



RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE DRAGON RISES: REFRAMING THE HERO'S JOURNEY IN CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON

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ABSTRACT

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This paper explores how the Chinese film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* reworks the traditional stages of Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey. It analyzes how the monomyth is adapted through wuxia conventions and Chinese philosophical values, particularly Confucian ideas of duty and responsibility to others, as well as Daoist and Buddhist notions of spiritual transcendence. Although the Hero's Journey is frequently adapted in film, its linear progression, emphasis on heroic mastery, and promise of triumphant return are culturally specific rather than universally applicable. We employ qualitative textual and narrative analysis to critically engage with the widely circulated but contested Hero's Journey, using it as a heuristic lens to identify and distinguish heroic elements within the film's main characters, particularly Jen Yu and Li Mu Bai. The analysis shows that heroic elements such as departure, trials, and transformations are distributed among many characters of the film and are framed as processes of moral and spiritual growth rather than victory or redemption, as emphasized in the Hero's Journey. The film reflects on restraint and moral growth, the values grounded in wuxia and Chinese philosophy, rather than focusing on control or a definitive heroic closure in the Hero's Journey. Gender plays a key role in this shift, as Jen Yu's open-ended path challenges male-centered ideas of heroic change without simply reversing gender roles. The paper further elaborates that the film affirms the Hero's Journey functions while also criticizing its adaptation. This case study contributes to comparative narrative and film theory by demonstrating how universalist heroic paradigms are both adapted and fundamentally constrained when reframed through culturally specific ethical and philosophical traditions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Joseph Campbell (2008) developed a narrative structure called “The Hero’s Journey” in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. It is known as the monomyth, one of the most influential storytelling structures in film and literary studies. His model describes the steps of a hero in a story, such as departing from the ordinary world (call to adventure), facing challenges and tribulations (enemies, trials), and transformation and achievement upon his coming back home (return with elixir). He further reflects that there is only one mythology in the world. That basic mythology, which Campbell suggests is culturally inflected rather than identical, “has been infected in various cultures in terms of their historical and social circumstances and needs and particular local ethic systems, but it’s one mythology” (Campbell, 2003, p. 150). Originating from comparative mythology, the Hero’s Journey has been widely used in film studies, particularly to examine Hollywood stories with character-driven development (Bordwell, 2017; Booker, 2020). Beyond its application in film studies, the monomyth has also been utilized in other disciplines such as education (Farmer, 2018; O’Shea & Stone, 2014), in marketing (Sanders & van Krieken, 2018), and in game design (de Lima et al., 2023).

At the same time, recent scholars have questioned the monomyth’s claim to narrative universality, a claim often inferred from Campbell’s comparative mythological framework, arguing that it reflects culturally specific assumptions rooted in Western narrative traditions (Mittell, 2015; Ryan, 2015). Scholars note that Campbell’s narrative structure follows a linear progression and emphasizes individual self-realization and goal-oriented transformation features. These features are closely aligned with the style of Hollywood storytelling rather than diverse storytelling practices across cultural contexts (Ryan, 2015; Bordwell, 2017). Researchers further caution that utilizing the steps of Campbell’s Hero’s Journey across different cultures globally can diminish alternative logics rooted in ethical relationships, non-linear story patterns, and spiritual forms of transformation, particularly in non-Western societies (Chen et al., 2024; Chow, 2019).

Rather than treating the Hero’s Journey as a universal narrative template, this study approaches Campbell’s monomyth as a heuristic framework whose assumptions become visible—and contestable—when applied to culturally specific narrative traditions such as wuxia cinema. Used in this way, the Hero’s Journey functions simultaneously as an analytical guide and a critical foil through which alternative narrative logics and ethical orientations emerge. Scholars have increasingly argued that the monomyth’s claim to universality reflects not a neutral cross-cultural structure but a Western narrative epistemology grounded in linear temporality, individual mastery, and goal-oriented transformation. When applied uncritically, such frameworks risk privileging Euro-American storytelling conventions while marginalizing narrative traditions that emphasize relational ethics, moral restraint, cyclical time, or spiritual transcendence. From this perspective, the Hero’s Journey operates not as a global narrative grammar but as a culturally situated model whose authority must be questioned when encountering non-Western narrative forms.

