

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

DIRECTED BY ANG LEE

MANDARIN WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES

DISTRIBUTED BY SONY PICTURES CLASSICS AND COLUMBIA PICTURES FILM PRODUCTION ASIA, 2000

120 MINUTES, COLOR



Source: The official *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* Web site: www.crouchingtiger.com
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C*rouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* has become a “break-through” foreign language film for American audiences, far exceeding the U.S. box office records for foreign films. The \$100 million collected in its first three and a half months is double the amount reaped by the next-highest-earning foreign film, *Life Is Beautiful*. Popular with general audiences and critics alike, *Crouching Tiger* was a hit at the Cannes Film Festival where audiences burst into applause after the first fight scene. It has also won

numerous awards for best picture and director and received a total of ten Oscar nominations, winning four in original music score, art direction, cinematography and foreign language film categories. Commentators applauded its challenging the notion of “foreign language” as a genre category by inducing mainstream audiences to embrace a movie with subtitles.

East Asian audiences, however, have been less enthusiastic. Despite critical acclaim and the involvement of local stars like Chow Yun Fat, *Crouching Tiger* has performed well below expectations in China, both in Hong Kong and the Mainland, as well as in Korea and Japan. In Beijing it played to near-empty theaters; in Shanghai audiences hissed at the fanciful flights across rooftops and atop swaying bamboo. Asian responses have been supportive only in Singapore and Taiwan where director Ang Lee is considered a homeboy.

Why such a weak reception in East Asia? Some Mandarin-speaking audiences, noting that only one of *Crouching Tiger*'s stars is a native speaker, consider the film not “really” Chinese because of its Taiwanese and American influences. Michelle Yeoh, in the crucial role of Yu Shulien, can't even read Chinese and had to learn her part line by line in pinyin. Most serious, however, is that *Crouching Tiger* is not the typical kung fu picture Asian audiences expect. The fighting doesn't even begin until after the film's first fifteen minutes, and only two of the leading characters are experienced martial artists. To many Asian viewers *Crouching Tiger* is slow, boring, and bloodless, both unrealistic and nothing new.

Based on an old story published by Wang Dulu in the 1920s, *Crouching Tiger* is a nineteenth century tale about the disenchantment of the great Daoist swordsman Li Mu Bai, who seeks to give up his magical sword and his *xiaowu*, chivalric-warrior lifestyle, and the repressed love between Mu Bai and Yu Shulien, who is equally courageous and accomplished with a sword. It also recounts the desperation of Jen, the daughter of a high official. Pledged to an arranged marriage, Jen has a secret passion for a desert bandit. She is also a martial arts disciple of her villainous governess Jade Fox, the assassin of Mu Bai's master. If this sounds convoluted, it is, but it is typical fare for kung fu cinema. In *Crouching Tiger*, however, layers of meaning and complex characterization enrich the plot, making it far more compelling than contemporary martial arts films. It is both a spectacular melodrama, as forces for good and evil fight for the soul of Jen and a morality tale about teaching and the search for knowledge. The source of all the trouble is the theft of a secret martial arts manual that has provided Jade Fox and Jen knowledge they do not know how to use justly. Both Mu Bai and Shulien seek to give Jen direction and training, but she responds by accusing Mu Bai of “talking like a monk.” Teaching her will not be easy.

Contrary to the typical martial arts movie, none of Ang Lee's characters are one-dimensional. Even archenemy Jade Fox is a complex character. It is difficult not to sympathize with her when she discovers that her pupil Jen, whom she has cared for as a daughter, has betrayed and surpassed her by not sharing the information she gained from reading the book's secrets. Poor illiterate

FILM REVIEWS

On this side of the Pacific, Americans have been exposed to a real slice of China: its aesthetics, its ethics, even its sweeping landscape from the deserts of the west to the Yellow Mountains' sea of clouds in the east.



Zhang Zhi-Yi as Jen in Sony Pictures Classics' *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Photo Copyright © 2000 Sony Pictures Classics

Jade Fox could only study the diagrams. And the selfish Jen, who causes so much trouble, is pitiable when she complains that she is getting married and has no chance to live the life she craves.

