Drunken Knight (Yueh Hua). Drunken Knight is not only her guardian angel who looks out for her but is also the heroic figure in the second half of the film. Drunken Knight takes over the role of protagonist in *Come Drink with Me* when Golden Swallow is weakened and wounded after her battle with the bandits at the
temple. Throughout this part of the film, she is nursed back to health by Drunken Knight, acts as a foil to his skill and is frequently saved by him whenever she is in danger. In the final battle with the bandits and evil Abbot Liao Kung (Yang Chih-Ching), it is Drunken Knight who not only rescues a nearly-defeated Golden Swallow but whose skills are the only ones that can defeat Liao Kung. The character of Golden Swallow thus is ambivalently portrayed. This ambivalence exposes the patriarchal politics of Confucian society where the male is the dominant figure in the community.

Poshek Fu provides a possible explanation for the ambivalent way swordswomen were portrayed. He explains that Hong Kong in the 1960s was facing upheavals due to the economic boom. The economic boom created a high demand for labour, which could only be met by youths and women leaving the domestic space and entering the labour market. Women thus became independent because they were earning money and were not financially dependent on their husbands or fathers. By doing so they slowly broke away from Confucian gender hierarchy. Because the swordplay films are analogical references to real world concerns, the portrayal of swordswomen particularly in 1960s and early 1970s swordplay films may have reflected the transformations of Hong Kong society (71-89). This is consistent with the view of David Harvey, a postmodern theorist, who, drawing on work by Georg Simmel, explains that a society draws on tradition (religion, cultural ideology) in order to provide stability in an unstable situation created by economic change due to modernity (171).

The most significant kung fu film to emerge in the 1960s, one that was to set the tone for the “modern” Asian female fighter, was *The Black Rose*. *The Black Rose* prompted a plethora of films featuring a female Robin Hood figure within the format of Hollywood’s “James Bond” films. These films, produced only in the 1960s, came to be popularly known as
“Jane Bond” films. Hong Kong cinema critic Sam Ho notes that “nowhere in the history of Chinese film, and arguably world cinema, are fighting women more dominant than in the Jane Bond films of Hong Kong” (40). The dominance of these fighting women goes beyond their ability to do battle or outwit their enemies. Rather, films like The Black Rose were allegorical discussions of globalisation and modernity in Hong Kong society.

The Black Rose was one of the first films within the martial arts tradition to marry “Cantonese film’s acrobatic swordswoman” with the “stoic” or subdued and sombre police inspector (Ho 40). In other words, there is a blending of both (chivalric) swordplay and (contemporary) kung-fu traditions in the film. The Black Rose followed the “James Bond” format in employing spectacular displays of technology. Technology was depicted in the form of everyday gadgets (lipstick guns, death-ray watches, ultra-violet shades) and the special effects that enabled them to work (Ho 43). The Black Rose and its other Jane Bond successors of the 1960s also portrayed their protagonists as “modern” women who not only enjoyed Go-Go dancing and lived in opulent excess, but also possessed “good” traditional Chinese family values (Ho 42-45).

Ideologically, the Jane Bonds reflected the financial independence Hong Kong women were encountering as they entered the workforce during the colony’s economic boom (Fu 74). The Black Rose’s female protagonists played by Josephine Siao and Chen Po-chu, for example, represented the “new” Hong Kong woman (Ho 40-46). These actresses were cast in similar roles, as the young and beautiful Jane Bond spies whose opulent and decadent lifestyles intertwined with their ability to uphold justice. These roles were important because they became allegories not only of Hong Kong women but of Hong Kong society as a whole, blending modernity with traditional Chinese culture. Ho observes that these characters
emphasized family values, as “the fighting woman must eventually return to her rightful position in the family” (Ho 45). Like the swordplay heroine, the Jane Bond character also became a site of tension between modernity and cultural tradition.

In his research on the Jane Bond phenomenon, Ho describes Hong Kong as a metaphor for Chinese modernity. He speculates that, in turn, the Jane Bond films reflected the colony’s rapidly emerging modernity (Ho 45). This was shown in the technological gadgets the female protagonists used and the glamorous lifestyles they led. In 1992, filmmaker Jeffrey Lau made *The Black Rose* contemporary in the parody sequel *92 Legendary La Rose Noire*. The significance of this sequel was that it was a pastiche of Hong Kong historical and commercial modernity in the 1960s. This was referred to through the references to *The Black Rose* seen through the television screen in the film. However, the key to understanding the rationale behind Jane Bonds becoming a site for cultural discussion on modernity may lie in Gayle Rubin’s speculation that women are mobile. In her essay “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex.”, (157-210) Rubin puts forth the argument that that women as objects of exchange are allowed by the patriarchy to be more flexible and circulate more freely. She explains that as units of exchange in marriage, women have traditionally been allowed by the patriarchy to circulate in established groups such as families, clans, communities, nations and races. Postmodernity and feminism, however, have reduced the significance of patriarchal institutions such as marriage and given women the opportunity to enhance their mobility by venturing beyond the home.