Within this critical context, we analyze the Chinese film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Directed by Ang Lee, the film serves as a productive case through which to examine the cultural boundaries of the adaptability of the Hero’s Journey. The film belongs to the famous wuxia genre of Chinese cinema. It has garnered global circulation and critical recognition as a cross-cultural

film, the evolution of genre forms, and narrative blending (Chan, 2004; Steenberg, 2006). Rather than denying the monomyth, the film revises steps commonly associated with heroic storytelling within the ethical, philosophical, and aesthetic traditions of Chinese culture (Zhang, 2021).

Scholars have examined *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and suggest that it operates across multiple narrative structures. First, its character arcs are organized around moral examination, and loss and transformation are understood by a global audience. Second, these arcs are rooted in the codes of honor and obligation called *jianghu*. These societal codes shape narrative motivation and ethical resolution of the story of the film. Third, the Daoist ideas of peace and non-coercive action (*wuwei*) further reflect these values. The character arcs of the film are informed by Confucian ideas of duty and responsibility to others, which hinder linear progression of the Hero's Journey (Tait, 2009; Cai, 2005). This rich narrative framework contributes to the film's transnational success while upholding ethical commitments distinct from Western heroic stories.

Gender constitutes a central dimension of this narrative reconfiguration. Typically, the Hero's Journey and *wuxia* cinema models revolve around male protagonists. By contrast, Ang Lee introduces a young woman called Jen Yu as the protagonist. Her character undergoes inner chaos, moral complexity, and spiritual transcendence rather than achieving a heroic success or ending. Critics suggest that changes in narrative forms are more closely related to Daoist and Buddhist values of transcendence than with Western models of triumphant return (Tait, 2009; Yao, 2023; Walker, 2010).

Utilizing a culturally situated approach to mythic storytelling, this paper evaluates how the film engages with, redefines, and transforms the steps of the Hero's Journey. Rather than taking the monomyth as a universal template of storytelling, the analysis of the film considers how heroic elements are divided among more than one character and reoriented toward ethical and spiritual transcendence. In doing so, the film reveals how transnational cinema negotiates narrative structure, cultural specificity, and gendered conceptions of heroism (Mittell, 2015; Chow, 2019).

Objectives:

(1) To identify the steps of the Hero's Journey in the film and how these steps are distributed across multiple protagonists rather than concentrated in a single hero.

(2) To analyze the narrative arcs of the characters Jen Yu and Li Mu Bai, with reference to the characters Yu Shu Lien and Lo

(3) To examine how *wuxia* conventions, Daoism, and Confucian ethics shape characters' moral choices and forms of transformation.

(4) To investigate how a female protagonist, within the context of *wuxia* cinema, redefines the application of the Hero's Journey by questioning heroic reach, mastery, and reintegration.

2. METHODOLOGY

We use qualitative textual and narrative analysis to evaluate how the film engages with and reworks the Hero's Journey framework within *wuxia* conventions and Chinese philosophical values. The Hero's Journey is employed as a heuristic framework to analyze the narrative arcs of

Jen Yu and Li Mu Bai, with reference to key supporting characters such as Yu Shu Lien and Lo. We also examine heroic functions in relation to ethical and spiritual transformation rather than the traditional triumphant homecoming of the hero.

Employing the Hero's Journey as an analytical framework for wuxia cinema involves an inherent methodological tension, given the model's origins in Western comparative mythology. This study, therefore, uses the monomyth selectively and critically, not as a prescriptive narrative template but as a heuristic device through which its cultural assumptions and limitations become visible. Rather than seeking to confirm the universality of Campbell's model, the analysis adopts an interpretive approach to narrative form, examining how *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* reconfigures, disperses, and resists its linear logic through Chinese philosophical traditions, ethical relationships, and genre conventions specific to wuxia cinema.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE HERO'S JOURNEY AS AN INTERPRETIVE TOOL

In this paper, we use the Hero's Journey as an interpretive framework rather than as a universal or prescriptive model. Film studies have long applied this framework to storytelling, especially in classical Hollywood cinema, where narrative development follows a linear progression. In the paper, we employ it heuristically to identify heroic functions such as departure, trial, ethical testing, and transformation, without assuming that these functions must appear in a fixed sequence or be completed by a single protagonist.