Like much of Chinese art, Confucian and Daoist ideas underlie much of the action, giving deeper meaning to the film. A Confucian sense of duty and honor rules the lives of Mu Bai and Shulien and ignites the dramatic passion of their unspoken love. Mu Bai and Shulien have loved each other for many years, but out of their concern for propriety have repressed their feelings because Shulien once promised herself to Mu Bai's "brother by oath," subsequently killed in battle. Mu Bai, in his search for transcendence, struggles to harmonize the Daoist Yin and Yang of meditation and action that govern human existence. Throughout, the tension between opposites, which permeates all life, enhances the dramatic effect of the film, from the portrayal of Jen as controlled calligrapher and combative swordsman to the Tan Dun score characterized by powerful percussion and a plaintive cello played by Yo Yo Ma.

The use of action clearly marks *Crouching Tiger* as a Hong Kong martial arts movie, but it, too, is unlike any other found in kung fu cinema. The film offers seven exhilarating fight sequences, all of which include women and often only women. Two, the comic destruction of an inn when Jen takes on all comers, and the fight between Mu Bai and Jen amidst bamboo, reflect the influence of the incomparable King Hu, whose masterpieces like *The Dragon Inn* were the rage in Taiwan when Lee was a boy. It is this *xiawu* tradition of ethical martial arts practiced by both genders, popular before the days of Bruce Lee, that Ang Lee seeks to portray. But while King Hu's fights occurred on the ground under the bamboo canopy, Ang Lee's characters sway high up on tendril tops. Cranes and wires, digitally removed from the final frames, lead to exquisitely choreographed battle dances which float over the tops of Peking roofs, across water, and through the air. Hong Kong audiences may find it disquieting, but for Lee these fight scenes become an extension of the drama, told through action instead of words. Mu Bai, the master who urges the volatile Jen to follow his teachings, sways on the bamboo tips, relaxed and in perfect control, while Jen fumbles for balance.

So *Crouching Tiger*'s Asian detractors are right; it is not a typical Hong Kong kung fu movie of today. It is much more. A fantastical martial arts romantic adventure, a lyrical, dream-like morality tale, *Crouching Tiger* combines the fast-paced action of the Hong Kong tradition with the emotional intensity of his earlier film, *Sense and Sensibility*, according to Lee. But does *Crouching Tiger* bastardize its genre and pander to the West as some have claimed? No. Setting out to film the martial arts movie of his childhood fantasies based on the melodramatic novels and films he loved as a boy, Ang Lee has brought to his dream dramatic skill honed in the making of thoroughly American movies like *Sense and Sensibility* and *The Ice Storm*. What he has created exposes audiences to his poetic vision of martial arts enacted within an intensely emotional and sexual drama. No wonder Americans love it.

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Zhang Zhi-Yi as Jen and Chow Yun Fat as Mu Bai in Sony Pictures Classic's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.
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What will *Crouching Tiger's* legacy be? Most likely the Hong Kong movie industry will never be the same. Lee's film has shown that Chinese movies can make millions in America. It has brought immense pride to the Hong Kong professionals who see the world acknowledging the talents of their fellow filmmakers. Undoubtedly increased investments will follow. On this side of the Pacific, Americans have been exposed to a real slice of China: its aesthetics, its ethics, even its sweeping landscape from the deserts of the west to the Yellow Mountains' sea of clouds in the east. They have discovered that they can listen to Chinese and forget that it consists of some very strange sounds and be swept away by its musicality and the visions before them. Perhaps some will even become curious about things Chinese and will seek to learn more.

Crouching Tiger, rated PG 13, should have broad appeal for students of almost any age; it is not only exceptionally entertaining but also successful in capturing the feel of the world of the Qing. It would be difficult, however, to use *Crouching Tiger* in the classroom because its representations of late imperial China are limited and interspersed between the many fight scenes in the two-hour film. It might be worthwhile, though, to pre-select some of the superb views of Chinese landscapes to support discussions of geography. The desert scenes depict both the pebble and rocks version common in the Takle Makan Desert, and the smooth, silty version found in the Gobi. A shot of nineteenth-century Peiking, based on considerable research, is worth the price of admission, and there is an excellent portrayal of a scholar's study, designed to give a convincing appearance of authenticity. Sprinkled throughout the film, little treasures such as these give students some understanding of the nineteenth-century Chinese world they have entered. ■

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