

Decoding Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*: A Sociosemiotic Approach

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Abstract

This study takes a sociosemiotic approach to decode Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* that is seen as an audiovisual discourse and also a symbolic representation. An analytical model that incorporates linguistic, semiotic and cultural analysis is constructed. The findings reveal that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* internalizes a hybrid intercultural Chinese identity that has rooted in Ang Lee's cognition of an imagined cultural China. Symbolically, a profound Chinese *wuxia* story that contains interwoven conflicts and negotiations between Chinese traditional culture and Western humanistic values is presented. The English translation of subtitles plays a key role in bridging the gap between Chinese culture and Western audiences, facilitating the dialogue between East and West. Significantly, Ang Lee's adaptation of plots, shaping of figures, symbolic representation of China's landscapes and also the use of language to some extent are for catering to Western audiences. Although the romantic imagination of "Cultural China" presents a multicultural cooperation of Chinese and Western culture, it objectively reinforces the ideological symbol of China as an orientally cultural "other" to the Western world.

Keywords: *Ang Lee, audiovisual discourse, symbolic representation, sociosemiotic perspective, cognition, translation, reconfiguration*

1. Introduction

Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) (henceforth CTHD) has been enshrined as one of the most successful Chinese martial arts¹ films in the world. It

saw a huge success in Western market, particularly in North America where it earned over \$100 million dollars in American box office, making it the highest profit foreign language film in American history in 2001 (Martin, 2005, p. 149). In addition to commercial success, the film also won the 73rd Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2001, becoming an icon of Chinese martial arts films by its success in Hollywood and its Oscar wins.

The success of CTHD can be attributed to “its stylish fighting sequences, romantic love stories, complex entanglements of old grudges between generations, elaborate costuming and picturesque settings” (Lee, 2003, p. 281). Its popularity in the Western film market and with film critics has suggested that this film is not simply a traditional Chinese martial arts film, or a Kung Fu film, like Bruce Lee’s *Fist of Fury* (1972), Tsui Hark’s *Once Upon a Time in China* (1991) or Raymond Lee’s *New Dragon Gate Inn* (1992). Rather, it is a new cultural product or cultural symbol that has combined Eastern *wuxia* tradition with Western cultural ideologies. As Dilley (2015, p. 118) puts it, “Lee’s film represents not only the international crossing of boundaries but the repackaging and reappropriation of Chinese cultural identity”. It is a well-designed global entertainment product (Yang, 2014, p. 125) and also a modern transformation of Chinese martial arts film. Undoubtedly, Ang Lee’s CTHD has profound sociocultural connotations and semiotic meanings, which deserve to be critically interpreted from multiple perspectives.

Although CTHD is a 20-year-old film, its artistic value and global influence still represent the highest quality of Chinese martial arts film (Zhu, 2009, p. 136). Therefore, it is a representative sample of Chinese martial arts film for cultural studies from the perspective of discourse-semiotic analysis. The film is seen as an audiovisual discourse and a kind of symbolic representation. By drawing on the sociosemiotic approach, the study seeks to decode Ang Lee’s CTHD by focusing on the three aspects of cognition, translation and reconfiguration of culture. Essentially, it is a text, discourse and sociocultural interpretation to the film from a sociosemiotic perspective, aiming to unveil its cultural identity, intercultural strategies and symbolic representations of sociocultural ideologies, which involves not only filmic interpretation but also specific linguistic-semiotic analysis. It needs to be pointed out that the term “discourse” here not only refers to language, but also a semiotic complex combining text, language, visual and acoustic systems for meaning-making.

2. Studies on *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

Previous studies of CTHD mainly involve two domains, namely, film studies and audiovisual translation studies. In film studies or cultural studies in a broad sense, Klein (2004) has investigated how Ang Lee's diasporic Chinese identity shaped his cultural cognition on China and how this identity recognition and imaginary China were reflected in CTHD. In Klein's (2004, p. 37) view, "*Crouching Tiger* stands as an exemplary instance of transnational cinema" and these kinds of films have "surprisingly fluid national-cultural identity". Placing cultural production in the context of globalization, Wang and Yeh (2005) propose a category framework for analyzing the process of hybridization of cultural products in globalization, namely "deculturalization", "acculturalization" and "reculturalization". CTHD was examined as a product of cultural hybridization that "cultures often generate new forms and make new connections with one another" (Wang & Yeh, 2005, p. 175).

Ang Lee's CTHD can be regarded as a culture-symbolic product that has been transformed from the textual reading of a novel to the visual communication of film. Lee (2009) makes a comparison between the original novel written by Wang Dulu² (王度庐, 1909-1977) and the film directed by Ang Lee. In its filmic narrative, it has created a dual meaning that strikes a balance between Chinese traditional culture and Western values to satisfy not only Chinese background audiences but also Western audiences who have not ever touched upon Chinese culture. Furthermore, Shen (2013) investigates the differences between Wang Dulu's novel and Ang Lee's film, pointing out that Ang Lee has rewritten the original story lines, narrative structure and its themes through highlighting the incorporation and conflict of Taoism and Chinese Zen philosophy instead of Confucian norms and social hierarchy that are emphasized in Wang's novel. Focusing on the female image in the film, Tseng (2005) adopts a "male gaze" perspective of feminist film theory to explore the portrayal of female images (especially, Jen Yu's (Yu Jiaolong) image) and summarizes that CTHD breaks the patriarchal norms of traditional *wuxia* films and challenges the stereotype of women's subordinated image, which is an innovation of the *wuxia* genre.