This flexible approach responds to critiques in narrative theory that emphasize the historical and cultural specificity of universal narrative models. Scholars note that the monomyth reflects assumptions associated with Western storytelling, including linear causality, individual self-realization, and closure through achievement or return (Ryan, 2015; Bordwell, 2017). Treating the Hero's Journey as a comparative lens, therefore, allows heroic functions to be redistributed across characters, reframed as ethical or spiritual development, or left unresolved. Such an approach is particularly appropriate for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which reworks familiar mythic elements through wuxia conventions and Chinese philosophical traditions, including Daoist and Confucian ideas of restraint, harmony, and moral self-cultivation that resist linear narrative solution (Chen et al., 2024).

4. WUXIA NARRATIVE TRADITION AND CHINESE PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT

Wuxia is a long-standing narrative tradition in Chinese literature and cinema. It centers on martial heroes called "xia" who operate within a semi-autonomous moral world known as "jianghu" (Tekwa & Jiexiu, 2023). Wuxia stories focus on moral behavior, self-control, and loyalty to unwritten codes of honor rather than to state authority or institutional law. This is different from Western heroic traditions, which often focus on individual conquest or social ascension. Scholars note that jianghu functions as an alternative social order governed by reputation, moral obligation, and reciprocal responsibility, where heroic action is evaluated according to ethical behavior rather than victory alone (Chan, 2004; Steenberg, 2006).

There is a clear distinction between wuxia narratives and the heroic arcs of the Hero's Journey. In wuxia narrative frameworks, a hero is shaped less by a straight path toward mastery and more by ongoing moral choices. Characters are often caught between conflicting responsibilities upheld out of respect for mentors, comrades, and other respected individuals. The

wuxia hero simply prefers sacrifice. He chooses renunciation or a tragic ending over a successful return or end. This structural tendency distinguishes wuxia from the goal-oriented heroic arcs typical of classical Hollywood storytelling and complicates the application of the Hero's Journey as a singular or complete narrative model.

Chinese philosophical traditions further shape wuxia narratives and their approach to heroism. Daoist thought, in particular, emphasizes harmony with the natural order, non-coercive action (*wuwei*), and the cultivation of inner balance rather than external domination. In narrative terms, Daoist influence often manifests as restraint in action, skepticism toward force, and an ethical preference for yielding over assertion. As Tait (2009) observes, moments of apparent passivity or withdrawal in wuxia cinema frequently signify philosophical strength rather than weakness, aligning heroism with self-mastery and spiritual attunement.

Confucian ethics also play a significant role, particularly in shaping interpersonal relationships and moral dilemmas. Confucianism prioritizes duty, relational hierarchy, loyalty, and the regulation of personal desire in the service of social harmony (Bell, 2023). In wuxia narratives, these values frequently generate tension between individual motivation and ethical responsibility, producing heroes who must suppress personal desire or accept loss to maintain moral integrity. Recent scholarship notes that such Confucian-inflected conflicts often complicate narrative resolution, as characters may achieve ethical fulfillment without attaining personal happiness or social reintegration, thereby resisting conventional models of heroic closure (Zhang, 2021).

Both wuxia conventions and Chinese philosophical values shape a narrative mechanism where a hero is defined by moral decisions and spiritual transcendence rather than triumphant return. This context is crucial to determining how the film under discussion engages with mythic narrative structures. Rather than discarding or negating the steps of the hero's journey, the film draws on wuxia film traditions and Daoism and Confucianism to reshape familiar narrative elements such as trial, transformation, and resolution into ethical and spiritual processes. Recognizing this cultural grounding makes it easier to see how the Hero's Journey is adapted and transformed within a Chinese cinematic context.

