

**Original Research Article****VILLAINS, VICTIMS OR HEROES? : THE THREE
MAIN WOMEN IN *CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN
DRAGON***Cynthia E. Zeiden¹**Received: 05.05.2024****Accepted: 11.05.2024****Published: 30.05.2024****Abstract**

This paper examines how the three main women characters in the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*: Jen (played by Ziyi Zhang), Xiulian (played by Michelle Yeoh) and Jade Fox (played by Pei-Pei Cheng), are all in their own ways villains, victims and heroes of their time as they break the Confucian traditional gender roles of the Qing dynasty. It explores the context of the genres that influence both the overall work *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and the characters within that work and the source novel by Wang Dulu. Then it examines what makes each of the three women characters villains, victims and heroes; including their motivations, desires and actions in the story as individuals. Finally, the inevitability of what happens to them when their lives intersect and why is analyzed.

Keywords: Villains, Victims, Heroes.**Thesis**

The three main women characters in the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*: Jen (played by Ziyi Zhang), Xiulian (played by Michelle Yeoh) and Jade Fox (played by Pei-Pei Cheng), are all in their own ways villains, victims and heroes of their time as they break the Confucian traditional gender roles of the Qing dynasty. This paper will first explore the context of the genres that influence both the overall work *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and the characters within that work and the source novel by Wang Dulu. This will be followed by an examination of what makes each of the three women characters villains, victims and heroes; including their motivations, desires and actions in the story as individuals. Finally, the inevitability of what happens to them when their lives intersect and why will be analyzed.

Context

In order to have a full understanding of what world the three women characters were operating in and within what genre conventions the story was created; a brief exploration of wuxia pian and jianghu follows. This is where the entire concept of hero for this paper originates as well.

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John R. Eperjesi writes that *wuxia pian* is the Chinese genre featuring stories of knightly chivalry of armed conflict, mostly with swords, and is a precursor to the genre kung fu which features unarmed conflict, fighting with the body only. He elaborates that first the wuxia stories first showed up in novels in the eighteenth century, then in Peking operas and then finally in films in the 1920s. (Eperjesi, p. 30)

Rong Cai delves deeper into this and states that “wu” refers to a person’s physical mastery of martial arts and “xia” refers to a chivalrous hero’s quest for justice and honor taking precedence over social conventions. (Cai, p. 445) The genre is a wish fulfillment fantasy for its readers or audience.

There is room in the wuxia genre for specific women warriors. Catherine Gomes writes that these women are called “nuxia” or swordswomen and that *Crouching Tiger* focuses on how they negotiate life in Confucian society. (Gomes, p. 47) Although this is great, they don’t get equal rights even so as Gomes states that they are second class citizens in this genre and don’t have full agency they are either stuck between a father and lover or are portrayed as weak and helpless. (Gomes, p. 50) Both male and female wuxia warrior heroes travel in the world of jianghu.

Jianghu

Jen specifically mentions jianghu literature to Xiulian early in the film as her ideal model for life. She sees Xiulian as living in the world of jianghu and that is why she is eager to have a sister-like relationship with her. Xiulian spends the rest of the film trying to get Jen to see reality regarding this concept. Therefore, it is crucial to define the term here and now. Felicia Chan literally defines jianghu as “rivers and lakes.” She writes that it’s an abstract community within Chinese literature; it has a moral code of honor but exists outside of society. (Chan, p. 7) This is a very similar concept to the classical loner cowboy hero in American Westerns living in the wilderness with special skills; but instead of guns they use swords. It also calls back to the Arthurian knight-errants of England and their moral code of honor.

Gomes explains the three moral codes that drive all wuxia heroes and heroines: chivalry/honor, loyalty and revenge. The jianghu world has various “underground” character types but still operates by the Confucian moral code and that goes for these warriors. She discusses how this nuxia heroine is rooted in folklore going all the way back to Fa Mulan and how in Peking Opera; women warriors were trained and how women actors were allowed to portray these characters (where they otherwise were not in other Southeast Asian countries), this all opened the door for the relative tolerance for nuxia in the jianghu world. She includes that one of the main actresses in the golden age of wuxia films of the 1960s was Pei-Pei Cheng, the actor who plays Jade Fox; the casting of her in this role is an honor to her. (Gomes, p. 49)

