

The Sword Metaphor in Chinese Martial Arts Films

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In this essay, I will explore how Chinese martial arts film could respond to the challenges and opportunities brought by this digital era and facilitate gender construction in film. I will interrogate the connections between metaphor and genre film, specifically, martial arts (wuxia) film. The works discussed in this essay explore the following questions: How do Chinese martial arts films use gender roles to negotiate cultural identity? And how do the representations of masculinity and femininity intersect with the formation/psychological construction in the socio-cultural sphere and in a patriarchal society; and how gender identity empowers the protagonists' free will to have multifaceted performances. Such semiotics challenges patriarchal assumptions about the presented gender hierarchies, prevailing institutional, cultural and social restrictions, and gender divide through blurring bipolar gender distinctions and questions binary thinking.

The form of martial arts films embodies the inner logic of digital culture: visual effects foregrounds a dominant position that overrides the importance of linear narrative in traditional cinema. I contend that Feng Xiaogang plays the role of a cultural broker by actively bridging up the cultural gap between the West and the East. Feng's success also sheds light on how Chinese commercial film can besiege the deadlock in the current context. Setting in a framework of Cognitive Metaphor Theory, I claim that metaphor in film is an idiosyncratic and omnipresent device, which facilitates the construction of narrative and protagonists. The global stage witnessed a successive global mania on Chinese martial arts films since 2000, which fueled up my research enthusiasm on the topic. I contextualize my discussion on how Feng responded to this global flux by employing the same metaphor that Ang Lee inserted in film to symbolize a flavor of authentic Chineseness.

In contrast, Feng's film critique reflects the post-socialist context in China from a different perspective, his film practice enriched the diversity in subgenres, social engagement and cultural exchange values between the East and the West in commercial film. As a cultural product embedded with a myriad of cultural elements that convey values, and ideologies of the host culture, film is a visual representation that not only epitomizes social reality, but also bridges cultural gap and promotes mutual understanding among different cultures. When a film reaches overseas audiences, as a unique and powerful medium, it contributes to cultural exports through the reception, consumption and assimilation of the audience. Therefore, film can serve as a vehicle of cultural diplomacy. In this sense, I claim that film harbors "cultural exchange values." In a commercial market, the filmmakers are analogized as "cultural brokers" as they negotiate cultures and mediate within different communities, groups and countries and actively participate in the cultural globalization process. The term of "cultural broker" also assists me to further illustrate their role in the flux of globalization and the post-socialist condition, which indicates their duality in dealing with the double edge of film, artistic concerns and cultural elements, as well as market-orientation and profits return. This cognition directly orients me to dichotomize its contradictions and strengths, cultural complexity and width that encompass other sub-genres.

Without the background of the post-socialist context in China, Feng cannot fulfill these achievements. The post-socialist context provides a cultural as well as ideological soil for the burgeoning and further development of Feng's filmmaking. In this process, he serves as a cultural broker that promotes cultural exchange with his cultural intervention and film practice.

Starting with introducing Conceptual Metaphor Theory, I will specify the presence and function of metaphor in Feng's *The Banquet* and a Hollywood produced martial arts (wuxia) film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The wuxia genre and Chinese cultural elements embedded in filmic texts to some extent contribute to their marketing success. I explore the metaphorical image as a cultural link in these two martial arts films to extend my previous argument. Though they were produced in different ideological contexts, the metaphorical image offers a premise to reflect how Chinese wuxia films ride with the global waves and ascend to the surface. In the cultural setting of incorporating cultural heritage to draw global appeal, both films not only manifest a mentality of cultural relocation to the lost glory of ancient China, but also enrich cultural presentation of sensations in wuxia movies. Such strategy explains how wuxia films with Chinese elements embarked on the global stage and attracted the Western exoticized gaze.

I. Metaphor in film

As a visual language, films are riddled with metaphors that convey significant connotations. Metaphor is more than a mere rhetorical device, but plays a crucial role in the process of understanding and cognition. (Semino, 2008) Goatly claims that metaphor could serve as a dominating principle that organizes the narrative as well as implements communications efficiently, through the interaction of basic or conventional, cognitive structures (Goatly, 2007:21-22). Moreover, as Bell Hooks indicates, “a film may have incredibly revolutionary standpoints merged with conservative ones. This mingling of standpoints is often what makes it hard for audiences to critically ‘read’ the overall filmic narrative” (Hooks, 1996: 3). Metaphor in film can appear as symbols. In essence, films are about metaphors for presenting human/inhuman experience in a general sense.

Metaphor in film is an idiosyncratic and omnipresent device, it structures the most essential foundation of language and cognition. According to Lakoff (1980), metaphors construct our conceptual system and our understanding of the world. Metaphors link two conceptual domains, the ‘source’ domain and the ‘target’ domain. The source domain entails literal entities, features, discourses and relationships, which are located in human’s mind. These entities are expressed in language through interrelated words and expressions. The target domain is relatively abstract compared to the source domain. It takes the configuration from the source domain, through the metaphorical connection. Target domains are considered to correlate with entities, discourses and relationships, which could be located in the source domain. Metaphor-making is a process of seeking meaning from one thing in terms of another. (Muller 2008, 26-32)

Existing in film as an effective means of expression, metaphor shapes our watching experiences and constructs our perceptions, as well as guiding our understanding of the plots and themes. Through the metaphorical expressions, we can perceive discourses, plots, and characteristics of the protagonists in the film. In brief, metaphor is crucial in interpreting texts (Semino, 2008), it negotiates the interactions between two domains. Metaphor can also serve as an organizing vehicle to organize the narrative and plotlines, thus conveying meanings in the texts through the interaction of cognitive structures (Goatly, 2007: 21-22). In the films discussed in this chapter, the sword metaphor signifies male power and their dominant status in a patriarchal society.