5. REFRAMING THE HERO'S JOURNEY IN CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON

5.1. Jen Yu and the Reconfigured Hero's Journey

Jen Yu's narrative journey parallels elements of the Hero's Journey, yet her heroic development is developed through wuxia ethics and Chinese philosophical traditions. Her ordinary world is not an ordinary one. It is structured by aristocratic rules, family authority, and Confucian expectations of duty (Cai, 2005; Walker, 2010).

Jen Yu's narrative arc most closely resembles a recognizable Hero's Journey, yet it persistently reframes heroic development through wuxia ethics and Chinese philosophical traditions. Her "ordinary world" is defined by aristocratic order and Confucian constraint, structured by family authority, gendered expectation, and filial duty (Cai, 2005; Walker, 2010). Her dissatisfaction is not aimed at public success or social restoration but at a desire to resist an imposed identity, unlike the typical monomythic hero. Her departure step is away from the hierarchical social order and into a morally fluid sphere called *jianghu*, governed by informal codes of honor. This transition is

not only physical but also moral, moving from social authority based on rank to respect earned through behavior and self-restraint (Chan, 2004; Steenberg, 2006). While jianghu promises freedom, it simultaneously demands discipline, rendering Jen's departure fundamentally ambivalent.

A series of issues trap Jen in her trial phase, testing her moral orientation and martial skill. Her character arc consistently frames her victories as unstable measures of growth, despite her exceptional ability to resolve those problems. In the wuxia conventions, heroism is measured not by dominance but by adherence to xia ethics, including restraint and moral responsibility (Cai, 2005). The bamboo-tree duel scene shows the trial phase of her character arc. Instead of resolving the issue through the force she has, the scene emphasizes balance, yielding, and attunement, qualities associated with Daoist wuwei and non-coercive action (Tait, 2009). Her technical power fails to seek a resolution because she remains ethically unformed, revealing the limits of conquest as a measure of transformation. Her most significant change emerges through confrontation with loss and moral consequence rather than through the acquisition of power, advancing a wuxia-inflected logic in which self-knowledge arises through contradiction and grief (Cai, 2005; Walker, 2010). Accordingly, the "return" remains unresolved. Rather than reintegrating into her former world, Jen refuses monomythic closure. Her final act has been interpreted as a form of transcendence that reframes resolution as ethical and spiritual rather than restorative or triumphant, displacing the monomyth's teleology of return into a culturally specific register of restraint, loss, and transcendence (Tait, 2009; Yao, 2023).

5.2. Li Mu Bai and the Ethics of Renunciation.

Li Mu Bai functions as a counter-heroic figure whose narrative arc redefines heroism through restraint, delay, and ethical self-discipline instead of decisive action or conquest. Throughout *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, he repeatedly refuses violence despite his unmatched martial ability, choosing withdrawal over confrontation and postponement over resolution. This refusal is not framed as weakness but as an ethical stance shaped by Daoist principles of non-coercive action (wuwei) and by a heightened awareness of the moral consequences of force (Tait, 2009). His pursuit of personal fulfillment is delayed, particularly in his relationship with Yu Shu Lien, which further situates his arc within a sustained tension between desire and duty rather than within a forward-driven heroic quest.

In monomythic terms, Li already embodies qualities typically associated with the culmination of the hero's journey—wisdom, mastery, and moral clarity—yet these attributes do not lead to a triumphant return or social restoration. Instead, his trajectory exemplifies mastery without triumph and wisdom without return. Li's sacrificial death functions as an ethical resolution rather than a narrative victory, affirming responsibility and acceptance over conquest or closure. When read through Confucian ethics, his sacrifice reflects fidelity to relational obligation. From a Daoist perspective, it reinforces virtue as withdrawal and alignment rather than assertion (Tait, 2009). In this way, Li Mu Bai's arc exposes the limits of the Hero's Journey by redirecting heroic value away from success and reintegration toward renunciation and moral consistency.

