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**Author**

Meng, Victoria

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The Martial Master's Mistresses: Forbidden Desires and Futile Nationalism in Jet Li's Kung-Fu Films

**Author:**

Victoria Meng, Candidate of Philosophy, Cinema and Media Studies, UCLA

**Abstract:**

During his 24 years as a kung-fu film icon, Jet Li has repeatedly portrayed the conventional Chinese martial master: the righteous but reluctant leader who ultimately retreats from the world after redirecting his own desires to support supposedly greater moral claims of master and nation. Too preoccupied by his fights and flights, Li's characters seem unable to give much thought to the women who love him. This consistent failure for Li to "get the girl"—especially given a series of hyper-feminine heroines who should, by rights, be irresistible—suggests that these popular films enact some trauma or taboo for their local audiences.

Indeed, I argue that these heroines, each of whom bears a mixed cultural heritage, personify the impossibility of imagining a unified modern Chinese identity, because the films cannot imagine these heroines as fit candidates to raise "culturally pure" children. Li's steadfast reincarnation as the martial master, then, represents the contemporary Chinese need to elegize a common cultural past as a compensation for the loss of a common cultural future. This essay thus pays homage to and extends feminist film scholar Gina Marchetti's groundbreaking Romance and the "Yellow Peril," in which she describes how Hollywood has used the trope of romance to perform and displace its racial fears and fantasies. Jet Li's kung-fu films mobilize a different set of gendered iconographies to explore different historical issues, but their discursive strategies and political implications remain the same.

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Good morning. During his 24 years as a kung-fu film icon, Jet Li has repeatedly portrayed the conventional Chinese martial master: the righteous but reluctant leader who

ultimately retreats from the world after redirecting his own desires to support supposedly greater moral claims of master and nation. Too preoccupied by his fights and flights, Li's characters seem unable to give much thought to the women who love him. This consistent failure for Li to "get the girl"—especially given a series of hyper-feminine heroines who should, by rights, be irresistible—suggests that these popular films enact some trauma or taboo for their mostly local audiences.

Indeed, I argue that one way to make sense of this narrative pattern is to note that these heroines each bear a mixed, or not Han-Chinese, cultural heritage. They personify the impossibility of imagining a unified modern Chinese cultural identity, because the films cannot envision these heroines as fit candidates with whom to start a family. Li's steadfast reincarnation as the martial master, then, represents the contemporary Chinese need to eulogize a common cultural past as a compensation for the loss of a common cultural future. [Slide] This presentation thus pays homage to and extends feminist film scholar Gina Marchetti's groundbreaking Romance and the "Yellow Peril", in which she describes how Hollywood has used the trope of romance to perform and displace its racial fears and fantasies. Jet Li's kung-fu films mobilize a different set of narrative patterns and gendered iconographies to explore different historical issues, but their discursive strategies and political implications remain the same.

[Slide] For this talk I focus on the most recent and possibly most representative version of this narrative: *Jet Li's Fearless*. As you can see from the top of this poster, *Fearless* was widely publicized as Li's final martial arts film, not only a kung-fu extravaganza but also a nationalistic biopic dramatizing the life of Huo Yuanjia. [Slide] *Fearless* depicts Huo's career with reasonable faithfulness: Huo was a sickly child who

through hard work became the most accomplished martial artist of his generation. In the wake of the [Slide] Boxer Rebellion, when a group of Chinese martial artists who claimed they were immune to blades and bullets were crushed by [Slide] the Eight Nation Alliance with humiliating effects, Huo became a national hero [Slide] by defeating in single combat a series of foreign fighters between 1901 and 1910, and thereby rebutting the contemporary stereotype that Chinese men were nothing but frail opium addicts. Huo believed that the bodily and mental discipline of martial arts practice could be a source not only of personal strength, but also of patriotic vigor. [Slide] Toward this end, Huo co-founded the Jinwoo Physical Training Center to popularize martial arts education. [Slide] Huo's mysterious death following a critical fight with a Japanese Judo master and some suspicious medicine possibly prescribed by his Japanese doctor thus sometimes served as the pretext for nationalistic angst, a myth for revering a model of Chinese manhood that could not survive the treachery of an internationalized modern world.