Confucianism and Gender

The rules for women and femininity in Chinese Confucian society, according to Gomes, are contained in two books: 1. the Nu Er Jing (The Classic for Girls) and 2. Nu Jie (Precepts for Women) and it is in The Classic for Girls that the sanchong (Three Obediences) and Four Virtues are found. Gomes goes on to write that under these rules a woman belongs in her lifetime to her father, then her husband and finally her son. (Gomes, p. 52)

The situation is very well represented in the scene in the film where Jen and Xiulian talk about how Jen yearns for the freedom of the jianghu fighter lifestyle like she reads about in the novels. Xiulian has to tactfully tell her that there is no real thing as total freedom in this lifestyle as wuxia fighters also have to adhere to Confucian values and that means that women are subordinate to men in every way in society. This sours Jen’s enthusiasm somewhat as she is starting to realize that there is no perfect place in this world for her.

Source Material-The Novel

To fully understand the story of the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*; it is important to be aware of its origins. The film is an adaptation of a novel of the same name that is the fourth in a series of five novels written by Wang Dulu and serialized in magazines in the early 1940s, according to Tze-Lan D. Sang’s article *The Transgender Body in Wang Dulu’s Crouching Tiger, Hidden*

Dragon. (Sang, p. 98) Unfortunately, the novel has never been fully translated into English from its original Chinese language; so it is from this article that information can be gathered about what happens in Wang Dulu's story.

There are two notable differences between the novel and the film which are relevant to the topics discussed in this paper. Before getting into those details, when the author Wang Dulu wrote this series of novels, he was somewhat of a maverick of his time too, "he creatively revised the narrative conventions about chivalrous women in China's long-standing tradition relevant for the times." (Sang, p. 98) Sang writes that Dulu synthesized women's liberation and the traditional martial arts genre.

Hsiu-Cheung Deppman in the article *Wang Dulu and Ang Lee: Artistic Creativity and Sexual Freedom in Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* writes, "According to Xu Sinian, Wang's storytelling departs from the plot-centered narrative structure in traditional martial arts fiction and focuses instead on a 'tragedy of personality,' in which characters ultimately come to realize that their 'enemies are themselves.'" (Deppman, p. 14) Deppman goes on to state that Wang also utilizes the anti-hero in his stories often.

The first big difference between the novel and the film is that in the novel Yu Jiaolong or Jen is so finely trained in martial arts from a very young age that her body literally turns into a man's and she is technically transgendered. As Sang writes, "How is one to conceptualize Jiaolong's self? Is there a feminine essence persisting at the core of a masculinized body? Or is there a masculine soul trapped in a feminine body? Intriguingly, both conceptual models seem to be at full play in the novel." (Sang, p. 99) An interesting point made in the article is that the Han aristocratic women had their feet bound so they physically could not practice martial arts, even if they had wanted to, but because Jen is Manchurian, she did not have her feet bound as that was not part of their culture, so she was able to take the training. (Sang, p. 104) In the novels, Jen ends up returning to the steppes and doesn't live by any gender norms. (Sang, p. 110)

The film's screenwriters, Hui-Ling Wang, James Schamus and Kuo Jung Tsai, and the director, Ang Lee, (imdb.com) changed this for the film version as Jen does dress up in male clothing during all of the fight scenes and when she goes on the run-in disguise as a man but she is not portrayed as transgender or queer. To the contrary, she is lovers with the Mongolian bandit Dark Cloud Lo who "kidnaps" her (she actually follows his horde after they rob her caravan) and there is some suggestion that there is an attraction between her and Li Mu Bai (the male lead character played by Chow Yun-fat, hereafter referred to as Master Li), presenting her as a heterosexual woman. This was most likely done to make the story more acceptable to a mainstream audience. Even so, the film still presents the idea that Jen is greatly breaking out of her traditional gender role.

The other huge difference in the novel is that at age 7, Jen is not trained in martial arts by her servant Jade Fox but by her male tutor Gao Langqiu, "a middle-aged Confucian scholar." (Sang, p. 100) What is similar is that Jen sneakily reads his manuals while he's away and surpasses him in skill secretly, like she does to Jade Fox in the film. When he realizes how skilled and untamed she is years later, "He fears that he has nurtured not a female knight-errant but a 'venomous dragon'..." (Sang, p. 101) This very principle comes up in the film in a scene that will be examined later in this paper.