Furthermore, metaphor in film harbors a myriad of meanings, such as cultural, artistic and ideological implications. The metaphor in film can shed light on textual interpretation as well as textual configurations of the narrative. The main function of metaphor is to “structure the target domain that is based on particular elements and relations” (Urios-Aparisi:2014,103), and “determine narrative structures (Forceville Journey; Varda; Forceville and Jeulink) or envision scenes by using basic structures of body-mind interaction to turn abstract meanings into a tangible one , so that the audience can mentally replicate the actions in film via the activation of mirror neurons (Coëgnarts and Kravanja Embodied Visual Meaning).”^[1] Carroll (1994,1996) notices that visual metaphor can be very powerful in generating insightful meanings, and he claims that “visual metaphors use pictorial or otherwise visual devices that suggest identity in order to encourage metaphorical insight in viewers” (1994: 190). In the filmic texts, the viewers can detect the intention of the filmmaker.

In this chapter, I will exemplify Hollywood’s embrace of martial arts films and its contemplation of Chinese cultural legacy by taking Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *The Banquet* (2006) to examine the presence and function of metaphor in films. In the record of martial arts films, these two films fueled up a global fever on traditional Chinese cultural elements and a mania toward the *wuxia* genre film, which harbors ancient Chinese philosophy and honor of code as well as cultural legacy. Both films construct the sword as a cultural site to explore gender issues, such as masculinity in the martial arts film. In other words, the martial arts film offers an alternative way of representing masculinity in a global gaze. Even though *Crouching Tiger* is a Hollywood made product, it showcases Hollywood’s testimony on Chinese market.

Most significantly, the cultural and filmic relocation of the sword metaphor opens up new masculine imaginings and possibilities for filmic and cognitive interpretations. As a visual metaphor, the sword metaphor intimately links with Chinese history, folkloric culture and warrior myth, it offers an index to cultural references that recreate the long-lost glory of ancient China as well as a fantastic and imaginary world of martial arts. In line with serving as a crucial entity of the *wuxia* genre that offers visual spectacle riddle with sword-fighting, the sword metaphor offers a contextual background of the plot, which is essential to develop the plotline. The cultural significance of *Crouching Tiger* lies in that it reinvents a prototype of the new global sword-fighting martial arts genre. Its production mode shows that nowadays the dominant trend in the film industry is integrated collaboration among nations, which shows a mindset of cultural hybridity and diversity.

As part of a cultural setting, the mythical sword grants an implicit expression of traditional Chinese culture as well as constructing an idealized Chinese cultural identification. As a visible marker of masculinity, the sword fighting plays a key role in the process of masculinity construction. In juxtaposition with the fight choreography, the sword metaphor in both films demonstrates a visual representation of strong emotions, including hatred and pain, as well as the desire for revenge.

II. The gender issues in martial arts film

To begin with, martial arts film is a genre that features the exhibition of bodily display, warrior spirit and accordingly national strength thus signals a politically safe message. Martial arts films create a milieu where intersects political, economic, and cultural implications, as the plot setting and cultural relocation usually connect with other socio-cultural realms and contexts.

In both films, the sword metaphor facilitates the outlining of the notion that male supremacy whereas women are in an inferior status in ancient China. The sword metaphor also helps construct the image of women warriors and delineates some key features that highlight the attribute and physical strength of protagonists. In the scene of a duel balletic swordplay in *The Banquet*, Empress Wan's exceptional martial arts skills challenge the entrenched dogma of male supremacy in ancient China. Exceptional skills in sword fighting serve as a path to step over the gender boundary. However, given the advanced skills, Empress Wan still engages in the system of pleasing man's gaze and desire.

The sword metaphor not only enables women the potent power to fight, but also grants females inhabiting in a male-dominated system the male power, free-will and physical strength that transcend their gender construction. In this context, it relieves the women and liberates them from gender suppression; it also loosens the stiff knot brought by gender construction. In addition, the sword metaphor also knit up an ambiguous realm, as the sword does not promote gender transition, but just enables women an entry to approach male power, thus adding up an additional layer of socio-cultural meanings. According to Lacan, men are "having the phallus," women is in the process of "being the phallus," such biological attributes "reflect the power of the Phallus, to signify that power, and "to 'embody' the phallus" in our society (Butler 44). On a symbolic level, the sword metaphor signals the phallus fetish in a symbolic order, which to a certain point explains the sword as a clue to knit up different narrative threads. Empress Wan's presence in the film serves as an object of the male gaze, apparently serving the function of appealing the targeted male spectator.

Both Empress Wan and Jen are subversive forces against the patriarchal system. However, Empress Wan utilizes her charm of femininity to seize the power in a male-dominated world. Jen and Empress Wan's survival strategies and tricks to a certain point testified male supremacy and women's marginal socio-political status. Empress Wan's ambition in seizing the power indicates that she identifies the patriarchal social order. She challenges the male power and accordingly reverses the gender stereotype. However, as inhabiting in a male-dominated system, they are unable to escape from the cage. The sword metaphor helps to vent out their suppressed desire and voice, it also reveals the truth in a silent way that females are suppressed to unfold their true-self. In this sense, gender identity generates a space for further explorations on this topic.