5.3. Ensemble Structure and Distributed Heroism

Beyond the arcs of Jen Yu and Li Mu Bai, the film employs an ensemble structure that further destabilizes the Hero's Journey by dispersing heroic functions across multiple characters (Chan, 2004; Steenberg, 2006). Yu Shu Lien is characterized by a form of duty-bound stasis, as her actions are shaped by loyalty, restraint, and ethical obligation. Despite her martial competence and emotional depth, she is unable to pursue personal desire without violating Confucian norms of propriety and relational responsibility. Her narrative arc, therefore, exemplifies moral endurance rather than transformation, positioning ethical constancy as a form of heroism distinct from progression or return (Cai, 2005; Walker, 2010).

Lo's narrative function is similarly partial. Defined primarily by romantic idealism rather than sustained ethical development, his relationship with Jen Yu gestures toward escape and freedom but lacks the moral grounding required for heroic resolution. Rather than completing a full arc of transformation, Lo fails to complete a transformative journey and does not contribute to communal restoration, underscoring the film's rejection of romantic fulfillment as a sufficient heroic endpoint within its ethical framework (Chan, 2004). Taken together, these trajectories demonstrate that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* deliberately fragments heroic functions across its ensemble, ensuring that no single character completes the full monomythic sequence. This distribution of heroism reframes the heroic ideal as relational, ethically constrained, and inherently incomplete, thereby resisting the teleology of return that underpins the Hero's Journey (Steenberg, 2006; Bordwell, 2017).

5.4. Gender, Heroism, and Narrative Transformation

This section addresses gender within the paper's broader concern with narrative form and cultural specificity, treating gender as a structural dimension of heroic storytelling rather than as a separate analytical category. In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, gender becomes a key site through which the limits of the Hero's Journey are exposed and reworked. Traditional wuxia cinema and classical formulations of the monomyth often prioritize male-centered models of heroic closure, characterized by mastery, social recognition, and reintegration. By contrast, the film foregrounds a female protagonist whose trajectory resists these narrative endpoints, unsettling the gendered assumptions embedded in heroic form. Jen Yu's arc is therefore central to this reconfiguration: unlike the Campbellian hero, whose development is measured by the accumulation of power and successful return, Jen's journey consistently refuses mastery as an ethical ideal and rejects reintegration into aristocratic order, romantic fulfillment, or jianghu hierarchy (Cai, 2005; Walker, 2010).

This refusal aligns closely with Daoist and Buddhist notions of transcendence, which privilege detachment, surrender, and the relinquishment of desire over achievement and possession. Jen's final act has thus been read not as failure but as an ethically and spiritually inflected form of release that reframes transformation as withdrawal from constraining structures rather than mastery within them (Tait, 2009; Yao, 2023). Importantly, the film does not simply reverse gender roles by assigning traditionally "masculine" heroic functions to a female character. Instead, it redefines heroism itself by decoupling it from conquest, closure, and social restoration. Gender here serves to reveal alternative narrative values already present within wuxia tradition and Chinese philosophical thought, reinforcing the paper's central claim that the Hero's Journey, when applied beyond its Western context, is not merely adapted but fundamentally transformed.

6. DISCUSSION: CULTURAL SPECIFICITY AND NARRATIVE ADAPTABILITY

This paper situates *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* as a critical intervention in discussions over the universality of the mythic storytelling frameworks. The analysis of the film illustrates that while the Hero's Journey remains a useful interpretive model, its assumptions about linear development, heroic mastery, and triumphant return are culturally contingent rather than universally applicable. When applied to a story shaped by wuxia convention and Chinese philosophical thought, the Hero's Journey does not map closely onto individual character arcs. When applied to a narrative shaped by wuxia tradition and Chinese philosophical thought, the monomyth does not map neatly onto individual character arcs but is reworked through fragmentation, deferral, and ethical reorientation. By tracing how heroic functions are redistributed and revalued rather than simply contested, this paper advances existing critiques of the Hero's Journey by showing how its limits become analytically productive in culturally specific contexts. This reveals clear limits to the Hero's Journey as a universal narrative grammar and underscores the importance of culturally situated approaches to mythic analysis in comparative narrative and film theory.