How is Jade Fox portrayed in the novel then? Jen steals the Green Destiny sword and inadvertently kills the policeman who is after the bandit the Green-Eyed Fox (whose name is Biyan Huli), who pretended to be Gao's wife before he died and works as Jen's servant. Her character was greatly changed and expanded in the film to create the original sin of feminism (her inability to legitimately learn wuxia skills at Wudang mountain because she is a woman) that caused the series of events that led to the three women characters ultimately being destroyed. By making this change of getting rid of the Gao character and fully replacing him with Jade Fox, the screenwriters and Ang Lee created an extremely sympathetic and empowered activist character to the film. (Sang, p. 102)

It is clear that the changes made in the adaptation of the novel to the film helped it appeal to a broader, international audience (Jen's gender identification and sexuality) and strengthened its feminist messages (Jade Fox's overall story and her training of Jen).

The Women

Jen, Xiulian and Jade Fox are all individual characters with their own goals, desires and actions. As the story in the film progresses, they become more and more interdependent on each other because of circumstances outside of their control. The following three sections will focus on them as individuals. After that there will be an examination of how they affected each other's lives.

Jen

Chan writes that Jen vacillates between being the protagonist and antagonist of the story because she is caught between the old order and the new order, which is not established yet. (Chan, p. 6) This is most illustrated when she tells Jade Fox that once she surpassed her in skill she got frightened because she had nobody to guide her. This reflects the chaotic time in China when the last dynasty gives way to the Republic of China. (BBC News) Jen finds no stability in this backdrop.

Jen is a villain for several reasons in the story. She puts her desires before the needs of her family, her lover Lo, her teacher Jade Fox, her friends Xiulian and Master Li and society. She doesn't care if she causes them harm, she puts herself first always. She also steals the Green Destiny sword, bringing suspicion on her family's household and danger to Jade Fox, who is living there incognito.

There is a very important scene between Xiulian and Master Li in the film where Master Li wants to bring Jen to Wudang Mountain to have her become an actual wuxia student, even though women are not allowed. Xiulian at this point in the story doesn't want anything more to do with Jen because she feels that Jen is not a good person since she stole the Green Destiny sword, she ran out on her arranged marriage and has not dealt with them in good faith. Master Li, however, feels that if they don't help Jen now, she will become a "poisoned dragon." About this, Chan writes, "In Chinese, 'poisoned dragon' is an idiom for the waywardness that may result if talent like Jen's is unharnessed and undisciplined, and the elusive nature of that 'poison' is what the film seeks to explore." (Chan, p. 5)

Jen is also a victim because she is being forced into the role that female aristocrats had to follow in the Confucian code during the Qing dynasty, including an arranged marriage to help her father politically. She has no agency in this decision, it is assumed she will go along with the arrangements, she is not asked by her family if this is okay with her. She feels panicked and trapped by this, despite her cool attitude on the surface. She spends the entire film desperately trying to find any way she can to escape this fate.

Finally, Jen is a feminist hero because she won't accept living that traditional life that is being forced on her. She leaps off of the mountain to make sure that she escapes the fate of being controlled by anyone else; she desires complete freedom to do what she wants and to make all of her own decisions. She realizes by the end of the film that she has run out of options.

Xiulian

Xiulian probably has the most freedom of any of these characters as she runs her own security business that she inherited from her father and does lead the jianghu lifestyle that Jen dreams about. This means that Xiulian must have been trained in martial arts by her father to take over the business, this is a luxury that most women did not have at that time. She is not an aristocrat but seems to make a good enough living witnessed by her home compound seen at the beginning of the film; she has a group of workers that serve as a family and support system to her. In her interactions with higher ups in society, she is treated with much respect; she is in the middle tier of the socioeconomic ladder relatively regarding these three women.

She is not very villainous, she seems virtuous, but she does want to have nothing to do with Jen once she realizes that Jen stole the Green Destiny from the Yu family household. This is very problematic for Xiulian as it was her responsibility to Master Li to get the sword to safety in Peking for him. She feels that Jen is not virtuous and doesn't want to help her. So in this way Xiulian is a

villain because she doesn't think it is important to get Jen out of her repressive gender role, but she does help because Master Li wants her to.

