

# *Cultural Translation in Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

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**Abstract:** *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, a groundbreaking film in Chinese cinema history, etched its name in the annals of cinema by becoming the first foreign-language film from China to clinch an Oscar. This monumental achievement not only marked a historic milestone but also laid a robust foundation for subsequent Chinese cinematic endeavors to carve their niche in the global film and television landscape. Director Ang Lee, renowned for his versatile filmmaking prowess, embarked on the audacious mission of seamlessly blending Chinese cultural nuances with Western ideologies within the canvas of this cinematic masterpiece. This essay embarks on a compelling exploration of cultural translation, wherein the writer delve into how Ang Lee masterfully transmits the profound essence of traditional Oriental martial arts cinema to Western audiences. Through an in-depth analysis of a specific case study, the writer dissect Ang Lee's ingenious methods for constructing a shared cultural context that bridges the chasm between these two distinct worlds. By shining a spotlight on Ang Lee's extraordinary accomplishment in transcending cultural boundaries through the medium of film, the writer unravel the intricate layers of this cinematic triumph, expanding the understanding of its significance in the realm of global cinema.

**Keywords:** cultural translation, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Ang Lee

## 1. Introduction

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is the first film in Chinese cinema history to win the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. The film incorporates Western intellectual frameworks such as chivalry, feminism, and Jane Austen's novel "Sense and Sensibility" while retaining Eastern aesthetics. This movie is directed by Ang Lee, a male director from Taiwan, China. Ang Lee's films have been widely recognized in both domestic and international academic circles, and his representative works include *Life of Pi*, *Gemini Man*, *The Wedding Banquet*, *Pushing Hands*, *Eat Drink Man Woman*, *Brokeback Mountain*, and others. Ang Lee's films excel in cross-cultural dialogue, allowing them to be embraced by both local audiences and the Western cultural market. Due to this, Ang Lee has been hailed as "the only film director in the world today who can authentically cater to both Chinese and Western audiences."

In previous studies, scholars have generally examined the music and aesthetics of "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," among other aspects. However, few have delved into the phenomenon of cultural translation present in the film. As a Chinese-style martial arts movie, the challenge of conveying its deep classical oriental charm to Western audiences in an easily understandable manner

is a subject that cannot be overlooked. This study also plays a significant role in the subsequent East-West communication within the media field and the export of Chinese culture.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Historical Evaluation of Ang Lee

Born in Taiwan, Ang Lee studied and worked in the United States for many years. His special identity as a Chinese-American has given him an innovative approach to Chinese culture, which has further led to his unrepeatable success in the field of international cinema. His father was a traditional Chinese so that his family has created an excellent environment for him to learn about traditional oriental cultures. In addition, he's study in film studies enables him to learn more about the cinema industry of Hollywood. While crafting his own movies, Ang Lee didn't aim to cater to or diminish either culture. Instead, he skillfully harnessed the strengths of both cultures to discover common ground. Simultaneously, during his ongoing filmmaking journey, he defied the camera techniques and styles which widely deployed in Hollywood cinematic industry. He seamlessly blended the Eastern cultural backdrop with Western cinematic expertise, making his films appealing and relatable to audiences from both East and West. Ang Lee's contributions allowed Chinese-language cinema to establish a solid presence on the global stage. His films encompass a wide range of genres, and he consistently pushes the boundaries of cinematic art, earning him a reputation as a daring, rebellious, talented, and captivating director.

### 2.2. Historical Reputation of Ang Lee

After Ang Lee's award-winning Chinese martial arts film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* received recognition at international film festivals in 2001, it gradually paved the way for films regarding to Chinese culture to gain acceptance in foreign markets. Western audiences developed a sense of fascination and appreciation for unfamiliar Oriental cultures, setting the stage for more Chinese films to make their mark on the global stage in the years that followed. As mentioned in Shi Xiuyuan's article, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* held the distinction of being the highest-grossing foreign-language film in the U.S. market for three decades. It was hailed as a groundbreaking movie that not only achieved several firsts for Chinese-language cinema in the international film industry but also sparked a surge in Western audiences' interest in Chinese martial arts films [1]. This success marked a significant milestone in opening up new opportunities for Chinese-language films to engage with international audiences.

### 2.3. Literature Review on the Film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* indeed made history as the first Chinese film to win the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Set in China during the Qing Dynasty, the movie delves into romantic relationships that defy societal conventions. Its themes revolve around the desire for freedom and utilize the sword as a symbol of connection between the characters.

