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J. Heath Atchley  
Mount Holyoke College, hatchley@mtholyoke.edu

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# When The Master Is Not Master: The Critique of Enlightenment in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

## **Abstract**

The concept of enlightenment plays a key role in the plot development of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. A subtle reading of the film, however, can show how it offers a filmic critique of enlightenment, both as a religious concept associated with Buddhism and as a broader concept associated with mastery in virtually any form (religious, martial, political). This paper argues that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* puts forth a novel image of this concept. According to this image, enlightenment does not produce mastery, as is conventionally thought. Instead, enlightenment paradoxically eschews mastery and critiques the knowledge that supports it.

A day without rain is like  
a day without sun.  
--A.R. Ammons<sup>1</sup>

Gravity is the root of lightness.  
--Lao-Tzu<sup>2</sup>

It is a question most of us never ask: What exactly is enlightenment? Even if one is a practicing Buddhist, the concern is more likely to be how to become enlightened; the object of knowledge being fully revealed only in attainment. Such a question, of course, would not occur to the enlightened. As a word, as a concept, enlightenment stimulates desire. It signifies, at the very least, a desire to be "something" else, to be "somewhere" else. Therefore, enlightenment is an object only for those of us on this side of the river, to use the Buddhist image, and its interrogation can become part of a practice of critical thinking.

Sometimes, when we are not paying attention, the movies can ask our important questions for us. Such is the case with Ang Lee's art-house, martial arts romance *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The film seems to act as a cipher for the question of enlightenment: how does one get it, certainly, but also what is it? Enlightenment is that awkward English word that attempts to roughly correspond to the Buddhist notion of bodhi, a term usually used synonymously with nirvana. But in the context of the film (and the concerns of this essay) the word also has overtones of mastery and empowerment that spill over into many realms, including the martial arts and the politics of social structure. One can be enlightened (and

unenlightened) in all kinds of ways. My thesis is this: there are two kinds of enlightenment in this film. One is enlightenment as a general structure of mastery, a blend of the enlightenment of meditating monks and martial arts masters with the enlightenment of reasonable philosophers and the bourgeois sovereigns who inherit their power. The other enlightenment swimming through the images and text of this film is one that refuses to be itself, that refuses to be anything.

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is something of a mythical tale. Lee describes it as his dream of a China that probably never existed, a dream that he cannot shake: "... you can't remove China from the boy's head, so I'm finding China now. That's why I'm making this movie ..., to talk about things we know and that practically don't exist."<sup>3</sup> *Crouching Tiger* may be a dream for Lee, but it would be wrong to consider it a product of simple nostalgia. It is part of the tradition of wu xia, medieval legends of masterful warriors who not only have supernatural fighting ability but also a heightened sense of ethical awareness, greater than that of a commoner and corrupt government officials. As tales highlighting individual skill, integrity, and righteousness - all good Confucian values - wu xia are a way that Chinese culture dreams alternatives to its large, complex civilization and the bulky, burdensome bureaucracy that it requires.

And then there is Buddhism. The film does not represent the religious tradition in an explicit way (There is only one scene in which Shu Lien lights an

incense stick and appears to pray before a Buddhist altar). But the Chinese fighting arts, wu shu, have a direct link to Chan Buddhism. Both traditions trace their foundations to the monk Bodhidharma (whose name means "enlightenment teaching"). One legend has it that Bodhidharma upon visiting the Shaolin temple in China found the monks there in such horrible physical condition due to their intense practice of seated meditation that he trained them in the martial arts in order to increase their vitality. Another story claims that Bodhidharma taught the Shaolin monks to fight in order to defend their monastery during a time of political chaos. Additionally, the wu shu traditions typically view martial arts training as a type of meditation, a physical practice that helps the practitioner to achieve enlightenment.

