Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

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Abstract
This is a review of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000).
What exactly is enlightenment? This is an important question implied by Ang Lee's recent art-house, martial arts romance *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Indeed, one could describe the entire film as a cipher for this concern. Enlightenment is that awkward English word that attempts to roughly correspond to the Buddhist notion of nirvana. But in this context the word also has overtones of mastery and empowerment that spill over into many realms, including the politics of social structure, and - yes - the martial arts. One can be enlightened in all kinds of ways.

Set in nineteenth century China, the film begins by following the spiritual and psychological struggles of Li Mu Bai (Chow Yun Fat), a monkish martial arts master of legendary renown who decides to part with the fighting life in favor of deep meditation. After coming to a place of frightening darkness in his meditative practice, a place his master had not warned him about, Mu Bai abandons his meditation, and travels to visit Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh), a former comrade in combat and the director of her family's security company. Mu Bai asks Shu Lien to deliver his now-unneeded sword, the mythical Green Destiny, to Sir Te the Governor of the province. In addition to this gesture, however, it is clear that Mu Bai leaves his monastery due largely to his attachment to Shu Lien. Their mutual desire has never been expressed due to the traditional respect they both give to Shu Lien's dead fiancé. The plot begins to twist in myriad ways after Shu Lien arrives.
at Sir Te's home in Beijing. There she meets Jen (Zhang Ziyi), the young daughter of an aristocrat who awaits her arranged marriage while longing for a life of adventure and - more importantly - self-determination. One night, a mysterious figure steals the Green Destiny. Shu Lien unsuccessfully pursues the thief, and Mu Bai comes to Beijing to join the search. He thinks Jade Fox (Cheng Pei Pei), a notorious underworld criminal who murdered his master, might be responsible. Mu Bai must take up one last martial mission. From here the plot turns into a labyrinth of revelatory relationships and social struggle.

The most talked-about feature of this film is the fight sequences. Choreographed by Yuen Woo-Ping, the mastermind behind the slo-mo kung fu of The Matrix, these low-tech but beautiful scenes feature fighters who gracefully defy gravity - walking on water, leaping among rooftops, and combating in treetops. Such supernatural powers are standard in Wuxia, the mythical Chinese tales of superhuman knights on which the film is based. In Lee's hands these scenes create a magical realism that alludes to, among other things, the human aspiration to be free of all bonds.

Behind the acrobatics, however, lurks a subtle critique of mastery. Mu Bai is a master who is nearly struck dumb by his near-enlightenment experience and his persistent but troubling love for Shu Lien, and the two of them seem to compete to be a pedagogue for the prodigy Jen. Meanwhile, Jen fiercely struggles out from
under any yoke, that of a teacher, her family, or her outlaw paramour, Lo (Chang Chen). Additionally, it is no accident that most of the warriors in the film are women, as if Lee were painting a new sheen on conventional images of masters.

Mu Bai’s struggle with enlightenment is a struggle with attachment, surprise and powerlessness. He can neither deny nor affirm his love for Shu Lien; he is dismayed and inspired by the chance to become Jen's master; and he is humbled and endangered by secrets his own master kept from him. His life beckons the questions: What is enlightenment? Who is a master? The film suggests, however, that living gracefully with such questions rather than answering them is an enlightenment of its own.