The desert love story between Wang Xiaohu and Jade Jiao Long has faced obstacles at first due to the constraints of traditional Chinese marriage. However, in the end, they defy the notion that parental orders cannot be disobeyed. They break free from their societal bonds and gracefully descend from Wudang Mountain, symbolizing introspection and the poetic aesthetics in Chinese culture.

Li Mubai and Yu Xiulian's stoic and restrained love represents how Oriental men and women express their feelings with subtlety. Yet, in a moment of life's fleetingness, they too break free from tradition, boldly sharing a deep kiss that reveals their love for each other.

As a martial arts film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* showcased its unique approach to action

movies. It doesn't emphasize violence but instead presents the strength and softness of Chinese culture. The scene should be noted is that the protagonists display their martial arts prowess in a bamboo forest, skillfully stepping on bamboo tips. Despite the intense confrontation, the camera work remains smooth, and the composition is symmetrical, with scene transitions being seamless and devoid of fast-paced action shots.

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* has earned international acclaim and marked the success of Ang Lee in cross-cultural filmmaking. Li Haiyan believes that the film's success lies in its ability to present Chinese classical aesthetics in a modernized manner [2]. Similarly, Zhang Min contends that the film offers a unique aesthetic experience and philosophical exploration, both in its visual design and in the emotional depth it conveys [2].

Wang Min and You Yuanyuan suggest that Ang Lee's incorporation of traditional Oriental thinking into his storytelling adds a distinctive flavor to his films, making them easily recognizable due to these characteristic elements. According to Ye Jigu, Ang Lee's movies carry the essence of national cultural traditions and radiate a profound Chinese cultural significance. When integrated well into the film, this cultural depth can be a valuable asset for its future market development [2].

In summary, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is celebrated for its successful integration of classical Chinese aesthetics with modern storytelling, creating a unique and philosophically rich cinematic experience that resonates with both domestic and international audiences.

### 3. Theoretical Framework: Cultural Translation Theory

Translating film and television materials or texts from one culture to another is indeed a complex process that goes beyond linguistic accuracy. It involves cultural adaptation and bridging the gap between different cultural viewpoints. "An essential part in the export of movies to foreign countries is the translation of language. Language is not only a tool for human beings to express their thoughts and feelings and communicate, but also a very important cultural carrier and an important part of culture" [3]. Cultural translation refers to a process that making the text with traits of one culture could be understood to by the audience from other countries. Whether the translation will be successful and effective not only depends on a translator capacity in the target language. Eugene A. Nida, the father of contemporary translation theory, mentioned that "for translation, mastery of two cultures is even more important than mastery of two languages" [3]. More importantly, it requires a comprehensive understanding in both cultures so as to reduces the misunderstanding cause by cultural differences.

The goal of transforming original video subtitles or articles into a new language structure is to convey the original author's intended meaning while minimizing cultural misunderstandings. This process aims to enhance the viewer or reader's sense of immersion and cultural identity, ultimately creating a high-quality cultural output. The objective is to make the content easily readable and engaging for the target audience.

Regarding to cultural translation process in translating Chinese-ness to global audience, one should not ignore the cultural negotiations. To be more specific, the translator faces the task of accurately conveying the literal meaning of the subtitles while also presenting the metaphorical aspects rooted in Chinese culture to the audience. This is particularly important due to the inherent differences between Eastern and Western cultures.

In the process of translating cultures, several factors come into play. The translator must be mindful of the potential comprehension bias that may arise due to varying cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the translator needs to consider the speaking habits of the target audience, the characteristics of the characters in the film or show, the emotional nuances conveyed in the scenes, the length of the original and target language utterances, and even the translation of slang or colloquial expressions.

Throughout this intricate process, it's crucial for the translator to respect both the source and target

cultures. “Audiences are able to have different levels of understanding of different cultures through watching the film, however, through comparison, it is found that Western film culture has very different characteristics from local Chinese culture.” [4] The ultimate aim is to facilitate the transmission and integration of these cultures, creating a context in which viewers from diverse cultural backgrounds can engage comfortably and seamlessly in the shared experience of the movie or television content.