The mythical and Buddhist backgrounds of the film, however, are the least interesting of its religious elements. What is far more compelling is that a seemingly botched enlightenment experience subtly drives the film's entire plot. Li Mu Bai is introduced at the beginning of the film as more of a monk than a fighter. In the opening scene he calmly walks with his horse onto the compound of Shu Lien's security company where he is greeted by all who know him. He then sits down with Shu Lien to explain to her that he left his practice of "deep meditation" at Wudan mountain because he had a frightening experience:

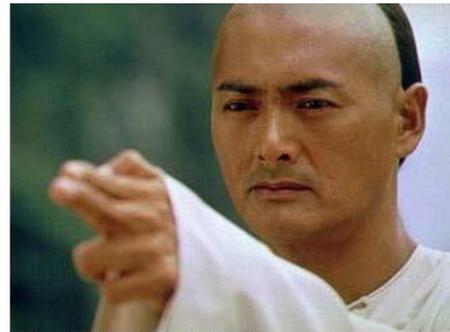
During my meditation training ... I came to a place of deep silence ... I was surrounded by light ... Time and space disappeared. I had come to a place my master had never told me about.<sup>4</sup>

Shu Lien speculates that Mu Bai experienced enlightenment, but Mu Bai thinks otherwise:

No. I didn't feel the bliss of enlightenment. Instead ... I was surrounded by an endless sorrow. I couldn't bear it. I broke off my meditation. I couldn't go on. There was something ... pulling me back ... Something I can't let go of.<sup>5</sup>

What else should one expect from "deep," sincere meditation other than bliss? It is not there, however, for Mu Bai. Presumably he reaches a high level in his practice because he achieves a state his master had not told him about (There will be more about the secrets masters keep later). But there is no bliss where Mu Bai has gone: space and time disappear; endless sorrow.

Allow me for a moment to jump into a Western, philosophical idiom. Immanuel Kant in his First Critique tells us that time and space are the a priori constituents of knowledge. For knowledge to exist, to



Li Mu Bai (Chow Yun Fat)

emerge, time and space have to already and always be there. And if the human subject is that which knows - the human as knower - then when time and space disappear they would take the human (perhaps one could even say the self) with them. In a psychoanalytic vocabulary, this experience sounds like a trauma. From

a Buddhist perspective this is all well and good because the self or the human has no ultimate, independent reality anyway. This understanding, however, does not solve the problem of Mu Bai's sorrow. What he experienced, from his perspective, could not have been enlightenment because there was no bliss. Perhaps, we can imagine Mu Bai's master saying, the experience was negative because Mu Bai had not yet released all his attachments. But the attachment that remains is only revealed through this meditation experience. How could it be released beforehand?

There is something odd about expecting enlightenment to be blissful (or merely blissful). To be sure, this is not Mu Bai's fault as an individual: the Chan/Zen traditions are full of stories of monks who become enlightened in rapturous joy,<sup>6</sup> and most representations of the Buddha picture him with a profound smile caused his Ur-enlightenment. But can or should one expect enlightenment to be anything? If we take enlightenment to be the disappearance of the self (which is a questionable way to describe it) or the extinguishment of the self, as the word nirvana implies, who or what is doing the experiencing of enlightenment? In other words, perhaps enlightenment is not an experience at all. Enlightenment itself could be nothing.

Of course, such a thought is not really so radical. It has been thought before within the Chan tradition. Take, for example, the *Platform Sutra* of the Sixth Chinese Patriarch of Chan, Hui-neng. According to this text, Hui-neng, an illiterate

monastery worker at the time, demonstrates his enlightenment realization to Hung-jen, the Fifth Patriarch, by secretly composing the following poem:

There is no *bodhi* tree,  
Nor a stand of a mirror bright.  
Since all is empty,  
Where can the dust alight?<sup>7</sup>

Hui-neng dictates this poem in response to another written by a rival monk:

Our body is the *bodhi* tree,  
And our mind a mirror bright.  
Carefully we wipe them hour by hour  
And let no dust alight.<sup>8</sup>

The rival's poem seeks to explain what *bodhi* is, while Hui-neng's poem claims that *bodhi* is nothing.

*Perhaps* then Shu Lien was correct all along. Mu Bai did experience enlightenment. It simply did not come in any form he had been taught to expect: rather than simply being about bliss and eternity, enlightenment is also about sorrow and attachment. If it had come in an expected form, then it would not have been enlightenment; it would have been a projection, a fantasy of the unenlightened self, the self which still seeks an ultimate object on which to secure itself. It is this unrecognized enlightenment, this enlightenment-that-refuses-to-be-enlightenment, that drives the entire plot of *Crouching Tiger*; it stimulates all of the action to come.