Xiulian is definitely a victim because of the Confucian code she cannot be with her true love, Master Li, because he was a best friend to her fiancée who died. Because of this, they are forbidden to each other. She could have found another love interest over the years, but she chose to remain true to this particular man whom she could not have. So, she lived alone without a romantic partner. She waited years for Master Li, and just when she thought they could be together, he slips away. It is very tragic.

Xiulian is also a hero because she chose to not have a romantic partner and ran her father's business instead of taking up the traditional woman's role. She also mastered the wuxia arts and has freedom of agency in most things. She is also moral and good hearted. She truly tries to be a big-sister figure to Jen until she realizes that Jen is not her friend. Even after this, she is compelled to help Jen because of Master Li's desires to neutralize Jen's disturbing powers.

Jade Fox

Jade Fox is the most complex of these three women. She sits on the lowest rung of the Confucian societal ladder as a servant and leads a secret life as she is one of the two crouching tigers in the title. Jade Fox commits the original sins, or heroic events, depending on your perspective, that serve as the inciting incidents to put the story in motion in the novel and film. She is morally ambiguous and a deeply layered woman. It is under her influence that Jen builds her secret identity, being the second of the two crouching tigers.

Examining these inciting incidents is to drill down to the core of the feminist message of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. When Jade Fox was a young woman from a poor household, she went to Wudang Mountain to receive special training in wuxia arts. Master Li's master slept with Jade Fox, evidently giving her false promises to teach her, but ultimately, he would not allow a woman to study in his school. Jade Fox killed him and stole his teaching manuals so she could finally learn. This is why Master Li wants revenge on Jade Fox. Jade Fox is illiterate being from a poor background and could only learn from the diagrams but does become a very accomplished practitioner of the wuxia arts. She clandestinely teaches a very young Jen these arts, giving Jen skills and mental training she would have never gotten in her aristocratic role.

Jade Fox is the feminist voice in the film and a militant one at that as she is a secret criminal who steals and kills as she lives a double life as a servant in the aristocratic Yu household. Eperjesi writes that she is an "explicitly political voice...that of second-wave...feminist...she killed Li Mu Bai's master because '[h]e would sleep with me, but he would not teach me'." (Eperjesi, p. 33)

She is the most obvious villain of these women; she is a wanted criminal, a murderer and a thief. The question: is she justified for any of these actions? Is she sympathetic? Let's examine this in detail. The only way Jade Fox could learn wuxia arts from Wudang Mountain after being used was to kill the Master and steal his technique manuals. If she had not done these horrible things, not only would she not have empowered herself with the knowledge of the wuxia arts, she also would not have been able to pass it down to Jen, symbolizing the next generation of women. Were her crimes worth it? This is a metaphor for the fact that women had to literally kill some of the traditional thinking that existed in order to make room for their expanded freedoms that were to come after the Late Imperial period. Once Jade Fox obtained these wuxia abilities, without a Confucian-sanctioned place to practice them, she became a "poisoned dragon." This is the same thing that happened to Jen. Society was afraid these women would use their superpowers against the Confucian status quo, so they had to be managed or stopped.

Jade Fox is the original victim in the story and the crimes against her in Confucian society are what started the cycle of violence and death in this particular circle of characters. She was denied education based on her gender, she was lied to and led on by a Master with false promises and was sexually exploited. Jen also victimized Jade Fox as she kept secret that she had far surpassed her master in wuxia abilities because she was able to read the teaching manuals. Instead of sharing these

advanced skills with her illiterate master, she kept them all to herself. Jade Fox cried like a baby when she realized how deep Jen's deception of her truly was.

As morally ambiguous as her actions are, Jade Fox passed on her forbidden knowledge to the next generation of women in Jen. Jen would not even have had the adventure she had with Lo; nor any realistic dreams of living a life like in the jianghu novels if Jade Fox had not given her that secret training. Jade Fox gave Jen the keys to the kingdom to having agency in her life. For that alone, she is an amazing hero.