#### **4. Main Body Cultural Translation in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon***

##### **4.1. From Poetic Metaphors to Direct Description**

When Ang Lee crafts lines in verse, he opts for more colloquial descriptions which convey meanings in a more direct manner, over metaphorical ones associated with Chinese culture.

For instance, traditional Chinese poems often employed elements like “Penglai” to symbolize an extraordinary place where one resides. This usage, such as in Yuan Zhen’s line “I am the Jade Emperor’s official in the incense case, and I have to live in Penglai when I am banished,” reflects a pinnacle state. However, this kind of imagery assumes a certain knowledge of ancient Chinese poetry and culture, making it challenging for Western audiences to grasp the poem’s meaning directly.

To bridge this gap, Ang Lee replaces such symbolism with the desert, where Jade Jiao Long lives, and incorporates the word “dragon” from her name, signifying emperors. This creation roughly translates to: “from the desert comes a dragon that comes and goes without a trace.” The poem uses the vastness of the desert to suggest Jade Jiao Long’s yearning for the river and lake, likening her to an unconfined dragon. This approach enables Western audiences, who may have varying levels of familiarity with Chinese poetry and culture, to readily comprehend the literal essence of the lines without sacrificing the beauty of the poem’s rhyme and structure.

Chinese imagery often requires a specific context for understanding, with deeper symbolism demanding a grasp of Chinese cultural history. Ang Lee strikes a balance by selecting straightforward and intuitive imagery for the poem, preserving the poetic flow of the ancient Chinese verse while aiding Western audiences in comprehending the poem’s meaning through bilingual translation.

##### **4.2. From a Conceptual Taoist Philosophy to Contextualized Taoist Philosophy**

Rather than conveying traditional Chinese Taoist philosophy through direct conceptual statements, Ang Lee incorporates this philosophy into the dialogues between characters, the film’s imagery, and the characters’ experiences.

Nothingness, and the harmony of nature has been widely considered as the core of Taoist philosophy. In the movie, during a conversation between Li Mu Bai and Yu Xiulian in the bamboo forest, Li Mu Bai tells her that when people clench their fists tightly, they cannot hold anything, but when they open their hands, they can grasp the whole world. This sentiment echoes Lao Tzu’s idea of “doing nothing and ruling by doing nothing.” Ang Lee presents this Taoist notion in a detailed context, which offers this Chinese philosophical concept a solid scenario. The act of shaking hands and letting go is a universal gesture transcending cultural boundaries. It serves to help the audience grasp the concept of “nothingness” emphasized by Taoism.

When Li Mu Bai attempts to inspire Jade Jiao Long to cultivate virtuous thoughts, he advises her not to allow her desires to expand or be influenced by external factors. He encourages her to remain steadfast in her beliefs and dedicate herself to helping others to attain a contented life. This advice is rooted in the “Tao Te Ching.” To enhance the audience’s understanding, Ang Lee pairs this wisdom with a fight scene between Li Mu Bai and Jade Jiao Long. By depicting their back-and-forth movements as Li Mu Bai strikes Jade Jiao Long with a wooden stick, he aids the audience in comprehending the meaning behind Li Mu Bai’s words and subtly conveys the Taoist philosophy he

aims to express.

Throughout the film, Taoist-related imagery such as “bamboo forest,” “water,” and “ink” recurs, allowing the audience to visually and intuitively immerse themselves in the Taoist ideological ambiance. “The metaphor of the ‘Battle of the Bamboo Forest’ particularly emphasizes the symbolism of “bamboo,” signifying the essence of Chinese martial arts. In traditional Chinese culture, martial arts guided by Taoist principles emphasize qualities like self-restraint, introversion, and self-examination, aligning with the Taoist theme of returning to nature, inner emptiness, and the unity of heaven and humanity” [5].

Li Mu Bai shares his experiences of cultivation with Yu Xiulian, describing how he enters a realm where time and space cease to exist. This parallels the sayings of Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi about cleansing away mysteries and achieving a state of mental fasting. Although Li Mu Bai claims he hasn’t fully attained “the Way,” his specific experiences are used to embody and elucidate Taoist philosophy, illustrating the process of returning to nature and letting go of worldly concerns.

#### **4.3. From Hidden Love to Straightforward Love**

In crafting the emotional arcs of the characters, Ang Lee made a deliberate shift from the subtle and introverted expressions of Chinese-style emotions to a more direct and straightforward expression of love that would be better understood by Western audiences.