Moreover, in terms of audiovisual translation, the existing studies mainly examine the specific translation strategies and techniques adopted to translate the film subtitles. For instance, Liu and Ren (2009) examine the translator's subjectivity in

the English subtitles of CTHD, proposing that the translator has to decide whether to use competition or compromise in translation practice, which in other words is to use domestication or foreignization strategies in different weights. Jay (2003) identifies that reduction and simplification are two main strategies used to translate the subtitles so as to make them easily understandable and user-friendly, while “the reduction is achieved by simplifying both the name of the characters and the dialogues, at the sacrifice of accuracy” (p. 706). Ma (2003) adopts a functionalist approach to examine the subtitle translating (seeing it as interlinguistic and intersemiotic translation) in CTHD and finds that the translation keeps an intratextual coherence so as to improve the readability and connectivity. In contrast to those studies, Zhang (2019) takes a cultural discourse-analytic approach to comparatively examine Ang Lee's CTHD and Zhang Yimou's *Hero* from a global-local perspective, revealing that Ang Lee and Zhang Yimou respectively constructed their *wuxia* worlds with different discourses and visual strategies. His focus is on discursive construction of cultural ideology and hybridity in the two films, but also concerns the English translation of some typical Chinese dialogues (see also Zhang, 2020). Admittedly, audiovisual translation is important for the circulation of transnational film and the translated Chinese martial arts film as a cultural adaptation (or a soft power) can be exported overseas (Zhang, 2018a, p. 61), especially to the English-speaking world.

Clearly, the existing studies have provided many insights based on sociocultural interpretations, translation and linguistic analyses (e.g., Klein, 2004; Wang & Yeh, 2005; Lee, 2009; Shen, 2013; Jay, 2003; Ma, 2003; Zhang, 2019). However, they rarely took a semiotic or specifically a sociosemiotic approach to examine this Ang Lee film, and also did not touch upon the cognitive elements, the symbolic representations of culture, and the multicultural competition and hybridization in the film. Significantly, Zhang's (2021) study on *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* has touched upon the dimensions of cognition, translation and reconstruction of culture, but has not yet taken the semiotic perspective into account.

In view of this situation, the study attempts to fill in these gaps. Three research questions are proposed: 1) what kinds of individual/social identity, cultural symbols and ideologies are embedded in the film? 2) what kinds of translation strategies are used to address the culture-loaded discourses? 3) how are Chinese cultural elements reconfigured as a multicultural discourse and a semiotic representation with the

characteristics of Western values?

3. Methodology

3.1 Sociosemiotic approach

Sociosemiotics (aka social semiotics) is closely related to semiotics that is “the science of the life of sign in society” (Kress & Mavers, 2005, p. 172). Specifically, according to Kress and Mavers (2005, p. 172), “(social) semiotics provides categories which, at one level, apply to all modes equally, to speech as much as to image, to gesture as much as to music, to writing as much as to three-dimensional objects, and so on: categories such as sign, text, genre, discourse, or those of metaphor and analogy”. In this sense, sociosemiotics concerns not only linguistic mode but also visual, image, sound modes as well as their meaning-makings in societies. In other words, sociosemiotics “is concerned with meaning making and meaning maker. It studies the media of dissemination and the modes of communication that people use and develop to represent their understanding of the world and to shape power relations with others. It draws on qualitative, fine-grained analysis of artifacts, and texts, as records of meaning making, to examine the production and dissemination of discourses across the variety of social and cultural contexts within which meaning is made” (Jewitt & Henriksen, 2016, p. 145).

It is noteworthy that semiotic approaches to film studies have developed since the 1970s, especially Christian Metz’s film semiology (see Buckland, 2017). However, according to Bateman (2013, p. 641), “semiotic approaches to film, and in particular, linguistically inflected semiotic approaches, are nowadays in film theory and film studies at best ignored, at worst explicitly rejected”. In such conditions, semiotic approaches to film studies deserve to further develop, while Hallidayan systemic-functional semiotics can help remedy such gaps (Bateman, 2013). From the sociosemiotic perspective, CTHD can be qualitatively decoded by viewing it as an audiovisual discourse and also a symbolically meaning-making entity that consists of lexicogrammar, text, dialogue, sound, music, image, scene, audio and visual elements, etc. namely, multimodal resources. In other words, it is a multimodal analysis of sociosemiotics, reflecting the multimodalization of social semiotics (Hu, 2007). Recent studies of using this approach have covered the analyses of websites (Harvey,

2013), audiovisual translation (Taylor, 2016), film posters (Zhang, 2018b) and social media (Wignell et al., 2021).

3.2 Multicultural discourse analysis

Multiculturalism is an ideological stance that emphasizes cultural diversity and co-existence, negotiation and cooperation of different cultures in one field. It holds the idea that culture is not isolated but a complex, dynamic and integral part of human social life that interacts with different individuals and groups who have different national, religious, regional and knowledge backgrounds (Shi, 2016, p. 2). Accordingly, multicultural discourse means that “as part of human cultures, human discourses, including their respective contexts (worldviews, norms and values, histories, societies, economic conditions, etc.) are diverse, complex and hierarchical” (Shi, 2006a, p. 2).

Specifically, a multiculturalist stance or multicultural-epistemological stance refers to “a reflexive and critical position of meaning making in between Eastern and Western, North and South, and local and global regimes of knowledge/power” (Shi, 2006b, p. 383). Thus, such approach can be seen as a position of cultural critique. From a multiculturalist angle, the world consists of “a sort of cluster of different cultural identities either tolerantly recognizing or violently excluding each other” (Buden et al., 2009, p. 198). In the film analysis of CTHD, it more focuses on multicultural tolerance and cooperation.

Moreover, “discourse” is not simply limited in text and talk, rather it is “culturally saturated forms of communication, involving linguistic-symbolic activities in the various domains of social and cultural life of a community” (Wu, 2008, p. 2). Ang Lee's CTHD is seen as an audiovisual discourse (also a linguistic-symbolic representation). On the one hand, it is a form of audiovisual communication and a form of medium; on the other hand, as a transnational film, it needs to rely on translation to realize intercultural communication in linguistic-semiotic level.

In short, the multicultural discourse analysis means using a multiculturally critical position to examine text, national identity, East and West, conflict and negotiation of cultural ideologies that are represented by linguistic and audiovisual symbols in this film.

3.3 Individual/social cognition, translation of cultural discourse and reconfiguration of symbolic complex of culture

Cognition is related to humans' brain and mental systems. Drawing upon van Dijk's (2014) model of discourse-cognition-society, cognition can be understood as personal cognition and social cognition. Specifically, personal cognition or individual cognition considers "the ways individual language users, as members of linguistic, epistemic and social communities, subjectively produce and understand text and talk. Although such an account is framed in terms of the mental and neurological structures and processes of individual language users, it must be based on socially shared representations of individual social actors as members of various social collectives" (van Dijk, 2014, p. 123). This means that individual and social cognitions are interrelated and interwoven in discourse processing.