This question I am pursuing - What is enlightenment? - does not occur in a strictly Buddhist context. For one thing, I am not a Buddhist thinker. But more importantly, the film itself is hybrid. Ang Lee is not a kung-fu-fighting moviemaker. He made his international reputation by directing manneristic family dramas such as *Eat Drink Man Woman*, *The Wedding Banquet*, *The Ice Storm* and *Sense and Sensibility* (an adaptation of the Jane Austen novel). *Crouching Tiger* is something of a departure for him. Furthermore, though the film is based on an early twentieth-century wu xia novel by Chinese writer Wang Du Lu, the screenplay itself was originally written in English by Lee and James Schamus then translated into Chinese then translated again back into English for re-writes. And, of course, the film was distributed internationally, gaining much critical praise at the Cannes Film Festival and winning the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar in the United States. Additionally, two of its principal stars, Michelle Yeoh and Chow Yun Fat, have previously made several pictures in the United States.

So *Crouching Tiger* is as much a Western film as it is an Asian one. And mentioning enlightenment, as this essay does, in a context that is at least partially Western, implies not only the Buddhist concept but also the enlightenment of Western philosophy. After all, the question, "What is enlightenment?" has been asked before, most significantly by Immanuel Kant.

In his short essay of 1784 entitled, "What is Enlightenment?"<sup>9</sup> Kant defines this concept as humanity's release from a self-inflicted *Unmündigkeit*, a term translated variously as tutelage, minority, or immaturity. Kant characterizes the term as the "inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another."<sup>10</sup> For Kant, enlightenment is essentially an autonomy purchased with one's free use of reason in matters of knowledge and understanding. This stands in opposition to an institution (especially a religious one), a sovereign, or "guardians," imposing knowledge on a public solely by means of authority. An interesting political edge to Kant's thinking here is the relationship between enlightenment and freedom. Using one's reason makes one more free, but that use of reason also requires freedom. Freedom is both a product and a pre-condition of enlightenment.<sup>11</sup> Freedom and enlightenment are so closely intertwined for Kant that it seems that they are almost synonymous: enlightenment is freedom, a freedom opposed to the "tutelage" by the masters of government and religion. Therefore, one could characterize enlightenment as a self-mastery that wrenches freedom away from the hands of others.

Kant admits that we do not yet, in his time, live in an enlightened age, but that we do live in an age of enlightenment, meaning that enlightenment in the public realm is just beginning to occur. Michel Foucault, in his analysis of Kant's essay which bears the same title, takes the point a step further.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps we do not live

in an age of enlightenment, and perhaps we never will, but Foucault claims that the question of enlightenment is the question of modern philosophy. The concern for enlightenment is the marrow of modern philosophy, whether this concern is explicitly acknowledged or not. Foucault observes that Kant defines enlightenment as an exit or way out (Ausgang). This terminology inevitably conjures the idea of liberation: enlightenment as an escape from a previously unsatisfactory way of being in the world. Furthermore, Foucault emphasizes that enlightenment is not an event but is an attitude or ethos, one that engages in a constant critique of one's contemporary existence and historical situation. The purpose of such a critique, for Foucault, is to become conscious of the historical limits imposed upon one and then attempt to go beyond them: enlightenment as transgression.

Perhaps I seem here to have gone far afield. A connection is on its way. Based upon Kant's perspective, supplemented a bit by Foucault, the essence of Western philosophical enlightenment can be characterized as critiquing one's historical and existential situation, fueled by one's own capacity for reason, in such a way that gains one greater freedom and autonomy. In other words, enlightenment leads to mastery. This is not so different, it seems to me, from Buddhist enlightenment. If we bracket the different means to the goal (In Western philosophy, it is human reason. In Chan, it is meditative practice.), Western and Buddhist enlightenments possess an uncannily similar structure. Even though there

are countless admonitions in Buddhism that *bodhi* and *nirvana* cannot be discursively described, we can think of Buddhist enlightenment as a state where one realizes in some way (intuitively, bodily, cognitively) the full contingency of one's own existence and of existence in general, that nothing exists in an independent and substantial fashion. Furthermore, it is the illusion that the self is a fixed and enduring entity that fuels the desire that creates suffering. Hence, Buddhist enlightenment is a way to see through the phenomenon of suffering, and, perhaps, even to exit from it. Achieving this state results in, at the least, some kind of psychological equanimity, at the most, a rapturous joy. Already the connections with a Western philosophical enlightenment should be clear. Buddhist enlightenment is an exit from a perspective on the self that creates suffering; thus it engenders a kind of freedom from suffering (or at least the ordinary perception of suffering). We can also call this freedom mastery. Within Buddhist enlightenment one ceases to be the slave of an existence that always comes up short; instead one masterfully recognizes and enjoys existence for what it is.