III. Metaphor in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *The Banquet*

My research on this topic is fueled by the successive global zest on Chinese martial arts films since 2000. During this epoch, the global stage witnessed the rise of *Hero*, *The Banquet*, *The Promise (Wuji)*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Flying Daggers* and other martial arts films. In this chapter, I also contextualize my discussion of how Feng responded to this global flux against this backdrop by employing the same metaphor that Ang Lee inserted in film to symbolize authentic Chinese culture. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) is a transnational work in both the crew setting, and industrial production mode, such as production and distribution; it is a re-invent of the martial arts film, there are a myriad of cross-cultural elements; it is a combination of swordplay and melodrama. At the level of genre, it is a postmodern hybridization of the eastern and western genres.

Feng Xiaogang is not the only director who engages with martial arts films. Other prestigious filmmakers who enjoys global reputation in producing martial arts films, such as Fifth Generation directors, Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, are all globally known martial arts filmmakers. Their representative works include *Hero* (2004), and another two follow-up works, *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006), etc. Zhang has established his personal style of employing color in a metaphorical way to foster the construction of a deeper meaning within the frame. Zhang is famous for his usage of color in martial arts films in an exquisite way to create a poetic expression. In his blockbuster *Hero*, color is employed to identify and separate the variations of tales told by different narrators. Each flashback of the memory is marked with a unique color, such as red, green and blue. The color also bestows emotional attachment of the narrator from each chapter of the tale. Compared to Zhang's expertise in the usage of color, Feng has not developed such a sophisticated aesthetic style yet.

In his martial arts films, Zhang is also indulged in using slow motions to display the airy beauty of the body and martial arts skills of the characters. Zhang attempts to target oversea audiences at the cost of sacrificing the Chineseness in his film;

Zhang's *Hero* incurred criticism for its embedded political ideologies, legendary making of the official history of an authoritarian regime, advocating the idea that values a nation's unification over an individual's life. In brief, Zhang's martial arts cinema draws expressions of cultural nationalism while Feng does not have these dimensions.

However, both of them relocate the cultural settings of Chinese history to generate a new reality of China as a powerful cultural capital on the global stage. Moreover, both of them keep a close eye on the domestic market. In brief, each of them has their own cinematic signatures, with regard to the approach, Zhang is more artistic and he is adept in conveying abstract philosophical ideas, while Feng is more commercialized and focusing on the mundane notions and ideologies, such as supreme political power and material success. Another common aspect that they share is both of them relying on digital technology in their post-production process.

Chen Kaige's martial arts films, such as *The Promise* (2005), *Monk Comes Down the Mountain* (2015), are fantasy adventures. Chen's cinematic styles and aesthetics are drastically different from Zhang and Feng who offer intense fight scenes and the exquisite way of employing colors; Chen's martial arts film focuses more on the overt dramatic plotlines, thus creating emotional catharsis to echo with the audiences. Both Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige's martial arts films are embedded with political messages, and showcase the intellectuals' Chinese search for national identity. Whereas Feng does not harbor such inclinations. Feng is more concerned with the storytelling and the discursive dynamics in his historical melodrama and attempts to channel a conversation sponsoring cultural exchange between the Eastern and Western cultures.

To start with, both *The Banquet* and *Crouching Tiger* are martial arts films. As a vehicle constitutes an important aspect of the theme and narrative appeal for spectators, the sword metaphor occurs recurrently throughout the whole film. It accentuates the theme - supernaturalism and the mythical fates of the characters. However, under the concerns of a global gaze, both directors diluted the genre's tradition and added new cultural elements. The genre of martial arts harbors cultural and ideological significance. Though they were produced in different ideological contexts, the metaphorical image offers a premise to reflect how Chinese wuxia films ride with the global waves and ascend to the surface. I will partake the Chinese martial arts film *The Banquet* in a foreground position and do a comparative study with regard to the difference and similarities of the sword metaphor in the following length to illustrate the difference between a Chinese martial arts movie and a Hollywood movie, as they share the sword metaphor in filmic texts. However, the sword metaphor in different texts carries various significance and meanings. I will extend my argument in the following aspects, such as the configuration of characters, cultural contexts and the interactive relationships between the protagonists.

First of all, both films deal with the themes of revenge and transcendence in different visual ways, such as the aesthetic concerns, motif and shooting style. Moreover, both of them construct female characters, who are shaped as women warrior or heroine with defining features such as ambitious, independent, and strong-willed. They are also the driving force of the narrative. The airborne flying fight scenes are one of the staggering spectacles in both films, which play a key role in configuring the martial arts film as an identical genre.

The sword metaphor is a core element that structures the narrative and construction of the female protagonist in both films. In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the sword metaphor not only structures the women warriors' images, but also generates a fetishism aura, as it serves as an embodiment of the social power and authority. Such embodiment explains why Jen Yu (Zhang Ziyi) is longing for the sword. However, she misunderstands the freedom empowered by the notion of "jianghu," the ancient martial arts world. Fundamentally, it has an oppressive nature and is defined by code of honor, which requires responsibilities and discipline from the individuals. It also regulates an individual's behavior and priority choices. Jen over-simplifies the notion of "jianghu", in her fantasy, it is a world replete with freedom and swordplay whereas ignoring the code, order and responsibilities reinforced by this notion.