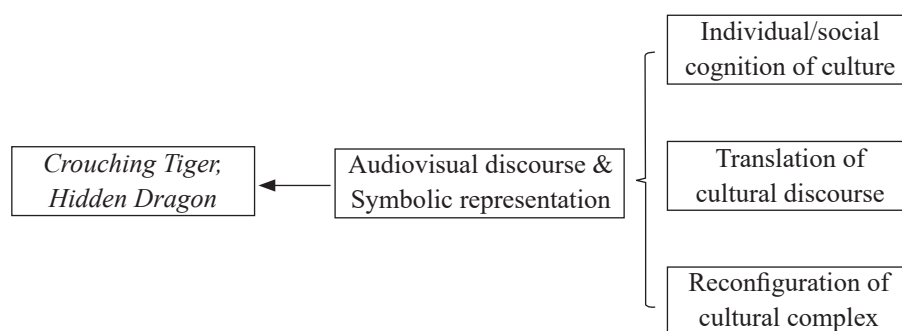
Translation of cultural discourse can be understood as a process of discourse processing (a process of transformation of different languages, styles and texts). Therefore, individual/social cognition plays a role, while it is also influenced by sociocultural contexts. According to Risku and Windhager (2013, p. 33), "cognition is not just an information manipulation process in the brain, it is contextualized action embedded in a body and increasingly mediated by technologies and situated in its socio-cultural environment." In such a case, sociocultural context, especially its symbolic representation is a key dimension to examine. In intercultural context, an effective cognition to an alien cultural phenomenon or product relies on the shared cultural symbols, such as language, identity, ideology and religious belief, so as to form a culture-shared "imagined community" (Anderson, 2006). In addition to the cognitive elements, translation of cultural discourse or cultural translation (though this term still remains controversial, see Buden et al., 2009; Sun, 2016) is a kind of intercultural communication behavior for both translators and ordinary cultural receivers, which also involve symbolic representations or reconfiguration of culture.

In terms of reconfiguration of symbolic complex of culture, it can be seen as an organic hybridization of cultural symbols in the context of cultural globalization. In Wang and Yeh's (2005) study of cultural hybridization, the analytical model that consists of "deculturalization", "acculturalization" and "reculturalization" can be drawn on through combining the linguistic-semiotic concepts (e.g., recontextualization) to examine the hybridization of cultural elements in this film.

For these concepts, “deculturalization” refers to “all of the elements that are cultural specific, including those that are ethnic, historical or religious, that create barriers to intercultural reception or are deemed unfit for a new presentation style, may be contained in a familiar narrative pattern that not only plays down cultural differences, but also guarantees comprehension across viewer groups” (Wang & Yeh, 2005, p, 178); “acculturalization” refers to making any national features disappear in a cultural product, namely “the ‘acculturalized’ cultural product” (Wang & Yeh, 2005, p, 178); “reculturalization” refers to adding some specific universal values, beliefs and cultural elements in a global cultural product so as to make audiences easy to accept, and it is often “as symbiotic with deculturalization as it is with acculturalization” (Wang & Yeh, 2005, pp. 178-179; Wang & Yeh, 2007, p. 179). However, in essence, these processes of cultural hybridization can be concluded as a process of cultural reconfiguration; therefore, in other words, they can be seen as a symbolic reconfiguration of culture.

Combining the sociosemiotic approach and multicultural discourse analysis, the above theoretical concepts are used as an integrated analytic device. The analytical model thus is constructed, see Figure 1.

Figure 1. Analytical model of CTHD



The analytical model sees CTHD as a linguistic-semiotic object with the dual attributes of audiovisual discourse and symbolic representation. It consists of three analytical components including i) individual/social cognition of culture, ii) translation of cultural discourse (or cultural translation for short) and iii) reconfiguration of cultural complex. *Individual/social cognition of culture* here can be understood as a cultural understanding (specifically, about language, text, audiovisual materials, and symbols) that emphasizes the functions of cultural identity, experiences

and background knowledge in understanding/interpreting different cultures or cultural products; *translation of cultural discourse* (cultural translation) is an intercultural translation behavior that is involved in multicultural conflict, negotiation and transformation (Sun, 2016), including two levels, i.e., macro-sociocultural level and micro-linguistic level; *reconfiguration of cultural complex* means a cultural product (including its meanings, connotations, styles and forms) is deconstructed from its original form in original context (de-contextualized) and then it is reconstructed into a new cultural form in a target new cultural context (re-contextualized).

4. Individual/Social Cognition of Culture: Cultural Identity and Semiotic Presentation of East-West Culture

There is no doubt that Chinese classical culture, especially Chinese philosophy, has been embedded in and semiotized by CTHD. The philosophical thoughts are represented by characters in the storytelling. Importantly, Chinese culture (classical philosophy) and Western cultural ideologies are consciously incorporated and hybridized. In such a way, Ang Lee pictured a fantastic and profound *wuxia* world that “mixes romance, feminism, martial arts, and high-art aesthetics” (Dilley, 2015, p. 120). This also reflects Ang Lee’s cognition of cross-cultural (Chinese and Anglo-American) identity which is closely related to his personal cultural experiences and perception.

4.1 Ang Lee’s cross-cultural (transnational) identity: Between East and West

Cross-cultural conflict and negotiation (specifically Chinese-Western culture) has always been a concern in Ang Lee’s films. According to Dariotis and Fung (1997, p. 187), “the overall philosophy of Ang Lee’s films demonstrates the struggles of individuals within and between cultures. Lee’s struggles to place Chinese culture within today’s progressive societies—both in the ‘East’ and in the ‘West’—echo a long tradition of Chinese negotiation with the influences of Western culture [...] Lee’s films consistently negotiate among cultures, nations, generations, and genders—illustrating the repressive as well as revitalizing forces of Chinese traditions in the intersection of the residual past and emerging future”.

Tracing back to Ang Lee’s cultural identity, it has a cross-cultural mark. His

parents moved from Mainland China to Taiwan after the end of China's civil war in 1949. He was born in Taiwan in 1954, grew up and received education there before he went to America to receive his university education in filmmaking at New York University and later he started his filmmaking career in Hollywood. His intercultural and transnational identity may be best understood from the content of his films themselves (Dariotis & Fung, 1997, p. 190).