In classical Chinese notions of love, emotions are rarely, if ever, expressed overtly, and the Chinese tend to avoid direct discussions about love itself. As noted by Bian Yue, “unlike Westerners, who are forthright in their expressions and don’t beat around the bush, Chinese people often employ subtle language, sometimes taking a circuitous route to convey a single thought” [6].

While the romantic relationship between Li Mu Bai and Yu Xiulian began in an introverted manner, with both of them initially concealing their true feelings, there are several scenes in the film that illustrate their open and sincere love for each other. At the outset, Yu Xiulian is bound by traditional customs, honoring the memory of her late husband, and suppressing her emotions for Li Mu Bai. They maintain a cautious distance and never openly acknowledge their love. It’s only when Li Mu Bai is still alive that he bravely declares his love, departing from the subtle expressions of affection. This bold confession prompts Yu Xiulian to confront her own emotions. After Li Mu Bai’s passing, she confides in Yu Jiao Long that, regardless of the choices she makes in her life from that point onward, she must be honest and true to her own heart. This revelation also lays the emotional groundwork for the reunion on Wudang Mountain between the lovers, Yu Jiao Long and Luo Xiaohu.

#### **4.4. From a Subordinated Woman to an Independent Woman**

Under Ang Lee’s portrayal, Jade Jiao Long, originally a classical Chinese woman in terms of gender roles, becomes a non-conformist, independent female figure that can be embraced in Western culture.

In Wang Chunfei’s article, the concept of “chastity” in traditional Chinese culture denotes complete subservience to a man, being solely the property of the man one marries, existing solely for his benefit, and devoid of any individual significance to other men. Also, “lust” emphasizes the separation of genders and the use of female desire to arouse enjoyment or attachment from other men [7]. This illustrates that traditional Chinese women were often objectified and relegated to a role of servitude, with their own thoughts and desires suppressed, essentially serving as playthings for men, and their status was subordinate to that of men.

In contrast, in the West, particularly after the French Revolution of 1789, women began advocating for equal rights and breaking free from the societal constraints that had bound them. “The feminist movement emerged, with a central focus on challenging gender discrimination, oppression, and exploitation. In Western feminist thought, gender relations have consistently been a focal point of

academic research, with the ultimate goal being the emancipation of women and the pursuit of gender equality” [8].

Jade Jiao Long’s portrayal in the movie reflects a departure from traditional Chinese gender norms in several ways. Firstly, she learns calligraphy, challenging the stereotype that “a woman’s lack of talent is a virtue.” Secondly, her name includes the word “dragon,” which historically symbolized the emperor’s authority and power. This suggests that Jade Jiao Long is not bound by the traditional Chinese expectation of conforming to marriage alone. She is free to fall in love with Luo Xiaohu without adhering to the traditional family marriage customs imposed on Chinese women. In their relationship, Luo Xiaohu, the male, is the one who cannot leave or let go, reversing the usual male dominance in Chinese culture. He continually follows in Yu Jiao Long’s footsteps, with the emotional power predominantly in her hands.

Furthermore, despite being a woman, Jade Jiao Long possesses formidable martial arts skills and successfully steals the “Green Destiny Sword” multiple times. Her desire for the Green Destiny Sword underscores her own strength, as well as her willingness to adapt rather than conform, much like a flexible sword. It also skillfully combines elements of Eastern femininity and Western masculinity, creating a common ground for cultural communication between the two worlds.

## 5. Conclusion

Through *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, an Chinese martial arts film, Ang Lee successfully transcends the traditional boundaries of Chinese culture and creates a space for the sharing and mutual understanding of Chinese and Western cultures, fostering cross-cultural communication. In the process, Ang Lee portrays an image of China characterized by harmony, restraint, and virtue.

Ang Lee’s approach involves bridging the cultural gap by tapping into common emotional themes shared by both Chinese and Western audiences, such as family, love, and friendship. By emphasizing these universal emotions, he ensures that viewers from both the East and the West can relate to and comprehend the feelings conveyed in the movie. Furthermore, this approach enables Western audiences to draw closer to Eastern culture and embrace it through their emotional connection.

In essence, Ang Lee’s masterful use of universal emotional themes in “*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*” not only facilitates cross-cultural communication but also presents China as a place embodying values that transcend cultural boundaries, fostering a greater appreciation and acceptance of Eastern culture by Western audiences.

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