Jen is the focus of narrative. Driven by the belief that the sword will bring her the social power and freedom that she has been longing for, she steals the sword, and consequently fights with Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh) to retain the sword. Her playful attitude is reflected in her hybrid identity and ambiguous attitude toward her relationship with the people in her life. She has multiple identities, she is a rebellious daughter in her family, an untamed student in the discipleship, and a lover without a sense of responsibility and commitment. These multiple identities render an overloaded burden to her, and eventually leads to the fracture of her. As a metaphor, the sword is inscribed as a phallic power of authority. There is a life-to-death fight scene performed by Shu Lien and Jen to retain the sword. Shu Lien shouted to Jen, "Don't touch it! That's Li Mu Bai's sword... Without the Green Destiny, you're nothing." Such a statement reiterates the importance of the sword. Notably, most fight scenes in this film are performed by women, such as the battle between

Shu Lien and Jen, the combat between Jade Fox and Jen. Such gender disposition foregrounds the movie with a gender construction. Specifically, the sword plays a key role in the process of fighting, which in turn grants the women power and physical strength, such features are considered as distinguishable attributes of men in traditional perceptions.

Another issue that the movie touches upon is the ethical settings. Such settings are very modern, and are familiar by the Western audiences, thus facilitating the reception. Jen's individualism and violent behavior are manifested through the plotline of the mythical setting of the sword, and her manners distinguish and separate her from the mainstream social norms of the civilized Han society. Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai are both Han, they are confined by the code of honor, which shaped their lifestyles.^[2] The narrative is interrupted with Jen's flashback of her passionate sexuality with the outlaw bandit Lo, who steals her jade comb, thus initiates their first encounter, and a romantic journey. To get her comb back, Jen persistently chases Lo. Her jade comb is a symbol of a civilized womanhood in Han society. The action of stealing the comb, symbolically deprives her social identity. On another hand, such deed evokes her inner desire for liberation from traditional Confucian ideology. Apparently, her sexual practice with Lo transgresses the accepted social norms and moral code, as Jen is still under the engagement of an arranged marriage, while she practices sexuality with Lo. The film reveals a Han-centered ideology. Ethnically, Lo is a Mongolian who belongs to a Mongolia tribe and lives in the periphery- the Gobi Desert. The patterned costume he is wearing, horse-riding, and wild behavior, these elements all protrude his ethical minority stance. So he is shaped as a stereotyped "barbarian" in this film. Interestingly, there is a switch of Jen's ethnic identity from the Manchurian to an ethical minority after the scene of taking a bath. After the bath, she wears Lo's tribal patterned apparel as well as picking up living habits from Mongolia, which implies her ethical conversion. The exotic setting of the enclaved territories grants an ethnic landscape. However, when Jen's family besiege their cave, Jen is forced to return to the Han-dominated society. Such configuration functions as a metaphor that suggests the marginalization and oppression imposed on minorities. (Chan, 2004: 10) In brief, such ethnic encoding illustrates the tensions and conflicts between different ethnicities in a Manchurian-ruled society as well as the paradigm status of Han culture.

In the fight scene in a teahouse, Jen wears men's clothes. With her performance of cross-dressing, her gender role is shifted accordingly. Therefore, the behavior of cross-dressing also involves with a gender performance of subversion and self-articulation of a re-gendered posture. It blurs the boundaries between masculine and feminine. Hunt claims that the women warriors serve "as exotic fetish in the Western Orientalist imaginary."^[3] Their shifting identities are registered in their male-formed appearance and their inserting of martial violence. Jen demonstrates such manners when she is fighting a gang of roguish men and reeling them off, defeating them out of the teahouse, she also displays her martial artistry and embrace of violence during the sword fight. Her self-assured gesture of empowerment is unfolded through her cross-dressing and deviant behaviors. In the teahouse fight scene, her cross-dressing also extrudes a gendered posture as well as a manner of masculinity that attests the stereotype in martial arts films.

Generally speaking, the sword metaphor also links intimately to fight, blood, and death. It reveals some aspects of traditional Chinese culture, in particular, the warrior culture and code of honor. Li Mu Bai is mentally trapped into this warrior culture, so he has been seeking vengeance for his master. Such a mindset dominates his life. In his mind, the code of honor and warrior culture transcend mundane love and individual happiness. To achieve this goal, he represses his love for Shu Lien for many years, and eventually, he pays off his own life to implement the revenge. So we can tell self-sacrifice is part of the warrior culture. In this film, the notion of "jianghu" is male-centered, it symbolizes a patriarchal order and ideology. Such a notion is embodied and objectified through the Green Destiny sword. It also intimately associates with warrior's lifestyle, such as responsibilities, confinements and codes of honor and justice. Most remarkably, the figure construction of Li Mu Bai demonstrates a dichotomy mentality.

Jen is a subversive figure who is driven by the desire of adventure and individualism with self-gratification. However, her untamed individualism often causes chaos. She is detached from the mundane principles, her flee of arranged marriage and love affair with the outlaw bandit Lo illustrate her wild moral nature. While she also harbors ideal imagination and longings on the lifestyle of "jianghu". She is portrayed as a subverted force, as she denies obligations from her family and the arranged marriage, and desires to escape from the patriarchal social order. To some extent, her romance with Lo serves as an escape from reality and social order. Unlike the girls who dedicated themselves to needlecraft in her era, she masters extraordinary martial skills through self-teaching. Appreciating her talent, Li wants to take Jen as his disciple to train her to a more advanced level, though he considers Jen a potentially destructive force to the Confucian social order.