Ang Lee's intercultural identity that bridges the gap between Chinese and American culture makes him "able to function as a director with the support of transnational capital, crew and markets" (Han, 2018, p. 227). Lee's personal experience is branded by diasporic Chinese identity and therefore his CTHD is regarded as "a work of diasporic cinema" (Klein, 2004, p. 18). Besides, his Chinese family upbringing and American filmmaking training allowed him become a multicultural director who can understand and connect the two cultures (Chinese and American cultures) in an effective way. Admittedly, Ang Lee's cross-cultural (transnational) identity shaped by the integration of Chinese and American cultures influence his film work that evidently reflects in CTHD, which presents cross-cultural, cross-boundary and cross-national features.

4.2 Taoism and Confucianism

In view of Ang Lee's cross-cultural and transnational identity cognition, CTHD can be seen as a diasporic image of "Cultural China". It represents Ang Lee's understanding on the combination and creation of Chinese culture (e.g., Taoism, Confucianism and Chinese Zen) with Western values (e.g., humanism, feminism, freedom, rebellion of tradition).

The two major classical Chinese philosophies, namely, Taoism and Confucianism, are intertwined throughout the narrative of story. As Klein (2004, p. 19) has put it "the film focuses on the tension between the characters' Taoist aspiration to follow the 'way' and their Confucian sense of obligation to others". Taoism and Confucianism embodied in characters and their conflicts also reflect in the story plot in which Li Mu Bai and Yu Shu Lien can be seen as the avatars (or semiotic representations) of Taoism and Confucianism, respectively. In contrast to Taoism of pursuing freedom, naturalness, balance and harmony between heaven, earth and human, Confucianism is secular and socialized, emphasizing social order, hierarchy, and virtues. For a

Confucian gentleman, primary virtues for him include “filial piety, fraternal duties, loyalty, kindness, righteousness, sincerity, trustworthiness, humility, diligence, gentleness, perseverance, respectfulness, deference, and others” (Jiang, 2018, p. 159).

In the story, Li Mu Bai is a respectable swordsman pursuing the “way” of Taoism from Wudang Sect. He loves Shu Lien but he cannot fully express his true feelings since he is constrained by the social morality of Confucianism and his pursuit of Taoism. Similarly, Shu Lien is shaped as a female warrior featured by Confucian morality and ethics. Although she loves Li Mu Bai deeply, she has to repress her love desire to Li Mu Bai since her deceased fiancé was also Mu Bai’s friend. The theme of repressed love between Li Mu Bai and Yu Shu Lien represents the conflict between Taoism (naturalness and freedom) and Confucianism (traditional social ethics and hierarchy) in the film. The tension between Taoism and Confucianism projecting on those characters and events constitutes the filmic core theme.

Chinese philosophies expressed in the film echo Ang Lee’s intercultural identity, a diasporic Chinese identity. Such intercultural and transnational identity embedded in the film can be seen as cultural hybridization in the context of integration of globalization and localization, the East and the West. Meanwhile, feminism and the pursuit of freedom are two Western cultural ideologies hidden in this “inauthentic” Chinese martial arts film (Chan, 2004, p. 4).

4.3 Feminism

Feminism generally is not a theme in Chinese martial arts films, in that they should be masculine films, and usually females are subordinated to male characters in story. However, feminism is highlighted in the film, which indicates that Ang Lee adopts a multiculturalist attitude to incorporate cultures from East and West and it is also a breakthrough of traditional norms of the martial arts film genre.

In traditional China, a woman is commonly affiliated with a man, which is also a feature of Chinese patriarchal society that enshrines Confucian values and norms. In the film, its “narrative design associates the woman warrior with a problematic desire, the eruption and containment of which becomes the center of tension and drama” (Cai, 2005, p. 449). There are three principle female characters in the film: Yu Shu Lien (俞秀莲), Jen Yu (玉娇龙), and Jade Fox (碧眼狐狸), and each of them represents a cultural ideology and female tragedy.

Yu Shu Lien represents a respectable woman warrior within the Confucian ethic morality. She is brave, loyal and has excellent Kung Fu skills. She is shaped by Confucian spirit as a Chinese woman with good virtues. In a scene at the beginning of CTHD (see Figure 2), there are two traditional Chinese couplets shown at Yu Shu Lien's hall, which is:

春祀秋嘗遵萬古聖賢禮樂，
 喬木發千枝豈非一本；
 長江流萬派總是同源，
 左昭右穆序一家世代源流。

Family obeys the traditions of ancient sages' rituals and music in Spring and Autumn sacrificial ceremonies,

A thousand branches of an arbor grow from the same root;

Ten thousand tributaries of Yangtze river flow from the same source,

Hierarchy and order are key to the prosperous and long history of family's generations.³

This is a metaphoric message that symbolizes Yu Shu Lien's worship of Confucian moral order in her family tradition. In China's traditional ethics, Yu Shu Lien cannot go cross the line expressing her true love to Li Mu Bai in that Li also is her dead fiancé's friend, though they love each other. In Ang Lee's words, "Having chosen a life of duty, Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien had to suppress their passions and desires, and, most of all, their love for each other" (quoted in Chan, 2004, p. 9).

Figure 2. Chinese traditional couplets shown in the background



In contrast with Yu Shu Lien, Jen Yu, a Manchurian aristocrat, is a representation of freedom and rebellion against tradition. She is young, passionate, has a desire for freedom and also has courage to break the norms of the Chinese patriarchy to pursue her true love with Lo. Jen Yu's rebellious behavior "reflects her deep resistance to patriarchy" (Chan, 2004, p. 9). In the film, Jen Yu disguises as a swordsman to adventure in *Jiang Hu*⁴ underworld (see Figure 3), which is a rebellion to Chinese traditional feudal ethics. In a fighting scene, Jen Yu defeated a group of male Kung Fu masters with the "Green Destiny" Sword, indicating Jen Yu's feminist spirit and rebellion against the norms of China's patriarchal society. Such a scene of Jen Yu's fight against the male Kung Fu masters metaphorically projects her rebellion against the male-dominated society and her resistance of the existing patriarchy and authorities' rules. The embodiment of Jen Yu's pursuit of freedom and resistance to the repression of Chinese hierarchical-patriarchal society echoes Western feminist values; specifically, women's independence, freedom and respect.