[Slide] *Fearless* holds...more or less true to these broad strokes of Huo's biography. It shows Huo as a bullied child [Slide] who thought that being powerful meant being able to beat people up, and who grew up to become [Slide] a local martial arts champion. However, here the story diverges dramatically. [Slide] Through an ill-considered act of vengeance, Li's version of Huo killed an innocent man and indirectly caused the slaughter of his own family. Guilt-ridden and heartbroken, "Huo" flees his native city into the Chinese hinterlands. Fade to black. [Slide] "Huo's" life begins again when two peasant women rescue him from his self-abuse. They show him that life is not a competition; [Slide] that in order to be a truly independent man one must be patient with and open to one's circumstances. Humbled and ennobled by the villagers' example,

[Slide] “Huo” resolves to discharge his final responsibilities to his previous life as a son and the head of a family, so that he can return to start a new life with his lovely rescuer, Moon. “Huo” returns to an embattled China. [Slide] Here fiction and history re-converge. “Huo” accepts an American boxer’s challenge and wins, [Slide] founds the Jin Woo Athletic Association, and [Slide] dies after being poisoned during a climactic battle against a Japanese Judo master. *Fearless* [Slide] concludes with a sentimental coda in which Moon, who is blind, dreams [Slide] of seeing a ghostly visitation from “Huo.” In other words, in adapting Huo Yuanjia’s life for the screen, *Fearless* not only exaggerated his professional triumphs and tribulations, but also fabricated a personal tragedy and psychological journey to interrupt Huo’s regional and international matches.

[Slide] What motivated the makers of *Fearless* to wreak such havoc upon Huo’s family life and romantic history? It was certainly not out of respect to Huo’s memory: as the *Daily Variety* reported on March 10 of 2006, Huo’s grandson sued the filmmakers for libel. [Slide] His lawyer said, “The film says Huo Yuanjia caused trouble that leads to the death of his mother and daughter, and as a result, he has no descendants. This is not true.” [Slide] Note that the family does not simply object to Huo’s portrayal as a callow rake who accidentally causes his family’s death, but to the implied result of this plot development: that Huo has no descendants. [Slide] In Confucian philosophy, filial piety, or serving one’s parents and ancestors, is the chief virtue; and one of the worst possible offenses against one’s ancestors is to leave them with no descendants. [Slide] Moreover, in Confucianism, the state of one’s world, nation, family, and self are inseparable: it is not possible to secure peace and prosperity in one sphere without taking account of the others. In reading numerous Western reviews of *Fearless*, Huo’s fictional personal

tragedy is generally taken as a stale plot device within a simple moral fable: [Slide] pride goes before a fall. However, I submit that for viewers who feel certain cultural affinities to historical China, family melodramas can seem like implicit allegories for China's plight during the twentieth century. By revising Huo Yuanjia's family history, *Fearless* subtly reinforces the synecdoche by which Jet Li's Huo can stand for China: just as "Huo" recognized his mistakes too late to save his family, dynastic China failed to reform in time to prevent invasion, revolution, and violent modernization. When the nation is fractured beyond return, nationalism is, in some sense, futile.

[Slide] What roles, then, do Moon and her idyllic village, and Huo's unrequited desire for her, play in this narrative? In order to answer this question, we must consider a related question: which audiences does *Fearless* address? The film was first released in Asia, then the US and the rest of the world. To date, the American market accounts for approximately one third of its box office total of 66 million dollars. In other words, *Fearless* appealed to both non-Chinese and Chinese—in the broadest sense of the word—viewers. This kind of crossover film often can accommodate a number of internally consistent interpretations, and Moon's pliant positioning with regard to Huo provides a case in point. [Slide] To viewers who are not familiar with China, Moon is the yin to Huo's yang, the rural to his urban, the timelessness to his historicity, the ur-China to his China. She tempers his youthful arrogance and shows him a more profound way to be himself, to be truly Chinese. Huo's death, according to this interpretation of Moon's identity, is doubly tragic, since it presages an end to Moon's way of life as well.