One of their encounters occurs in the bamboo tree top fight scene. Both Li Mu Bai and Jen bounce up on the branches of the trees, while Jen is unable to maintain balance, Li Mu Bai remains in a stable and calm posture. They utilize the bouncing force of the branches to swing back and forth while fighting against each other. The camera takes close-ups and slow motions to show the inner emotions of the characters.

In contrast with Jen's unbalanced swing, Li shows his mastery stance and takes control of the whole situation. When Jen ascends the top of a branch, she stamps out with fury and attempts to shake Li off the branch, but she fails and almost falls over from the treetop. In contrast, Li remains an aloof and transcendental stance. Then the camera takes a long shot, offering a visual feast, from which we can see them floating through the verdant bamboo forest.

The bodily position in this scene incorporates gender and sexuality issues, which generates a symbolic meaning, though they never had any physical contact. While Li Mu Bai hovers over Jen back and forth on the treetops, Jen falls into a lying position that carries an erotic sense in the filmic text. As Li is bouncing above Jen, he takes a birds-eye angle on Jen, which is an implication that the patriarchal social order remains a dominant place and rules over other ideologies.

As a female protagonist, Jen has a paradoxical personality, which is exemplified in her ambiguous attitude toward life. For instance, she steals the Green Destiny sword for fun, but returns it, then steals it again; her romantic relationship with Lo swings between passionate love and aloft separation; her sisterhood with Shu Lien switches as well, from extreme polarities, literally, from intimate sisters to lethal enemies. Such swing may result from her unstable personal identities in society, unsuccessful social acceptance and her own desires. Her identity is fractured by nature. Another scene demonstrates her ambivalence is her cross-dressing in the teahouse scene.

It is noteworthy that the construction of Jen is imbued with the attributes from traditional Chinese women and the tough aspects of the Western women. She harbors a spirit of independent women, with regard to her life goals and choice, she is not as submissive as ordinary traditional Chinese women. Such controversial features interplay with each other and thus meet both the oriental and the Western audiences' expectations.

In the sequel, despite her reunion with Lo, Jen jumps off the bridge of Wudang Mountain, while she is falling down, Jen extrudes an embracing posture with stretching out her arms. Her leap seems to testify the desire to follow one's "faithful heart." With the sorrow of Li's death, Jen's action resembles a suicidal gesture that intends to escape the patriarchal social system. Her choice also testifies her ultimate embrace to freedom, because the marriage with Lo means giving up her freedom that she has been chasing. From a philosophical sense, after both Jade Fox and Li Mu Bai's death, Jen's leap-off can be considered as a Daoist path, which seeks for immortality in exchange of giving up the mundane life. The merging of Chinese mythology and Taoist philosophy serves as a cultural blend and a relocation to its motif. Daoism promotes transcendental ideas, such as the best way to fight is not to fight, and one can be immortal through a series of training both mentally and physically. The mythology told by Lo testifies this thought. Based on the mythology, there was a young man who jumped off a mountain to fulfill the wish that his parents would recover their health in exchange for sacrificing himself. Surprisingly, God fulfilled his wish, he didn't die but remained unhurt. Jen's fate remains unknown in the open-ended coda. Did she restore the life of Li Mu Bai? However, her suicidal jump-off can be read as a final resistance to abide by the rules from the patriarchal system.

Her action evokes multiple interpretations. It can be interpreted as a reaction of redemption for her past misdeeds, as well as releasing herself from the patriarchal system. From a perspective of Western thought, Jen's stretching arms overlap with Christological allusion of redemption. From any dimension, this final image is evocative and powerful, it leaves an open-ended coda with a mysterious closure. Similarly, *The Banquet* shares a provocative open ending that leaves sufficient space to contemplate as well.

Ang Lee has discussed the motif of the film in his writing, "Family dramas and *Sense and Sensibility* are all about conflict, about family obligations versus free will." (Lee, 2000: 96) So his purpose was to explore the conflicts between individual's freedom and family obligations. The martial arts film is just a form to demonstrate the tension between the restraints imposed to individuals versus one's celebration. Overall, the conflicts between Shu Lien, Li Mu Bai and Jen can be summarized as the stifle between Confucian and Daoist philosophies. Daoism advocates to follow the laws of nature without striving for goals, whereas Confucianism emphasizes social order and hierarchy. This film entails more than one philosophical system; however, it suggests that there should be a balance between the natural way of Daoism and the refined order of Confucianism. Li and Yu's failure to establish a romantic relationship is just due to a blind adherence to the ritual propriety.

In an ideological dimension, the sword metaphor embodied an ultimate force that symbolizes patriarchal power. As the sword was used in wars to protect and defend the country in Ancient China, it is associated with the patriotic spirit. It also creates an atmosphere of "being more ancient and historical than the southern style" (Teo, 1997: 98). The sword metaphor also unfolds other hidden subtexts, such as ultimate speed, power, and spectacles of violence. Ang Lee reimagines China through the sword metaphor, he also negotiates among different agencies, such as the conflicts between tradition and society, and individualism and collectivism.