Figure 3. Jen Yu disguises as a swordsman



Compared with Shu Lien and Jen Yu, Jade Fox is a female villain in the story, but represents the traditional women's tragedy in patriarchal China. She is a female assassin with excellent Kung Fu but is illiterate. In order to become stronger and learn the secret skills of Wudang swordsmanship, she seduced and slept with Li Mu Bai's master (Jiang Nanhe). However, Li's master refused to teach her, which led him to be killed by Jade Fox. In a dialogue between Jade Fox and Li, she says, "Your master underestimated us women. Sure, he'd sleep with me, but he would never teach me. He

deserved to die by a woman's hand!" In this sense, Jade Fox is a kind of tragedy of feminism in Chinese patriarchal society.

5. Translation of Cultural Discourse: Metaphor, Religious Discourse and Rewriting

Culture and translation are interdependent and interrelated (Nedergaard-Larsen, 1993, pp. 207-208). Cultural translation can be seen as a translation behavior or process related to cultural contact, conflict and negotiation and further it is an arena of hybridizing different meanings and signs (Sun, 2016, p. 5). Specifically, cultural translation of film can be understood as "the process in which film creators, considering audiences living in different cultural backgrounds, transform the original values of the cultural texts into a new form recognizable by the audiences" (Qi, 2009, p. 82), wherein the consciousness of (multi-)cultural identity is very significant.

In order to analyze the elements of cultural translation in the film, 1029 Chinese-English film lines (1029 lines for Chinese and 1020 lines for English) were manually collected for examination. Unique cultural terms may cause problems when a film enters a different cultural context; in CTHD, culture-specific terms run throughout the film's story. These terms are examined by using specific translation examples and their underlying sociocultural and symbolic implications are also discussed.

5.1 Translation of character's name: The metaphorical loss

One of obvious linguistic representations of cultural symbols is the translation of the names of the principal characters. The names of the characters have certain culturally metaphoric implications in Chinese *wuxia* novels and films, especially for Wang Dulu's novel, "the dragon and tiger of the title stand for the pair of young lovers, Yu Jen-long and Lo Xiao-hu" (Leung, 2001, p. 44).

Table 1. Cultural attributes, semiotic representations and the English translation of character names

Character	Name	Attributes and semiotic representations
	Li Mu Bai (李慕白) (acted by Chow Yun-fat)	Taoism; Wudang swordsman; Righteous image and Jiang Hu's authority; A representation of martial arts chivalry.
	Yu Shu Lien (俞秀莲) (acted by Michelle Yeoh)	Confucianism; Matured and righteous female; Defender of Confucian ethnics, norms and morality.
	Jen Yu (玉娇龙) (acted by Zhang Ziyi)	Feminism; Thirst for freedom; Rebellion and resistance of Chinese patriarchal norms and authorities.
	Lo "Dark Cloud" (罗小虎) (acted by Chang Chen)	Masculinity; Desert bandit chieftain; Freedom and untamed.
	Jade Fox (碧眼狐狸) (acted by Cheng Pei-pei)	Feminism; Craftiness; Female tragedy of traditional patriarchal society.

In Table 1, the lead character's name, “李慕白 (Li Mubai)”, was translated into mandarin Chinese pinyin “Li Mu Bai” by transliteration. Similarly, the heroine “俞秀莲 (Yu Xiulian)” was transliterated into “Yu Shu Lien” using Taiwan's Wade-Giles pinyin. In a deep sense, Li Mu Bai's name “慕白 (Mubai)” can be poetically translated to “pursuing emptiness” in English, which reflects a kind of spiritual pursuit and Taoist self-training. Yu Shu Lien's name, “秀莲 (Xiulian)” reflects Confucian moral metaphor in that “莲 (lotus)” in Chinese culture represents purity and elegance. In Chinese, their names contain rich cultural metaphors, while these metaphorical

connotations disappeared in their English translations.

In contrast, “玉娇龙 (Yu Jiaolong)” and “罗小虎 (Luo Xiaohu)” were translated into two English names by domestication strategy, i.e. Jen Yu and Lo “Dark Cloud”, respectively. The two translations lost metaphorical meanings which are in their Chinese names “龙” (“Long”) that refers to *Hidden Dragon*’s “Dragon” and “虎” (“Hu”) that refers to *Crouching Tiger*’s “Tiger”. So, the Chinese essence has been lost in their English translations. Interestingly, the female villain’s name, “碧眼狐狸 (Biyen Huli)” was translated as “Jade Fox” (literally “Jade-Eye Fox”) by free translation, indicating her crafty feature. In fact, the English translations of these principal characters’ names mix Mandarin Chinese pinyin, Taiwan’s Wade-Giles romanization and English names, which results in the disappearance of the original Chinese cultural connotations and metaphors. However, it is understandable, since the purpose of such subtitle translation is for easy understanding by global audiences.

5.2 Green Destiny Sword as a metaphor of patriarchy

Green Destiny Sword is Li Mu Bai’s sword that is a major plot trigger pushing the progress of the storyline. The sword is a representation of power identity and also “a cultural symbol with moral, ideological, and aesthetic appeal even to people beyond the righteous outlaws” (Cai, 2005, p. 450). It is offered a profound Taoist connotation, masculine power and sexual metaphor in the filmic narrative. According to Chan (2004, p. 12), the Green Destiny Sword is “a phallic symbol of Jiang Hu authority” and the phallic symbol of the sword is further reflected on a fighting scene between Shu Lien and Jen Yu (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. A fighting scene between Yu Shu Lien and Jen Yu



In this scene, Yu Shu Lien warns Jen Yu, “Don’t touch it! That’s Li Mu Bai’s sword!”. In the filmic context, the sword becomes a metaphorical symbol of Li Mu Bai’s male sexual organ. For the two female roles, touching the sword psychologically projects a sexual implication of touching male’s phallus. It is a kind of Freudian sexual metaphor. In Ang Lee’s words:

With *Crouching Tiger*, for example, the subtext is very purely Chinese. But you have to use Freudian or western techniques to dissect what I think is hidden in a repressed society—the sexual tension, the prohibited feelings. Otherwise you don’t get that deep. (quoted in Chan, 2004, p. 6)

Furthermore, the translation of “Green Destiny” sword can be seen as a kind of metaphor of Taoist thought, because “mercury green [...] is the most remote and mysterious place of the ultimate yin, where all existence comes from” (Dilley, 2015, p. 130). The “Green Destiny” also implies Li Mu Bai’s death and Jen Yu’s jumping off the cliff of Wudang Mountain at the end of the story, which symbolically means they return to the ultimate freedom of Taoist philosophy.