Taking a cue from the similarities between these two perspectives, one can abstract what might be called a general structure of enlightenment.<sup>13</sup> Structurally speaking, enlightenment is a position of freedom and mastery gained through effort. In even more plain words, it is an attempt to be above the fray, any fray whatsoever. It is here that a new look at *Crouching Tiger* becomes compelling.

Already I have said that the entire film is thrust in motion by Mu Bai's seemingly botched enlightenment experience. And I have suggested that there is some question to whether this experience is botched or not: perhaps Mu Bai does experience a kind of enlightenment. From a different angle, however, Mu Bai, along with Shu Lien, are *definitely* enlightened in the sense that they are self-determined masters, a status made possible because of their martial arts skills. Here is where the film's most striking feature of action comes into play: flight. Shu Lien, Mu Bai, and the other Giang Hu fighters (who appear in this essay shortly) are literally *en-lightened*; they are lighter than air. Along with their astounding ability to fight, with weapons and without, these masters can fly. In the midst of combat, at their own command, they gracefully defy gravity.

Owing to the mythical matrix from which the film derives, supernatural events should come as no surprise. Indeed, wu xia warriors have all kinds of extraordinary



Jen (Zhang Ziyi) flying through a bamboo grove

powers. It is easy to imagine how such powers can be projected onto these legendary figures - fantasies of those who tell stories of the masterful and self-determined. Indeed, self-determination is the key, I think, to appreciating the

possible significance of flight in *Crouching Tiger*. First of all, notice how natural it is that some characters fly. After seeing Jen or Mu Bai levitate, no one exclaims: "Oh my god! You can fly." Such ability seems to be taken as a given. It is a skill that comes from training, not a divine gift. Even when Shu Lien first confronts the masked Jen in the film's first combat sequence, it is Jen's ability to absorb a punch, not her ability to fly, that causes Shu Lien to suspect the young girl has studied at Wudan. Notice also that flight is not a means of absolute escape. Jen does manage to fly out of a few precarious combat situations. But, by and large, the fighters do not use their ability to fly as a means of escaping the circumstances of their existence (Even Jen does not do this when she flees her family and new husband). Flight for these fighters is a means of engagement, a tool they use to fulfill the roles they have chosen. The characters in *Crouching Tiger* do not fly away to a paradise or a motherland.<sup>14</sup> They fly to fight, and they are never very far off the ground. Flight in the film seems to act as a sign of mastery, the ability to willfully, purposefully, and nonchalantly defy gravity, the single force that grasps us all.

Young Jen, of course, represents the struggle to attain such mastery. Her governess, the criminal Jade Fox, has for ten years clandestinely trained Jen in the Wudan martial arts. So the girl can already fly and fight, but she has yet to gain the self-determination that should come with mastery. Jen awaits her arranged marriage

to an influential diplomat while she longs for the life she imagines Shu Lien and Mu Bai to have. Independence and freedom are for the *en-lightened* masters.

With mastery, of course, comes knowledge. Masters have knowledge that others do not - secret knowledge. Indeed, the possession of secrets brings power, and there are all kinds of secrets in *Crouching Tiger*. The secret around which so many others depend is the Wudan martial arts manual. Containing the secrets of the Wudan school of martial arts, the manual is stolen by Jade Fox when she murders Mu Bai's master. She then uses the manual to train both herself and Jen in secret. Her ability to read the manual, however, is limited; she can only follow the diagrams and cannot translate the symbols. Jen, on the other hand, does read the symbols and secretly surpasses her master in her knowledge of the martial arts. Her superior knowledge is revealed when Jade Fox first engages Mu Bai in combat on Yellow Hill. Mu Bai, who seeks to avenge the murder of his master, taunts Jade Fox as he easily counters all of her attacks, telling her that despite her knowledge of the manual her moves are undisciplined (a comment that implies that she has had no proper master to teach her). Having disabled Jade Fox, Mu Bai attempts to finish her only to have his sword blocked by Jen who then rescues her master from death by successfully engaging Mu Bai. In the process, however, Jade Fox realizes the secret Jen has been keeping: she has fully read the Wudan manual, and her skills have surpassed those of her master.