Clearly, the sword metaphor in both films resembles mythical tales and cultural legacy. In addition, both films have different aesthetic representations. Compared to *Crouching Tiger*, *The Banquet*'s mise-en-scenes are darker-toned and exquisite. The director of *The Banquet* pays close attention to the framed settings and the usage of colors. Each person is represented in different colors that feature a distinctive personality.

As an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the backdrop is set in the Tenth-century which is called Six Dynasties in China, one that is replete with political struggles and chaos, at which the Tang dynasty approached its end. The scenario in *The Banquet* exhibits an abyss preoccupation with cultural and political turbulence, and carries on an artistic exploration of historical experience, such as political conspiracies, interior struggles and individual ambitions. The sceneries of swordplay are vibrantly highlighted the drastic, intensified court struggles in a poetic way, which dispersed fragments of death, violence, repression and the yearning for a paramount political power into viable political solidarities. Behind the death and bloody sword fights, a curtain of human nature—greedy, and thirsty for paramount power was brought about into vision. Thereby, between the narrative of fights and death, and the storytelling of the murder behind the silver screen, the fight scenes in the bamboo forest endeavor to represent a double-layer of historical epigram: the chaos of social situations, and the fragility of lives. Overall, *The Banquet* displays a kaleidoscope consisting of the cravings for power, bloody struggles and entangled love affairs in a poetic way.

In this historical costume drama, there are mainly three threads woven together to constitute the plot: the affections between Empress Wan (Zhang Ziyi) and Prince Wu Luan (Daniel Wu), the unconditional love of Qing Nü (Zhou Xun) toward Prince Wu Luan, who lingers in her mind and eventually causes her death; the delusional love of Emperor Li (Ge You) to Empress Wan. These threads entangled and envisioned a tragedy in oriental style. The image of Empress Wan is amid the focus of these threads. Compared to the female figure in *Crouching Tiger*, Wan shows no ambiguity with regard to her social identity and attitude, she is clearly demarcated between love and hatred. In the opening prologue, a voice-over narrates the background of the story.

In 907 AD, after the Tang Dynasty collapsed, the pre-modern Chinese history witnessed an epoch called Six Dynasties, in which the interior struggles were exceedingly frequent, and even sprawling into the imperial family. Prince Wu Luan falls in love with Little Wan, but his father smashes his dream by entitling her as his Empress. Wu Luan is sent to exile. To relieve himself from the sorrow of an innocent yet reminiscent love, he converts himself into a hermit, a dancer and a musician. Later, his uncle murders his father and usurps to the throne, his beloved woman Wan is entitled as Empress again. Thereafter, Wu Luan's relationship with Wan has transformed from a couple to son and stepmother, which entails a suggestive theme of incest. Incest is a popular theme in Western culture, which has bifurcated into a genre. The taboo nature of the incest spices the titillation, which fostered a large collection of fictions and films that devoted to elaborate this topic.

There are three scenes that contain the sword metaphor. The first one is the opening sequence that serves as a wardrobe, which is imbued with typical Chinese martial arts and aesthetic values from the Hollywood filmmaking mode, such as appreciation for the violence aesthetic. The combat happens between the Emperor's assassins in black armor riding on horsebacks, and the masked dancers in diaphanous white linen, who are practicing a gripping dance in a grand temple-like theatre in the bamboo forest. As a natural location and surrounding, the bamboo forest is a place repeatedly appears in *Crouching Tiger* as well. It signals a life of peace, tranquility and Zen, and is antithesis to murder and massacre. Then there are close-ups on falling bamboo leaves and flying arrows in slow motion. Consequently, the guards sent by Empress Wan to protect Wu Luan are killed. In this sequence, melancholy music is set as the backdrop, accompanied with the brutality of the massacre and political power. The sound track reinforces the gap between an ideal bucolic life and the atrocious political massacre by switching from a haunting, lyrical love song into the thumping of hooves and the clatter of armour.

Another paradigmatic scene associated with the presence of the sword metaphor is the Empress's coronation. In the name of honoring her coronation, Wu Luan displays a sword battle with the palace guards. After he is struck by the fierce moves of the palace guards several times, eventually, he is pinned down to the ground and his life is endangered. At this crucial moment, Empress Wan intervenes in with gorgeous slow-motion swordplay, she glides aerially and defeats the guards in just a few strokes. In this scene, the artistic swordplay skills of Empress Wan grant a visual spectacular and outrun the male protagonist, which are extraordinarily dazzling and impressive. Thereby, such narrative strategy reveals a feminist interpretation by constructing the image of an invincible woman in a patriarchal milieu. She traverses the zone of the desirable gaze of the masculine; rather, she acts as a rescuer, a woman warrior. Here, Laura Mulvey's psychoanalysis and interpretation of gender roles shed lights on women's function in constructing a patriarchal unconsciousness.

“Woman stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order...The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly...Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.” (Laura Mulvey, 1975, 6-9.)

The second scene enriched with the sword metaphor is the bamboo fight scene. After Emperor ascends the throne, he sends an army of armored assassins with mastery of sword skills to murder Wu Luan who practices art in a luxury mansion located in a bamboo forest. The swordsmen in black masks brutally killed the defenseless and unarmed dancers, who dressed in white linen robes and white masks. In a long shot, this fight scene is riddled with blood and disjointed corpses in slow motion. In this scene, the sword metaphor represents a merciless massacre and political struggle. White color suggests that the dancers are innocent people, they show a fearless and composure stance when confronted with death. In contrast, the sound track in this scene is accompanied with a calming music, which functions as a lullaby deepens the sense of sorrow and mourning. The fight scenes in the bamboo forest endeavor to represent a double-layer of historical epigram: the chaos of political turbulence, the fragility of lives, and the alternation of dynasties is accomplished at the cost of innocent people's lives.