5.3 Translation of Taoist discourse

Chinese religious discourse and thoughts (especially Taoism) are embedded in conversations of the principal characters, particularly the conversation between Li Mu Bai, Yu Shu Lien, and Jen Yu. Li’s dialogues are usually featured by Taoist thought. But, unfortunately, most of the religious-cultural connotations are not translated into English subtitles. In order to deal with the barriers of cultural terms and expressions, literal translation, paraphrase and omission are adopted as translation strategies. Let’s see the case analysis below.

Case 1

Timeline: 00:45:42,120 --> 00:45:58,890

→ 李慕白：我一直在想找一个徒弟，能把武当派的“**玄牝剑法**”传下去。

→ Li Mu Bai: I’ve always wanted a disciple worthy of **Wudang’s secrets**.

→ 玉娇龙：你不怕我学会了杀了你？

→ Jen Yu: And if I use them to kill you?

→ 李慕白：即为**师徒**，就要以**性命相见**。我相信，碧眼狐狸未能泯灭了你的良心。

→ Li Mu Bai: That's a risk I'm willing to take. Deep down, you're good. Even Jade Fox couldn't corrupt you.

In Case 1, literal translation, paraphrase and omission are the main translation strategies to deal with culture-bound problems. The typical cultural term is the name of Wudang swordsmanship. For instance, “玄牝剑法” (“Xuan Pin Swordsmanship”) was translated to “Wudang's secrets” by omission and paraphrase translation and one important Taoist concept, namely, “玄牝” (“Xuan Pin”) was omitted. The concept of “玄牝” (“Xuan Pin”) is a religious/philosophical concept derived from the six chapter of Laotzu's *Tao Te Ching* in which writes “谷神不死，是谓玄牝。玄牝之门，是谓天地根。绵绵若存，用之不勤。” (“The spirit of the valley never dies. This is called the mysterious female. The gateway of the mysterious female, Is called the root of heaven and earth. Dimly visible, it seems as if it were there, Yet use will never drain it.” Translated by D. C. Lau, 1963)⁵. The key term “玄牝” (“Xuanpin”) was translated as “mysterious female”.

Specifically, “玄” (“Xuan”) refers to ultimate profoundness, while “牝” (“Pin”) refers to female and fertility. The term “玄牝” (“Xuanpin”) indicates the ultimate origin of the world and life (Lee, 2009, p. 110). Due to its profound Taoist implications, the term was simplified and concisely paraphrased as “Wudang's secrets” in English translation. It is acceptable in film subtitle translation for concision and easy understanding, though it sacrifices accuracy.

For the omission of translation, it aims to transmit the original meanings concisely. Li's dialogue “即为师徒，就要以性命相见” was translated into “That's a risk I'm willing to take” by paraphrasing and omitting the Chinese terms “师徒” (i.e. “master and apprentice”) and “以性命相见” (i.e. “one is willing to sacrifice one's life for another”). Their communicative meaning is delivered to the target language, though omitting some original concepts in order to achieve concision and fluency.

Case 2

Timeline: 01:18:55,010 --> 01:19:21,220

→ 李慕白：秀莲，我们能触摸的东西没有“永远”。师父一再的说，把手握紧，里面什么也没有，把手松开，你拥有的是一切。

→ Li Mu Bai: Shu Lien. The things we touch have no **permanence**. My master would say, there is nothing we can hold on to in this world. Only by letting go can we truly possess what is real.

→ 俞秀莲：慕白，这世间不是每一件事都是**虚幻**的。刚才你握着我的手，你能感觉到它的真实吗？

→ Yu Shu Lien: Not everything is an **illusion**. My hand, wasn't that real?

In Case 2, the dialogues about “illusion” and “reality” were translated by paraphrasing. In order to make sense to target audiences, the translator rewrote the film dialogues by deleting words and reconstructing syntactic structures. Specifically, the conversations between Li and Yu reflect the philosophical thoughts of Taoism and Confucianism in their minds. In Li's worldview, nothing has permanence and reality, because his belief is Taoism which emphasizes ultimate emptiness and naturalness, which pursues a cultivation beyond secular society and transcends life and death. In contrast, Yu is on the side of Confucianism which emphasizes reality, materiality and secular society. The ideological-philosophical conflict between Taoism and Confucianism is a key tension facilitating the story narration.

Essentially, Li Mu Bai's word, i.e. “The things we touch have no permanence”, projects his philosophical view of Taoism that everything in real life is always changing and not real, while in Yu Shu Lien's reply, “not everything is an illusion”, reflects the worldview of Confucianism that the world is real and one can strive for what he or she wants and even change the world. This conversation seems like a couple's love talk, but actually it is a tension/conflict between Taoism and Confucianism.

5.4 Translating as rewriting

Rewriting is a strategy in translation. Translation as rewriting is manipulation of power and ideology in literature translation, according to Lefevere (1992, p. vii), “All

rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way. Rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power, and in its positive aspect can help in the evolution of a literature and a society.”

Rewriting is a salient feature in cultural translation of CTHD. In the context of audiovisual discourse, mood and tone, linguistic style, semantic meaning, cultural symbol and aesthetic value of Chinese source text are unable to be completely translated into English target text. This also reflects the untranslatability of Chinese culture to some degree. Taking Jen Yu's Chinese poem in one fighting scene as example, its English version is translated by rewriting, and some of culture-specific terms are translated literally by foreignizing strategy.