Another secret is revealed on Yellow Hill: the complete origin of Jade Fox. The notorious criminal tells Mu Bai that she was once his master's lover. She grew angry and resentful that the Wudan master would sleep with her but not teach her. So she killed him and stole the Wudan manual, beginning her life in the Giang Hu underworld. Mu Bai is ignorant of this etiology and does not seem to care when he hears it. His passion for revenge drives him to pursue Jade Fox and eventually leads to his own death.

One should consider here the role of teachers. To a common way of thinking, teachers are, of course, the ones who dispense secrets, the ones who regulate the powerful knowledge that few know. And the very idea of a teacher presupposes care and stability: a teacher gives knowledge out of concern for the student and guides the student into new experiences, ones that the teacher has already had. This image of a teacher seems to break down with Mu Bai and Jen. Mu Bai's master has, of course, shared with Mu Bai the secrets of the Wudan martial arts, but he apparently hid from his pupil his own sexual relationship with Jade Fox. This secret condemns Mu Bai to a cycle of violent vengeance that ends only with his own death. Secrets bring power and destruction.

But what happens when the teacher has no more secrets, no more lessons? Jen surpasses the skills of Jade Fox, but such attainment does not make her happy:

Master...I started learning from you in secret when I was 10. You enchanted me with the world of Giang Hu. But once I realized I could surpass you, I became so frightened! Everything fell apart. I had no one to guide me, no one to learn from.<sup>15</sup>

Teachers hold things together. They are objects (to use a psychoanalytic term) onto which students ground their freshly-formed senses of themselves. When that ground disappears fear and confusion can result. Recall Mu Bai's enlightenment experience. It is an experience his master had not prepared him for, and the sorrow it produces overwhelms Mu Bai.



Jen and Mu Bai (Chow Yun Fat) battle at close range

Jen and Mu Bai, then, encounter each other in the empty space of their own teachers' failures. No wonder then that Mu Bai becomes enchanted with the young prodigy. Desiring a disciple worthy of the Wudan secrets, he persistently pursues Jen and hopes to make her the first female Wudan student. Jen resists, in part because she knows Wudan is none too friendly toward women ("Wudan is a whorehouse! Keep your lessons!"<sup>16</sup>) but also because she hesitates to replace the yoke of her family with the yoke of a new mentor. What Mu Bai fails to realize, and Jen sees all too clearly, is that teaching is not an entirely self-less endeavor. On the verge of giving up his martial ways and perhaps even making a life with Shu Lien, Mu Bai becomes energized by the appearance of Jen; he seems re-committed

to his role as a Wudan martial arts master. He does not recognize, however, the eros present in his desire to teach the young fighter. When the two of them fight in the tops of bamboo trees, Mu Bai, with a sly smile on his face, seems to be more flirting than fighting. The camera's close-up on their faces reveals a sexuality never before present in the film. Shortly after when Mu Bai rescues Jen from being drugged by Jade Fox, Jen greets him by opening her top, revealing her breasts through a thin undershirt, and saying: "Is it me or the sword [Green Destiny] you want?" She passes out in Mu Bai's arms, and the Wudan master's face grimaces with bewilderment. Jen's question, as much as her condition, forces Mu Bai to see the sexuality present within his desire to teach. He does not realize that teaching is not an innocent thing and neither is the mastery that it requires.