[Slide] But no: a viewer who is familiar with China on a regional order would immediately recognize that Moon and the villagers are wearing non-Han costumes. Just

as a feather headdress in a Western film makes a character “American” in an unusual sense of the word, so some viewers cannot help but see Moon as a dispossessed ethnic minority, a kind of “internally exotic” or “nobly savage” Chinese. [Slide] This knowledge awkwardly inflects the previous interpretation of the couple’s relationship, since one could argue that Huo’s people once did to Moon’s people what the Eight Nation Alliance was doing to China. In this light, Moon’s village seems not only idyllic but downright fantastical, a hypocritical invention to soothe a colonizer’s guilt as it copes with the prospect of becoming colonized. [Slide] But wait: Moon’s ethnicity can be further determined. While few viewers, myself included, would be able to fix her ethnicity on sight, it is nonetheless not too difficult, through the seven-star shawl that the women drape over their waists and the conduct of Moon’s household, to ascertain that Moon belongs to the Naxi nationality of Yunnan Province, with a population of 300,000 as of 1998. [Slide] The Naxi nationality is distinguished for being the only matrilineal society among the fifty-six ethnicities that the People’s Republic of China officially recognizes. On one hand, this knowledge equalizes Moon and Huo’s relationship: [Slide] Moon no longer acts as an ahistorical figure and instead emerges as the head of a household, possessing property and sexual freedom. On the other hand, the profound cultural difference between Han and Naxi culture underscores Huo and Moon’s incompatibility. *Fearless*, like official P.R.C. policy regarding minority categorization, cannot imagine a mixed ethnicity: one can be Han or Naxi, but not both simultaneously.

Jet Li’s Huo Yuanjia must choose between dying for a heritage that was itself on the brink of death, and living with Moon and rejecting his identity as a Han-Chinese. One finds variations of this dilemma between national identity and personal desires in other

popular Jet Li films. [Slide] In *Fist of Legend*, a remake of Bruce Lee's classic *Fist of Fury*, Jet Li plays a fictional student of Huo Yuanjia who avenges his master's murder. Jet Li's version differs from the original in one chief respect: his character has a Japanese girlfriend, who eventually departs because Li's family and friends refuse to accept their relationship. At the film's end, Li himself flees Shanghai after faking his death to avoid being executed for avenging his master. The English subtitles to the scene imply that Li is headed for Japan to join his girlfriend; however, as another example of using cultural-specific cues to address different audiences, the Chinese subtitles suggest that he plans to join the anti-Japanese war movement. In any case, Li's obligations to master and nation again place him in an untenable position, and he cannot both pursue his love and remain himself. [Slide] A more comedic example is found in the *Once Upon a Time in China* series, in which Li plays a patriotic doctor who is torn between his allegiance to traditional Chinese values and his admiration of Western democracy and science. His love interest is ethnically Han-Chinese, [Slide] but proves to be too strange for comfort due to her Western upbringing. The fact that the couple is introduced as distant relatives, means that even the incest taboo stands between this particular merging of [Slide] East and West. Despite the doctor's desire to be open to change, his efforts appear ridiculous and unsustainable: at least this time he only pines perpetually instead of dying. [Slide] Finally, the most psychedelic instance of this narrative pattern occurs in *Swordsman II*, also known as *Asia the Invincible*, in which Jet Li's primary love interest, Asia, personifies an awesome number of Chinese nationalist fears and fantasies. In order to achieve his ambition of leading the Miao ethnic minority to defeat Han colonizers, Asia forges an alliance with Japanese ninjas and studies a martial style that promises



invincibility through castration. The invincible but increasingly effeminate Asia falls in love with Jet Li's character, and they share a one-night stand. The couple later realizes that they are actually mortal enemies, and leap off a cliff together to conclude the climactic battle. Asia sacrifices herself to save Jet Li's character, who in turn fails to consummate a romantic relationship with either love interest #2 or #3. And I have barely done justice to this film, so I highly recommend it to those who are interested in this narrative pattern.

[Slide] In conclusion, for such a popular star and such a popular genre, Jet Li's kung-fu films seem to contain a surprisingly large number of failed romances. I offered one interpretation by approaching these films as a part of Chinese national cinema, and look forward to your questions and comments to help me to refine my ideas. Thank you.