Case 3

Timeline: 01:23:59,580 --> 01:25:03,500

→我乃是潇洒人间一剑仙，	I am the Invincible Sword Goddess.
→青冥宝剑胜龙泉。	Armed with the incredible Green Destiny.
→任凭李俞江南鹤，	Be you Li or Southern Crane.
→都要低头求我怜。	Lower your head and ask for mercy.
→沙漠飞来一条龙，	I am the desert dragon.
→神来无影去无踪。	I leave no trace.
→今朝踏破峨嵋顶，	Today I fly over Eu-Mei.
→明日拔去武当峰！	Tomorrow, I'll kick over Wudang Mountain!

In this case, Jen Yu's poem was translated by rewriting or semantic interpretations. Some Chinese concepts were omitted, substituted, generalized and even distorted in English translation. For example, in the first line, “潇洒人间一剑仙” was translated to “Invincible Sword Goddess” by deleting the term of “潇洒人间” (unconstrained life or a life of freedom). In the second line, “青冥宝剑胜龙泉” was translated into “Armed with the incredible Green Destiny” in which “龙泉” (“Longquan”, literally “dragon spring sword”, a famous Chinese sword) was deleted.

The English translation of the third line is elusive and inaccurate. The Chinese sentence “任凭李俞江南鹤” which was translated into “Be you Li or Southern Crane” by literal translation. “李俞江南鹤” should be three characters' names, i.e.

Li Mu Bai, Yu Shu Lien and Jiang Nanhe (i.e., Li Mu Bai's swordsmanship teacher). But this translation is very strange and awkward. Especially, the translation of “江南鹤” (“Jiang Nanhe” in pinyin) that was translated into “Southern Crane” is not correct in that it is not a name of bird, but instead the name of Li Mu Bai's swordsmanship teacher. This causes a cultural misunderstanding.

As for the other lines, they were translated by rewriting (also paraphrasing) in general, but some cultural information lost. For instance, “沙漠飞来一条龙” was translated into “I am the desert dragon” without providing the context, which makes audiences confused about why this is “desert dragon” but not fire dragon, for example. However, the “desert dragon” refers to Jen Yu herself, since she and her aristocratic family have lived in Xinjiang for a long time. The last two lines' translations are faithful to the source text style in a large degree, though non-Chinese background audiences may not understand what are the “Eu-Mei”⁶ and “Wudang”⁷.

Based on the discourse analysis of Chinese-English subtitles, it is found that the free translation and domestication strategies are dominated in the subtitle translation of CTHD, accompanied by literal translation. However, it is very difficult to fully translate cultural connotations into English since there are no such alternative cultural concepts in English. In such case, “it is probably hard to come up with conceptual substitution in English for Chinese martial arts notions. If the translator could not make sense of them by either paraphrasing or trans-coding, deletion is perhaps a handy option” (He, 2009, p. 217). Indeed, deletion or omission is employed frequently in English subtitle translation of the film, especially when the Chinese cultural expressions (e.g., religious terms) are untranslatable in English.

6. Reconfiguration of Cultural Complex: A Multicultural Incorporation

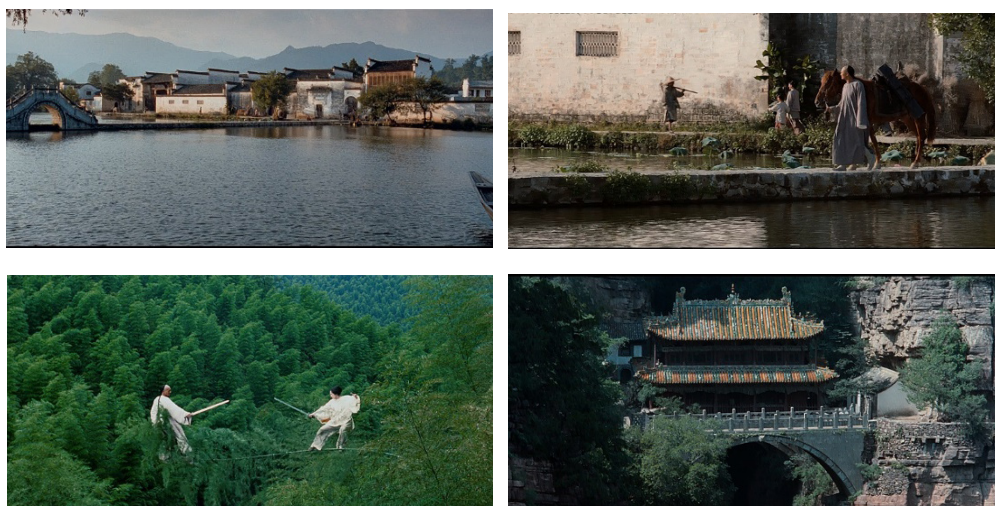
Reconfiguration of cultural complex refers to an original cultural product or element being deconstructed in its cultural context and then reconstructed in a new form with new cultural features in a target cultural context. The process of reconfiguration echoes the three stages of cultural hybridization, i.e. “deculturalization”, “acculturalization” and “reculturalization” (Wang & Yeh, 2005, 2007). From a linguistic perspective, it is also similar with the linguistic recontextualization that means “the dynamic transfer-and-transformation of something from one discourse/text in context (the context

being in reality a matrix or field of context) to another” (Linell, 1998, p. 145). Yet, the meaning of cultural reconfiguration is broader than the text-based recontextualization. It is not only on textual level, but also on physical level of cultural product.

From novel to film, the original story of CTHD is deconstructed, translated, and rewritten into a new filmic narrative so as to cater to global audiences from different cultural backgrounds. Chinese dialogues, English translations, the embodiment of Chinese culture and China's landscapes shown in the film are branded by diasporic Chinese identity recognition.

For the film, it presents an imaginary China and it is also a symbolic reconstruction of cultural China by Ang Lee's artistic re-creation with the characteristics of Chinese traditional ink-wash paintings (see Figure 5). As Ang Lee says, “the film is a kind of dream of China, a China that probably never existed, except in my boyhood fantasies in Taiwan” (Lee, 2003, p. 291). Therefore, the film symbolically reflects an imaginary China and a dream of a Chinese martial arts world in Ang Lee's Chinese cultural cognition (Dilley, 2015, p. 121).