Precisely because of her ability to be mobile, Jane Bond therefore is able to provide a popular and believable site for discussion on the changing countenance of Hong Kong society’s relationship with modernity. This “mobility” provided Jane Bond with the capability to
navigate through these changes. Since the Asian female fighter, through the swordswoman, was already a familiar and prominent character in Hong Kong cinema, Jane Bond likewise became a significant cultural icon of Hong Kong’s encounter with modernity.

*Come Drink with Me* and *The Black Rose* not only reflected Hong Kong’s modernity but also set the standards for future martial arts films featuring the Asian female fighter. Hong Kong cinema featuring female fighters in the 1980s was comprised of contemporary kung fu films that most notably featured women as law enforcement officers (Teo 102). In the 1980s, films such as *Yes Madam* and *The Inspector Wears Skirts* saw intrepid female fighters battling corruption and drug lords. These policewomen’s quest for justice was reflective of the real concerns that Hong Kong faced during this period, as corruption was rife in the Hong Kong police force and the triads were powerful and feared criminal organisations, ironically with links to the local film industry (Passmore). Such films went on later to influence television programming in shows such as *Armed Reaction*, a Hong Kong TVB (Television Broadcasts Limited) production which traced the lives of female police officers in Hong Kong.

Modernity is also discussed in female fighter films of the 1990s. This period was more inclined towards spy films on a global scale. Of particular interest were films such as *Project S*, whose plot involved terrorist activities, and *Black Cat*, an Asian version of Luc Besson’s *Nikita* (Logan 171). The spy films can be considered successors of the 1960s Jane Bond films with a more sophisticated commentary on Hong Kong modernity. These films not only used sophisticated gadgets, they were also set in overseas locations similar to Jackie Chan and John Woo films. Hence these films became commentaries on Hong Kong as a transnational space.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, films featuring the swordswoman once again became prominent. The main allegorical theme of the swordplay revival was concerned with the 1997
handover of Hong Kong to China. Films such as *Moon Warriors*, *New Dragon Gate Inn*, *Bride with White Hair* and *Wing Chun* featured strong, independent swordswomen who were equally or more highly skilled than their male contemporaries. However, these female fighters were not portrayed as independent. Instead, they sought the approval of their male contemporaries through love. In *Moon Warriors*, swordswomen Hsien (Maggie Cheung) and Yuet (Anita Mui) are rivals because they are both in love with male hero Fei (Andy Lau). In *New Dragon Gate Inn*, the rebel swordswoman Yao Mo-yan (Brigitte Lin) drowns her sorrows in alcohol when her lover Chow Wai-on (Tony Ka-Fai leung) marries the flirtatious inn owner Jade King (Maggie Cheung). In *Bride with White Hair*, assassin Lian Nichang (Brigitte Lin) turns violent, revengeful and emotionally self-destructive when she learns that her lover Zhuo Yihang (Leslie Cheung) betrayed her trust. Likewise in *Wing Chun*, heroine Yim Wing-chun (Michelle Yeoh) pines for her lost love Leung Pok-to (Donnie Yuen). While these fighting females were portrayed as physically strong, they were also conventionalized as feminine (Arons 28). The generic concept of Hong Kong cinema’s female fighter during this period was double-edged as she was caught in what he calls the “Deadly China Doll Syndrome”, where the Hong Kong female fighter is “powerful but delicate” (Hunt 120). A possible explanation for this ambivalence can be derived from Rey Chow’s theorisation that women in Chinese society are often located as upholders of tradition (Chow 86). As Hong Kong people at the time before and during the 1997 Handover were feeling great angst and fear due to the anticipation of the greatest political, social and cultural change that their society had yet faced, they turned to the figure of the woman to provide some form of stability.

In groundbreaking work, prolific filmmaker Tsui Hark created a new form of swordswoman that represented the confusion of an impending 1997 Handover: the gender-
bending swordswoman. The transgendered swordswoman was epitomized by Tsui Hark’s muse at the time, Taiwanese-born but Hong Kong-based actress Brigitte Lin. Lin’s most famous portrayal of the transgendered swordswoman is Asia the Invincible in Tsui Hark’s *East is Red* (1992) (Bordwell 159). Asia the Invincible was not only sexually and morally ambivalent but also a highly skilled, yet extremely violent, swordswoman. It was this sexual and moral ambivalence that Hong Kong people could relate to as an allegory of their own ambivalence at “returning” to China (Bordwell 10). There was ambivalence in Hong Kong society about returning to China because China was the antithesis of Hong Kong. While China was the ancestral home of the Hong Kong people, it was now communist. Communism also contradicted the economic policies of Hong Kong, which for one hundred and fifty years had been governed by the capitalist British (Fu 71-6).