To think about the darker side of enlightenment, consider the work of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* shows that philosophical enlightenment never totally overcomes its unenlightened roots, i.e. mythology. Not only does enlightenment dialectically depend on mythology because mythology is the ground from which it grows, but also mythology and enlightenment both derive from the desire to exert some kind of control over one's environment. From a mythological worldview, this attempt at control takes the combined form of didactic, explanatory narrative and mimetic ritual. Pre-enlightened humans explain existence and proper behavior within it through myths,

and they attempt to influence the gods by imitating them through ritual. Instead of appeasing the powers of existence through mimesis (an action that requires a proximity, an intimacy, with the gods), philosophical enlightenment seeks control of existence through discourse that creates a greater distance between humans and the world, establishing a rigid line between subject and object. Philosophical enlightenment is pre-figured by the Judeo-Christian mythology in which, instead of imitating god, humans act in his image to gain dominion over the world that he created. Furthermore, enlightenment itself is something of a mythology. Horkheimer and Adorno observe that, like most mythologies, enlightenment is based on a structure of retribution. It seeks to overcome and destroy that which came before it. In the theorists' own words:

Just as the myths already realize enlightenment, so enlightenment with every step becomes more deeply engulfed in mythology. It receives all its matter from the myths, in order to destroy them; and even as judge it comes under the mythic curse. It wishes to extricate itself from the process of fate and retribution while exercising retribution on that process.<sup>17</sup>

This argument, that mythology and enlightenment are already and always necessarily intertwined within each other, is not merely a clever act of dialectics. Writing during the Second World War, Horkheimer and Adorno want to know why philosophical enlightenment has not delivered the world it promised. Where are the social freedom and the happiness of individuals that were to come with the birth of the twentieth century? Instead, we get mechanized mass warfare, economic

depression, existential angst, and fascism. The theorists suggest that modern horrors and disappointments do not stem from an error of thought, some kind of mistake that enlightenment attempts to make right - only it has not yet fully completed its task. The "new barbarism" of the modern world is not a reversion to pre-enlightenment; it is part and parcel with enlightenment. Enlightenment does not overcome its other (which Horkheimer and Adorno usually call mythology but also associate with irrationality and violence); it brings its other with it. Which is another way of saying, when simplistically conceived, philosophical enlightenment does not work. Such a conclusion is not merely a lament. Adorno and Horkheimer hope that a more enlightened view of enlightenment leaves room for hope:

The point is [...] that the Enlightenment must consider itself, if men [sic.] are not to be wholly betrayed. The task to be accomplished is not the conservation of the past, but the redemption of the hopes of the past.<sup>18</sup>

Enlightenment is not a well-lit stairway to a utopian heaven. It has within it the seeds of its own reversal, a reversal that can be dangerous and violent. Realizing this fact, though, need not lead one to cynicism. Indeed, Horkheimer and Adorno engage in their critique out of a sense of hope. Perhaps life is better when we understand the limits of our thinking. Perhaps the hopes of the past, if not the plans of the past, can be revived. Such a view one could cleverly call the enlightenment of enlightenment.

It would be silly to say that *Crouching Tiger* illustrates Horkheimer and Adorno's thesis. The film, however, is a portrait of enlightenment as a general structure of thought considering itself, a vehicle of thinking that spurs the viewer into considering the many faces of mastery.

To return to the issue of flight. There is something missing in all the flying that happens in *Crouching Tiger*: levity. Think of Friedrich Nietzsche's understanding of flight. For him, flight is the joyous and playful attitude adopted by a thinker that opposes the spirit of gravity. The spirit of gravity is the spirit of graveness, a somber seriousness that Nietzsche attributes to Christian (slave) morality. It is the task of the thinker to free oneself from the pull of this force, to dance lightly amid concepts and cultural forms, cultivating a life-affirming creativity. Nietzsche has his Zarathustra proclaim:

And above all, I am an enemy of the spirit of gravity, that is the bird's way - and verily, a sworn enemy, archenemy, primordial enemy....He who will one day teach men to fly will have moved all boundary stones; the boundary stones themselves will fly up into the air before him, and he will rebaptize the earth - "the light one."<sup>19</sup>

In *Crouching Tiger* there is something unbearable about the lightness of those who fly. The three characters who possess this ability are tragic: Mu Bai dies as a result of his dogged pursuit of vengeance; Shu Lien loses Mu Bai and shares her feelings with him only in the last seconds of his life; and Jen, despite all her talent and will, cannot find satisfaction, not even in the arms of her outlaw lover, Lo. The flight of

these three is not a flight of spirit. It lacks the levity of Nietzsche's metaphor. As I said earlier, their flight is not a vehicle of escape, but its engagement bears the aura of tragic fate. In other words, where is the humor in *Crouching Tiger*?