Figure 5. Typical Chinese landscapes in the film



In addition to the diasporic Chinese cultural identity, the screenplay writing and English translation are important for the reconstruction of Chinese culture (or reculturalization) in the film. For the film script, it was adapted from Wang Dulu's novel and then rewritten and translated into English subtitles by three screenwriters,

namely, James Schamus (from America), Wang Hui-ling (from Taiwan) and Kuo Jung Tsai (from Hong Kong) (Chien, 2013, p. 152). Wang's novel itself is featured by the combination of Confucian values and tragic aesthetics (Xu, 2006). Its adaptation essentially is a textual reconfiguration of cultural and symbolic resources. In a discussion about the screenwriting, James Schamus, one of the screenwriters, says,

It was really rewriting the script so many times, translating back to English, back to Chinese, writing it and, of course, finally rewriting the film one last time in the form of the subtitles and at that moment, through discussion ... realizing how little of the movie I understood. [The film's] meanings remain embedded in the Chinese language and culture. (quoted in Dilley, 2015, pp. 121-122)

The process of the film script writing is a cross-cultural dialogue between East and West and also a mini global-localized process (Zhang, 2019, pp. 35-36). Within it, the reconfiguration of multicultural discourse (namely, it incorporates the understandings on Chinese culture from the sense of the combination of East and West, i.e., Hong Kong, Taiwan and America) is created, which shows Ang Lee's multicultural consciousness in the film. In a broader sense, the filmmaking is a global-local cooperation that incorporates international capital, an international director (Ang Lee), transnational screenwriters (James Schamus, Wang Hui-ling, Kuo Jung Tsai) and actors (Chow Yun-fat, Michelle Yeoh, Zhang Ziyi, Chang Chen, and Cheng Pei-pei) and local landscapes of Mainland China (Wu & Chan, 2007, pp. 201-205), which presents a kind of multicultural incorporation.

It thus can be summarized that screenwriting is a process of reconfiguring (and also translating) Chinese culture by combining Western ideological values (e.g. feminism, freedom) in textual and narrative levels. Furthermore, the filmmaking itself is a cultural production of multicultural cooperation and hybridization.

7. Conclusion

This study adopts a social semiotic approach to film analysis. Film is seen as a linguistic-semiotic object with the dual attributes of audiovisual discourse and symbolic representation. Such understanding resonates Metz's semiology of cinema

that sees that “cinema is a language” (Guzzetti, 1973, p. 292), while in Buckland’s (2017, p. 18) understanding of film semiology, film is not a language but more like “a coded medium, a system of signification that possesses its own specific underlying system of codes”. From the sociosemiotic perspective, accompanied by multicultural discourse analysis, this article has decoded Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* by focusing on the three aspects including i) the individual/social cognition of culture, ii) the translation of cultural discourse and iii) the reconfiguration of cultural complex.

It is found that Ang Lee’s CTHD is not a traditional Chinese *wuxia* film; instead it is a romantic narrative about an imagined and symbolic China. In such a romantic, fantastic and cultural China’s *Jiang Hu* world, it contains multicultural conflict and negotiation, which involves China vs. West, Confucianism vs. Taoism, feminism vs. patriarchy, and freedom vs. repression. This is the dialectical integration of Chineseness and Western values. Undoubtedly, CTHD is a re-narration of Chinese martial arts film in global cultural field and also a symbolic representation and romantic imagination about “Cultural China”, facilitating the multicultural contact between East and West. However, the imagined China is still a cultural “other” to appear in the global cultural field that is hegemonized by Anglo-America-led Western culture. In this sense, CTHD, according to Coe (2018, p. 100), is only “a minoritarian artwork that engenders becoming sinophone by deterritorializing cultural Chineseness from the nation state, thereby highlighting the processes by which sinophone cinemas mediate cultural identity by engaging and modernizing established norms”.

In summary, the sociosemiotic approach to the analysis of Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* contributes a constructive perspective to the linguistic-semiotic analysis, content interpretation and sociocultural analysis of film and of other multimodal materials (like TV, websites and social media). It also further advances the integration of sociosemiotics and film analysis.

Notes

- 1 The terminology “martial arts film” here is interchangeably used with “*wuxia* film” (武侠电影), but they actually have some differences. In Lee’s (2003) study, martial arts film is usually related to Kung Fu and its story is set in contemporary society, such as those action films starred in by Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Lee, while *wuxia* film is usually

set in a Chinese historical dynasty, such as Tang Dynasty, Song Dynasty or Ming Dynasty. Precisely, Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a *wuxia* film.

- 2 Wang Dulu (王度庐, 1909-1977) was a Chinese *wuxia* novelist. He was seen as a master of tragic *wuxia* novel and had a great influence on other famous Chinese *wuxia* novelists, such as Jin Yong (金庸) and Gu Long (古龙) (Xu, 2006, p. 62).
- 3 The English translation of the two Chinese couplets is literally translated with paraphrase so as to transmit their basic meanings.
- 4 Jiang Hu or Jianghu (literally, “rivers and lakes”, 江湖 in Chinese) is an imagined society of heroes, swordsman and martial artists in Chinese *wuxia* stories. It is the underworld “where moral fighters call upon justice and righteousness to rid the public of bandits and corrupt fighters, support the underprivileged, and avenge personal wrongs” (Jay, 2003, p. 701).
- 5 The English translation of Laoztu's *Tao Te Ching* (《道德经》) has numerous versions today. This English translation of the 6th chapter of *Tao Te Ching* used here refers to D.C. Lau's version that was published in 1963. Its electronic version can be accessed from Terebess Asia Online (TAO) <https://terebess.hu/english/tao/lau.html#Kap06>
- 6 Eu-Mei should be “Mount Emei” (in Chinese pinyin, 峨眉山) or “Emei Sect” (峨眉派). It is a Chinese Buddhist sacred mountain with long history in Sichuan province and also a martial arts sect that often appears in traditional *wuxia* novels, TV dramas, films and web popular novels.
- 7 Wudang here refers to Wudang Mountain or Wudang Sect (武当山/武当派). It is a Chinese Taoist sacred site with long history in Hubei province. Wudang Mountain is a Taoist symbol and also a Chinese martial arts sect. As a Chinese native religion and martial arts sect, it commonly appears in many *wuxia* novels, such as Louis Cha Leung-yung's (Jin Yong 金庸) *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer* (《笑傲江湖》) and *The Heaven Sword and Dragon Saber* (《倚天屠龙记》)

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(Copy editing: Alexander Brandt)

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