In the next scene, the sword represents revenge and hatred. During the banquet, Empress Wan offers the emperor a toast with a cup of poisonous wine, but things go astray unexpectedly: the emperor grants a reward to Qing Nü this cup of toxic wine. After drinking the wine and fulfilling a dance performance, Qing Nü collapses and dies. At this point, Wu Luan stands out and takes off his mask to mourn Qing Nü. Holding a sword in hand, he accuses the Emperor of regicide, surpassing the imperial guards with his spanking power and lethal strengths. Then the plot reaches a turning point, stung by conscience, Emperor Li asks the heaven whether it is the ghost of his brother who has protected his son, then drinks up the poisonous wine and dies in Wan's arms. Wu Luan's purity in his heart awakens his uncle's conscience.

As an underlying suggestion, political power is usually associated with male charisma and martial conquest. Wu Luan's defeat by the palatial guards illustrates this point on a reversal aspect that he lacks masculinity. Such configuration also implies a narrative strategy: the effeminized Asian male implies a stereotyped perception of the Western world. The configuration of effeminized Asian male is a deconstructive pattern, it challenges the traditional Chinese notion as well as the roles of men and women. It also eroticizes the oriental masculinity up to the Western ideas and fantasies. Notably, the role of martial arts not only offers an eroticized spectacle in the vision of the West, which channels up to share a portion of the international film market; but also fosters the revitalization of a traditional genre to reach a global audience.

However, in the coda, the situation goes tragically awry: after all these figures died, there are no obstacles on her way to the throne, empress Wan entitles herself as “Her Majesty, the Emperor,” the scene also parallels her shifted new role: her garment is luxuriously unfolded in a long rivulet of silk, the red color is compelling: the red is visually metaphorized as the flame of ambition, implying that she accomplishes her ambition while she ascends the supreme power of rulership. Afterwards, the ending goes unanticipated: the Sword of Yue Maiden flying into the scene and piercing her body through. Thus the ending endows the audience with an uneasy open-ending. The unidentifiable murder leaves the audience a suspension as well as a space to develop a further reflection to ruminate the relationship between the protagonists and the antagonist. Occurred in a chilly winter with fluttering snow, the ending of *The Banquet* is suddenly saturated with accumulated melancholy sentiments and thereby reaches the climax, which is packed with overwhelming sadness and loss. The last shot concentrates on a gaze of the facial expression of Empress Wan when her body is pierced through by the Sword of Maiden of Yue. In a close-up shot, her sophisticated facial expression is entangled with pain, astonishment and despair. This scene is out of the viewers' expectations, without pointing out who is the murder, thus leaves the end open. In this light, the plot setting of the ending shares similarity with *Crouching Tiger*.

In *The Banquet*, there is a legend associated with the Sword of Maiden of Yue. There was a war between the Kingdoms of Wu and Yue during the Spring and Autumn Period in ancient China. The Yue Maiden was mastery in swordplay, thereby she was named as Yuenü by the King of Yue, who was impressed by her mastery of the art of swordplay. He decreed that his army adopt her swordplay skills and appointed her to train his officers in the army. Her swordsmanship is considered the earliest known swordplay, which has a lasting influence on Chinese martial arts for generations. However, in *The Banquet*, the filmic text endorses a nostalgic, romanticized sentiment on the Sword of Yue Maiden, as the theme associates with separation from family and lover.

Wu Luan in *The Banquet* is a paralleled counterpart to Li Mu Bai in *Crouching Tiger*. Both of them share the features of a transcendental aloofness from the mainstream ideology and mundane concerns. Wu Luan exiles himself to practice performance art in a bamboo house, and stays away from the political turbulence. Accordingly, Li Mu Bai wants to quit *jianghu* and his prestigious social status.

However, the configuration of Wu Luan's fallout in sword fighting somewhat erased his masculinity whereas Li Mu Bai claimed a leading position in sword fighting which in turn highlights his masculinity.

Focusing on re-articulating the plot features from *Hamlet*, *The Banquet* projects Empress Wan as the center of the whole story, who strives to achieve sublime power in a patriarchal world replete with violence, political conspiracies and struggles. She manipulates people around her: to survive, she abandons the loyalty to traditional values and female chastity. After her first husband is poisoned and died, she marries her brother-in-law and is entitled as the Empress in the new regime. From the perspective of Emperor Li, she is the center of a desirable gaze, which links to a hint of a patriarchal ideology in the visual field. She is jealous of Qing Nü, who embraces an innocent love and devotion toward Wu Luan. To highlight the significance of Wan's role in this drama, the director made several triumphs. In the scene of reunion with Prince Wu Luan, the director aligned a beautiful synchronized pairing balletic sword-play dance as well as showing her dazzling swordplay skills, which serves as an extension of her graceful charming and emotional release. The sword-dance performance brings Wan and Wu Luan back a nostalgic moment and a flashback to the verdant life span in their younger years. In the end of the film, Wan's sudden enigmatic death adds a labyrinthine tone to the whole piece. In summary, the spectacle in *The Banquet* is constructed through the arts of dance-like swordplay and combat that condensed with slow motion sword performances.