When the Three Unite

It is fate that brings Xiulian to cross paths with Jen (and Jade Fox), Master Li asks her to deliver the Green Destiny to its final resting place after his retirement and that happened to be the Yu household in Peking. In the initial transactions and reactions, Jen is excited to meet Xiulian. It gives her hope that she can use Xiulian to escape her arranged marriage and live her ideal life of freedom. Xiulian is interested in Jen, because the Yu family has just arrived in Peking and especially because it is in her household that the Green Destiny will be kept. This is the beginning of a bond between these women that will eventually destroy them both.

When Jade Fox, in her daytime persona of Jen's servant, sees Xiulian at the house for the first time, she is jealous of their new relationship, but even more importantly she becomes alarmed and warns Jen not to see Xiulian again. She puts herself in danger to save Jen, her cub, as Xiulian calls her, multiple times in the story, and that ultimately causes her death.

As Jade Fox dies, she kills Master Li. This action effectively ruins Xiulian's life because even though Xiulian is not dead at the end of the film, the only man she ever loved is now gone for the rest of her earthly life. She was so close to finally having a domestic life with him and it completely slipped away because of their involvement with Jen and Jade Fox.

As Jen escapes the death scene of childhood mentor, Jade Fox, and her possible future mentor, Master Li Mu Bai, she has the opportunity to study wuxia arts on Wudang Mountain and be with her lover Lo, but she chooses to throw herself off of the mountain to her presumable death instead (although we can't be absolutely positive, she dies).

Jen could not find a space in her world where she could be totally free. After trying everything she could think of, and failing, her only option for fully living on her own terms was to presumably end her life on her own terms. Deppman states, "The film is both a performance and a study of the external and internal conditions on freedom, the former spectacularly borrowed from martial arts fiction and the latter generically embedded as psychological drama." (Deppman, p. 12)

Conclusion

It is because Jen, Xiulian and Jade Fox were victims of Confucian society that they had to be villains at times to realize their agency and desire to break out of their traditional gender roles. It was painful to do this in the context of their daily lives and because of their steadfastness in times of extreme challenges; all three of them are the heroes of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

They were all existing in their uneasy lives before coming together. Deppman writes that in the film version Jen listens to the other women characters for advice and resists traditional marriage because she is part of a gendered identity that is collective rather than it being a matter of socioeconomic class. (Deppman, p. 16) Jade Fox was trying to convince Jen to run away with her and live the true life of a jianghu novel as a way to escape her marriage. Xiulian was waiting for Master Li to retire and finally live a domesticated life with her. As they crossed paths, their plans crashed and burned because they doomed each other's existence. Xiulian served as a more honorable option for Jen, disrupting Jade Fox's plans. Master Li resumes his revenge on Jade Fox, comes out of retirement to do so and also then takes up Jen's cause. This delays and ultimately destroys Xiulian's hopes for a domestic life with him. No matter what Jen's options or possibilities were regarding Jade Fox and Master Li, they died when both were killed by each other. Xiulian was done with Jen and had only helped her for Master Li's sake so there was no option for Jen to be with her. Jen's only

option was to hide out from her husband's powerful family for the rest of her life so she had no freedom and no options left except to end her life.

The ending of the film tells us that at that time during the Qing dynasty, there was no place for highly trained women wuxia experts in traditional Confucian society. These women had to live the life portrayed in the jianghu novels, out in the wilderness, outside of society, or otherwise go into hiding. This is why Jade Fox and Jen are regarded as "poisoned dragons" and were fated to die by the end of the film. They were too powerful and had no moral way of giving outlet to their skills. Of course, society either has to tame or kill these rogue creatures. Xiulian alone survives because she is the only woman of the three who practices her wuxia skills within the traditional context of Confucian society as she carries on her father's security business.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon's Jade Fox has to murder and steal to give women the right to learn martial arts. Not only is Jade Fox a "poisoned dragon," she is also a "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" because she had to lead a secret life to use her wuxia skills while living within society. Chia-Ju Chang writes, "The Chinese idiom 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon' (wohu canglong) describes a place or reality that is full of overlooked talents or masters." (Chang, p. 380) Chang goes on to explain that the deeper level of the film, beyond the feminism, is finding one's true nature. This is what the scene between Jen and Master Li fighting in the bamboo field was about. Master Li was trying to get at Jen's true nature. This reflects the main theme of the film with Jen trying to figure out her true nature regarding her gender role and absolutely not fitting in to society's expectations for her. Her courageous hero's journey to not capitulate to society's demands is truly wondrous to behold.

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