While the analysis of American popular press reviews of the Chinese swordswoman seem dire in their recognition of transnational themes focusing on Chinese America, hope springs in the ever growing number of popular press critics who posses informed and sometimes scholarly knowledge of cinemas other than Hollywood. Leading international expert in Cinema Studies David Bordwell is an example of a film commentator who writes in scholarly and specialist film publications as well as the press. Bordwell writes prolifically in scholarship about Chinese-language cinema, particularly Hong Kong cinema. Bordwell writes one of two introductions in “*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*: Portrait of the Ang Lee Film,” a critical and pictorial accompaniment to the film (8-13). The other featured writer who writes an introduction in this book is *Time Magazine* film critic Richard Corliss (8-13). Corliss has written on China and Hong Kong cinemas, as well as Hollywood films featuring Asian themes,
for *Time Magazine*. *Sight and Sound*’s resident film expert on Asian cinema, Tony Ryan, has also published in respected Asian publications on cinema, in particular the much-respected publication on Hong Kong Cinema, the annual Hong Kong International Film Festival edited cinema magazine. Ryan contributed the essay “The Sword as Obstacle” in *A Study of the Hong Kong Swordplay Film (1945-1980)* for the Fifth Hong Kong International Film Festival (155-58). This magazine contains essays by prominent Hong Kong-based Chinese-language film critics and film scholars such as Law Kaw, Ng Ho, Koo Siu-fung, Sek Kei and Sam Ho. It is thus with expectation and anticipation that a more complex framework incorporating the various tenets connected to transnational (Chinese) productions will be constructed. Doing so will provide more nuanced observations on transnational communities such as Chinese America when decoding multifaceted pan-Asian/Hollywood texts.

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**Endnotes**

1. Parts of this essay have been published elsewhere by me. See the works cited page.

2. Some of these film critics are members of popular press dailies *The New York Times* and *The San Francisco Chronicle* while others wrote for specialist cinema papers such as *Salon.Com* and *Bright Lights Film Journal*.

3. In the Mandarin version of *Crouching Tiger*, Zhang Ziyi’s character is called Jen Yu while in the English-dubbed version of the film, her character is known as Jiao Long. These are different readings of the same Chinese character.

4. America also has a history of engaging in different ways with Chinese cultures and ethnic Chinese people. While American encounters with Chinese cultures and peoples have increased ever since China flung its doors open to the global community with much gusto from the 1990s onwards, their acquaintance with transnational Chinese cultures and people is rooted far earlier in the twentieth century. Before the opening up of China, Americans were already becoming familiar with transnational Chinese cultures and people through US involvement in economic, political, militaristic and tourist ventures in other parts of Asia and elsewhere.
5. Temporary migrants are those who normally enter a country, amongst other things, for work or study.

6. Hong Kong cinematic productions have long been considered transnational productions. In terms of production, for example, its martial arts genre borrows heavily from early Hollywood silent cinema and from Japanese postwar samurai films. For more information on Hong Kong cinema as transnational cinema, see work in this area by David Bordwell, Stephen Teo and Frank Bren and Law Kar.

7. Wang Du Lu was a novelist in China who wrote socialist realist dramas and martial arts novels. *Crouching Tiger* is based on the fourth novel in his martial arts pentalogy *Crane/Iron/He-Tie Pentalogy* (Schamus, 130).

8. *In the Mood for Love* won Leung the best actor award at the 2000 International Film Festival at Cannes. Cheung is also well known for doing projects outside Hong Kong. She appears as herself in French director Olivier Assayas’ French-English film *Irma Vep* and as a Chinese doctor in the 1999 French film *Augustin: King of Kung Fu*. Later she has appeared in another critically acclaimed Assayas film entitled *Clean* where she plays a drug addict recovering from addiction. Her role won her the best actress award at Cannes in 2004.

9. MGM or Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer is a major Hollywood studio that was well known as a producer of glamorous stars during the Classical Hollywood period.

10. The legacy of the powerful Asian woman warrior as signifier of cultural uncertainty and ambivalence is precisely what was to follow in later films in the martial arts genre.

11. Cheng Pei-pei was later to star in other notable martial arts films such as *Golden Swallow/Hsia Yu-yen* and *The Lady Hermit/Zhong Kui Niang Zi*, reprising her warrior role in *Crouching Tiger* as the villainous Jade Fox.
12. David Bordwell notes a similar theme in a Zhang Che film *Golden Swallow* (25). While this film featured Cheng again in the lead role, the narrative featured the tragic hero Silver Roc rather than its eponymous heroine.

13. Other Jane Bond films include: *Diamond Robbery/Zhuanshi Da Jien* and *Lady Bond/Nü Shashou (The Lady Professional)*. For a more comprehensive list of Jane Bond films, see Sam Ho’s essay on the subject (45).

14. One of the lead actresses in *Yes Madam* was Caucasian actress and martial arts expert Cynthia Rothrock. Hong Kong martial arts cinema, especially in the 1980s, featured Caucasian actresses such as Cynthia Rothrock and Sophia Crawford in warrior women roles (Tasker 24-6).