In a paralleled comparison, the sword in both films is portrayed as a lethal weapon, it is a metaphor for revenge and massacre in general. In *Crouching Tiger*, it is the symbol of social justice, political power and authority; while in *The Banquet*, besides sharing the same symbol of revenge and massacre, it is a symbol for elapsed verdant years and innocent love. They both link to cultural and historical traditions in the filmic texts, as the sword metaphor in both films is closely related to a certain cultural backdrop of mysterious legends. In particular, the Sword of Green Destiny inserts a phallic power and hegemony. The Sword of Yue Maid adds sensibilities in the filmic text, as it is named after a maid of Yue State, thus associated with a legend. It symbolizes the verdant years and innocent maidenhood of Empress Wan, which grants a sharp contrast with her later becoming. She is dominated by political ambition and manipulates power tactically among multiple agencies. In the cultural dimension, the sword metaphor in both films also registers masculinity and patriarchal social order in general. In *Crouching Tiger*, Jen transforms into a swordsman through cross-dressing in the scene of teahouse fighting; her cross-dressing apparently blurs gender boundaries. While in *The Banquet*, there is not such a configuration.

In conclusion, the sword metaphor in both films is associated with myth and conventions, both directors offer a twist in presenting and envisioning the historical traditions. Serving as an imaginary agency, which links to fantasies, myths and legend from Chinese culture, the sword metaphor creates an exotic cultural space that registers a selling point in the circuit of global gaze. It provides a novel way to reimagine China to a Western gaze as well.

IV. Conclusion: The contributions of metaphor in film

Generally speaking, metaphor in film serves as a visual communicator that conveys information to assist the viewers to understand the film more deeply and thoroughly. Metaphor offers visual forms of representation, it links to two domains, the source domain and the target domain. It dynamically bridges up a gap between cognitive studies and film studies. In *Crouching Tiger*, the source domain is *jianghu*, which means the underworld of martial arts and patriarchal order, while the target domain is the sword. Similarly, in *The Banquet*, the sword metaphor shares the same target domain with *Crouching Tiger*, while the target domain is revenge, slaughter and hatred.

First of all, the metaphor in film can contribute to offering a subtle or blatant index to the motif of the film. It can also highlight the theme and facilitate the development of the narrative line. With the engagement of metaphors, the filmmakers can invent complex and innovative ideas and bestow the cinematic works with an epic value. It can boost the thematic value of a film to the next level. To be more specific, with the aid of gravity-defying slow motions, multiple camera angles, the sword metaphor helps to construct the spectacle in fight sequences. It also intermixes with swordplay fight scenes, thus echoes the attribute of this genre.

Secondly, metaphors and symbols can be used to develop plot, theme, and character constructions in insightful and visual ways. In essence, metaphor in film emptomizes humans' life experience. One of the most significant values of metaphor is that it helps us to understand abstract concepts that cannot always be translated into words. As metaphor is visually cued, the metaphors in film can locate abstract meanings into a concrete physical source domain, organize viewers' visual fields, orient the viewers' understanding of the narrative, and thus creating solid meaning structures.

Sometaphor can function as a medium to transfer one form to another. In particular, it provides multilayered perspectives and can express complex meanings via images.

In films, the metaphor can be employed as rhetoric tools to generate inspiring ideas that deepens the theme. For instance, the sword metaphor in *Crouching Tiger* carries ideological and cultural significance, such as symbolizing the phallic power in a patriarchal society; while in *The Banquet*, the sword metaphor extends the theme of revenge, massacre to political ambitions. The metaphor in both films is saturated within certain cultural backdrops and thus demonstrates an exotic cultural landscape.

In cognitive film studies, the metaphor is considered as a vehicle that can resonate deep emotions from the perspective of the viewers (Smith 2003). It also bestows the film with complex cultural meanings so that the audiences and scholars are able to interpret the filmic texts in a deeper dimension.

Most significantly, the metaphor allows scholars to investigate the structures and aesthetics of moving images in a given cultural context. Cognitive scholars define metaphor as a dynamic outcome of interactions between cinematic representations and subjective activities of the viewers. (Fahlenbrach, 9) "Film creates a realistic motivation for its metaphorical transformation through the point-of-view structure." (Langkjoer, 117) In film studies, metaphor can serve as a mode of viewing images (Fahlenbrach, 286), which can map out invisible domains, such as abstract ideas, mentalities, or emotions. (Fahlenbrach, 286) Moreover, as a media, it can mediate different domains, such as perception, cognition and emotion. The scholarly works indicate that metaphorical progress has become a global discourse that contributes to enrich the viewers' knowledge and experience. (Fahlenbrach, 287) In conclusion, metaphor is a blending mechanism that grants the cognitive scholars an innovative way of interrogating complex interactive processes between the auditory and the visual dimension.

^[1] Eduardo Urios-Aparisi. 2014. "Figures of Film, Metaphor, Metonymy, and Repetition." IMAGE [&] NARRATIVE Vol. 15, No. 1 (2014), 103.

^[2] Lee et al., *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, 76.

^[3] Hunt, 120. Hunt: "The Asian woman is a prime object of what Asian-American critics call 'racist love' [I]f Asian men are represented as emasculated and asexual, Asian women are 'only sexual, imbued with an innate understanding of how to please and serve'" (quoting Cheung, 1990, 236).

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