Of course, the film is under no obligation to be humorous. One of its beauties is that it avoids a Hollywood happy (and fully understandable) ending. But humor is not absent. It is just masterfully concealed. *Crouching Tiger's* humor is embodied in the character Bo. The head security officer for the Governor Sir Te, Master Bo should undoubtedly be a competent warrior. From the beginning, however, he is portrayed as a sentimental buffoon with mediocre martial skills. In the first combat scene of the film, he interrupts Jen as she steals the Green Destiny, but the petite fighter easily evades the attacks of the security officer and, in the process, causes him to strike himself with his own weapon. Later, when the undercover police investigator Tsai, along with his daughter, May, confront Jade Fox, they secretly tie a rope to Bo so that he will not interfere with the fight. Jade Fox appears, and Bo vigorously charges after her only to be jerked backwards by the rope. When he manages to unleash himself, Bo further demonstrates his incompetence by getting between Jade Fox and Tsai, allowing Jade Fox to use Bo's own weapon against Tsai. Lee, of course, provides no laugh tracks with these scenes, but they are undeniably funny. The laughter, however, is muted and

awkward, because, after all, Jen successfully steals the Green Destiny, and Jade Fox successfully kills Tsai.

Despite his buffoonery, Bo is no Falstaff. Indeed, he appears to have a wisdom that other more enlightened characters do not, for Bo allows himself to become attached. After Jade Fox kills Tsai, May looks to Bo for solace and companionship. "Come in [to the house]," she beckons him, "We don't have to fear Jade Fox if we're together."<sup>20</sup> Bo obliges, and one cannot help but think this is a gesture that neither Mu Bai nor Shu Lien would do. After years of fighting side-by-side, they never seem to express their longing and fear to one another. With such emotions, Bo seems entirely comfortable. Is it mere coincidence, then, that Bo buries Jade Fox? After she and Mu Bai kill each other, Bo places the criminal alone in a muddy hole as her final resting place. He certainly does little to contribute directly to her demise, but as an image, this scene extraordinarily suggestive. Master Bo, the foolhardy security chief, has the last word, so to speak, with the notorious criminal Jade Fox. In the pouring rain, he stands over her dead body, covering it with wet earth, creating a feeling that is almost triumphant. Almost. Except that he did not defeat her, and her conqueror, the impenetrable Li Mu Bai, also stands on the verge of death. It is as if Ang Lee creates this cinematic image to suggest that victory comes despite effort, not because of it. Or even more, perhaps

this image renders useless the idea of triumph. Enlightenment does not defeat its other but secretly brings its other with it. Bo the buffoon, not Mu Bai the master, stands over the corpse of Jade Fox, and it is a sad scene.

In a film that engages the theme of mastery, it is significant that most of the main characters are women, and perhaps even more important that they are also fighters. This is one of Lee's innovations on the wu xia genre.<sup>21</sup> It is as if he tries to paint a new sheen on our images of masters. But Lee does not adjust gendered images by merely including martial masters who are female. Instead, *Crouching Tiger* gives the stories of how three women - Jen, Jade Fox, and Shu Lien - never fully become legitimate masters. Jade Fox becomes a Giang Hu criminal due to her anger that Mu Bai's master will not teach her, subordinating her to the mere status of paramour. As I said earlier, Jen struggles desperately for a life of self-determination. She has the opportunity to be the first female student at Wudan, but

under the influence of her mentor, she knows such an opportunity is no clear path to freedom. It is only her time in the desert with Lo that she seems happy and free. But



Tsai (Wang De Ming) combats Jade Fox (Chang Pei Pei)

even here Lo seems to act as the taming male influence on her irrational, feminine

drives.<sup>22</sup> Of the three female characters, Shu Lien appears to be the most successful. She is a respected warrior who runs a security company. Her status seems to come from her connection to her dead father who started the family company. Since she was not trained at Wudan, Shu Lien also probably learned her fighting skills from her father. Despite the respect she has, Shu Lien is, of course, constantly overshadowed by Li Mu Bai. She clearly becomes impatient with him when he interrupts her investigation of the stolen Green Destiny and by his infatuation with Jen. Additionally,



Jen and Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh)

she seems to compete with him to be a pedagogue to the young prodigy. Mu Bai wants to be Jen's mentor; Shu Lien wants to be her sister. As she rides through a bazaar in Peking, Shu Lien's unease with her own position (and her gender) shows when she spots a young girl performing in an acrobat troop. Shu Lien views this child contorting her body for money with an empathic concern: What will she grow up to be? For whom will she grow up?