The film further demonstrates how mythic structures change when they are treated as flexible interpretive resources rather than fixed narrative templates. Elements commonly associated with the Hero's Journey, such as departure, trial, and transformation, remain recognizable, but their narrative functions are reshaped by cultural values that privilege restraint, relational obligation, and spiritual transcendence over conquest and closure. In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, transformation is measured not by reintegration or narrative completion but by ethical awareness and acceptance of limitation. Character resolution is therefore plural and incomplete, reflecting a worldview in which moral consistency and spiritual alignment outweigh definitive outcomes. This reframing aligns with the study's heuristic use of the monomyth, allowing heroic meaning to emerge through deviation rather than narrative fulfillment.

These dynamics illustrate how cultural values actively reshape narrative goals and meanings. Wuxia ethics and Daoist–Confucian philosophies redirect heroic aspiration away from individual achievement toward moral self-cultivation and responsibility to others. As a result, narrative success is decoupled from victory, mastery, or return and instead aligned with renunciation, endurance, and transcendence. This reconfiguration challenges dominant Western models of heroism while remaining intelligible within transnational circuits of circulation, demonstrating how global cinema can engage shared narrative forms without erasing cultural specificity.

The implications of this case extend beyond a single film. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* illustrates how culturally embedded narrative traditions can circulate internationally without conforming to universal narrative rules. For comparative narrative theory, this reinforces the value of treating mythic models as heuristic tools rather than normative templates. More broadly, for cross-cultural film analysis, the case demonstrates how sustained attention to ethical and philosophical contexts can reveal alternative narrative logics that resist assimilation into dominant theoretical frameworks centered on linearity, mastery, and closure.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* does not reject the Hero's

Journey but reconfigures it through cultural, philosophical, and narrative transformation. By treating Campbell's monomyth as a heuristic rather than a universal template, the analysis demonstrates that the film retains recognizable mythic elements—departure, trial, and transformation—while displacing the monomyth's emphasis on conquest, closure, and triumphant return. In doing so, the film reveals the cultural specificity underlying dominant heroic models and clarifies how mythic frameworks generate critical insight when examined through culturally situated narratives, illustrating how such structures can be reshaped rather than replicated as they circulate beyond their original narrative contexts.

Through its ensemble structure, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* redistributes heroic functions rather than concentrating them in a single protagonist. Jen Yu's arc foregrounds ethical and spiritual transformation without reintegration, Li Mu Bai's trajectory exemplifies mastery without triumph through renunciation and sacrifice, and supporting characters such as Yu Shu Lien and Lo embody forms of moral endurance and limitation. Taken together, these arcs show that heroism in the film is defined not by the completion of a single journey but by relational ethics, restraint, and acceptance of loss, thereby disrupting the monomyth's assumption of narrative unity and closure. Transformation is thus rendered plural, partial, and ethically grounded rather than narratively conclusive.

Gender plays a crucial role in this reconfiguration. By centering a female protagonist whose journey resists mastery and closure, the film does not merely invert traditional gender roles but redefines heroism itself. Jen Yu's open-ended path aligns with Daoist and Buddhist ideas of transcendence, demonstrating that refusal, surrender, and withdrawal can function as ethically meaningful modes of heroic transformation. In this context, gender operates as a critical lens through which the limitations of universalist heroic paradigms are exposed, reinforcing the film's challenge to models that equate heroism with dominance, resolution, and social restoration.

Film studies benefit from these findings, which show how transnational cinema negotiates narrative universality and cultural specificity through adaptation rather than opposition. The case of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* underscores the value of culturally situated narrative analysis and supports comparative approaches that treat mythic frameworks as flexible interpretive tools. This study suggests that future comparative analyses of global cinema should attend not only to shared narrative forms but also to the ethical, philosophical, and cultural logics that fundamentally reshape the meaning of heroism across traditions.

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COOPERATION STATEMENT

All authors contributed equally to this work and approved the final manuscript.

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