To begin to conclude, I think Shu Lien was right from the beginning: Mu Bai does have an enlightenment experience at Wudan - a confounding experience that reveals the sorrow and the need for attachment that mastery in any form tries to hide. To be sure, this is not the enlightenment that most of us dream about: there

is no sovereignty, freedom, or bliss. This is an enlightenment that evades satisfaction but embraces the complexity of an existence beyond our control.

So what of it? The point, as I see it, is not to become film critics, masterful judges of yet another kind of discourse. The enlightenment-that-refuses-to-be-enlightenment is not a clever way to view a compelling film. It is a concept *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* seems to offer or stimulate. As Slavoj Žižek has suggested, films should not be so much objects of thought as means of thought.<sup>23</sup> Our movies think us. And *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* beckons us to think along the outer surfaces of mastery, to dream dreams in which failure and death are always possibilities and intelligence, love and justice do not come to our rescue but do come along for the ride.

Finally, the enigma of enlightenment is mirrored in the last image of the film. Reunited with Lo at Wudan, Jen lifts herself off a bridge spanning a foggy cavern. Her feelings and motivations are not clear. The action itself is also puzzling. Is she floating or falling? She is definitely not flying.

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<sup>1</sup> "Weathering," in *The Really Short Poems of A. R. Ammons* (New York: Norton, 1992), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Lao-Tzu, Tao Te Ching*, trans. Stephen Addiss and Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 26.

<sup>3</sup> Ang Lee & James Schamus, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: A Portrait of the Ang Lee Film* (New York: New Market Press, 2000), p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> For a particularly vivid example see *The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writing*, trans. Philip Yampolsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971).

<sup>7</sup> *The Sutra of Hui-Neng*, trans. A.F. Price & Wong Mou-lam (Boston: Shambhala, 1990), p. 72.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?" in *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Library of the Liberal Arts, 1959), pp.85-92. See also a more recent translation of this essay in *Kant, Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 17-22.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> At the end of the essay, Kant distances himself from the radical implications of this point, claiming that restrictions on political freedom are necessary for freedom of thought to flourish.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?", trans. Mathew Henson (1992). This text can also be found in... (<http://eserver.org/philosophy/foucault/what-is-enlightment.html>)

<sup>13</sup> This notion of a general structure to enlightenment is inspired by John Caputo's reading of Derrida, in which he argues that the French philosopher has created a "generalized apophatics," that is an apophatic discourse that does not occur within a discrete tradition of negative theology. With my idea of a general structure of enlightenment, I do not mean to suggest that Western philosophical enlightenment and Buddhist enlightenment are identical nor there is a universal form of enlightenment; I mean to highlight some striking similarities between Western philosophical and Buddhist enlightenments and to note how both of these concepts can affect those of us who dwell in a pluralistic culture. See Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1997), pp. 26-56.

<sup>14</sup> Contrast this to the flight found in Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* (New York: Dutton Signet, 1987). Morrison writes of a legendary tribe of Africans enslaved in the American Southeast in which, shortly after they are emancipated by a white President, all the men lift off and fly back to Africa, leaving their women and children behind. This escape becomes a myth embedded in children's songs. Several generations later, the novel's protagonist, an immature male named Milkman, discovers that the story, the *mythos*, within these songs is his. Ironically, he finds his roots in a tribe of missing fathers who flew home to the motherland. More importantly, however, he realizes that his aunt, a bootlegger and healer provocatively named Pilate, could fly without ever leaving the ground. The flying fighters of *Crouching Tiger* more closely resemble Morrison's Pilate than her tribe of flying slaves.

<sup>15</sup> Lee and Schamus, p. 84.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 82.

<sup>17</sup> Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. xv.

<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra in The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1976), p. 304.

<sup>20</sup> Lee and Schamus, p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> Wu xia films have not been totally absent of female fighters. Chang Pei Pei, who plays Jade Fox, has made a career out of Wu xia roles.

<sup>22</sup> I am grateful to TOM McCabe for this insight into the interactions between Lo and Jen.

<sup>23</sup> Slavoj Zizek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), p. 9.