

## ***He deserved to die by a woman's hand!: masculine and feminine traits of female kung-fu practitioners in films***

CHERISE SHI LING TEO and MIE HIRAMOTO  
National University of Singapore  
tsl@nus.edu.sg and ellmh@nus.edu.sg

### **Abstract**

As often discussed in the field of linguistic anthropology, mainstream media has been a common source of propagation of dichotomous gender ideologies about femininities and masculinities. Because the hegemonic ideas about suggested 'femininity' and 'masculinity' demonstrated in the media appear so effortlessly acceptable within cultural and historical contexts, people readily treat constant reiteration of any such ideology as commonsensical and naturalized. This study investigates female *kung-fu* practitioners, *nüxias*, in films to investigate how their femininity is mitigated with expected masculinity via mediation and mediatization. *Nüxias* are prototypically portrayed as empowered women who have the agency to take control of their own lives and are able to fearlessly challenge *wuxias* or male *kung-fu* practitioners. We analyze the film data from Asian, namely, Confucian perspectives in order to demonstrate a multimodal deconstruction of the various characterologies of *nüxias*. By observing different types of *nüxias* in *kung-fu* films, this study attempts to understand Chinese specific hegemonic ideologies associated with femininity and masculinity in media.

### **1 Introduction: Mediation and Mediatization of Chinese Masculinity**

A naturalization of gender ideologies by media can be inflected along the vectors of race (a property of human bodies) and ethnicity (a social category of people). Illustrative of this is Bucholtz's (2011) study on the re-embodied voice in Hollywood films which highlighted how the mocking of the white hip hop fan uses ideologies of race, gender and language to enforce essentialized racial boundaries. In Chinese martial arts films, Hiramoto (2012) observed a process via which discursive practices employed began naturalizing a widely propagated concept of ideal Chinese masculinity rooted in Confucian ideology. Traits that index such masculinity include the *wuxia* heroes' reticence and use of formulaic or philosophical speech styles which are unlike those observed in Western masculinity (see Bloyle, 2010). These mediatized and racialized speech styles have generally been accepted by most viewers as naturalized forms. *Mediatization* is a specially formalized type of message which occurs by means of institutionalized communication including mainstream media discourse. It encompasses all representational strategies—choices made during production such as editing of linguistic resources—in the creation of media products yielding intertextual chains of communication like text, image, and talk (Jaffe, 2011; Jaworski, 2007; Lippi-Green, 2011). *Mediation* here refers to processes of communication that connect people and elements of society through the exchanges of meanings and ideas (Agha, 2011; Scollon, 1998).

In this paper, we investigate representations of *nüxias* 'female *kung-fu* practitioners' in films to discuss how their femininity is mitigated with expected masculinity via processes of mediation and mediatization. Often, *nüxias* are portrayed as empowered women who are equipped with both physical and mental

prowess to take control of their own lives and are able to courageously take challenges against male opponents. While some western scholars raised an awareness of the subordination of *nüxias* in films, their arguments are mainly centered on the dominant gender ideology without referring to Chinese-specific ideology (e.g. Gomes, 2005; Reynaud, 2003). However, multimodal deconstructions of the various characterologies of *nüxias* need to be related to Asian-specific contexts and perspectives. The constant and consistent recontextualization of associating conformance to Confucian values with virtuousness (e.g. maintaining patriarchal hierarchy) and non-conformance (e.g. disobeying superiors) with wickedness perpetuates patriarchy. By having this particular system of measure for the identities of *nüxias*, we attempt to understand mediation and mediatization processes of ideologies associated with Chinese femininity and masculinity.

## 2 Confucianism and Chinese Women's Place

In Confucianism, women belonged to the inside space (*nei*, a sphere of domesticity and wifely servitude) while men belonged to the outside space (*wai*, a sphere of business and scholarly pursuits). Within the realm of *wai* exists the mediatized world of martial arts and this is seen through the many fictitious heroic *wuxias* who project the ideal *wen-wu* 'cultural attainment-martial valor' masculinity of Confucian virtues like righteousness, self-mastery and selflessness. As Liu (1967: 1-2) explains, although they did not have much regard for the law, "they usually acted on altruistic motives and were ready to die for their principles".

Heroic *nüxias* who transgressed the *nei-wai* boundary, on the other hand, are aware of their position as women and often participate in martial arts activities in order to fulfill their duties as daughter, wife, or mother. Thus, in fact, they are abiding by Confucian patriarchal values. Dong (2011: 13) explains that fictional heroic *nüxias* are "carefully characterized without either challenging or threatening the dominant male-centred rule". Thus, it seems that in order to further understanding of the Confucian patriarchal hierarchy within the martial arts films, one has to be able to identify the subtleties of transgressing Chinese gender propriety as measured against Confucian ideals/values.

## 3 Data and Methodology

The observed data consist of 13 historical-action films dating from 1966 to 2011, selected based on the representativeness and prominence of heroic and villainous *nüxia* characters. While no distinctions are made between *nüxias* who fought with or without weapons, *nüxias* equipped with magical powers are excluded from the data as their physical prowess was not achieved by martial arts trainings.

As mentioned in the previous section, the recognition of a heroic (exemplary) *nüxia* revolves around male endorsement. This also means the construction of a villainous identity of a *nüxia* is based on a distorted representation of the *wen-wu* philosophy or Confucian social order. All in all, endorsement by important male characters can be a significant factor for *nüxias*' positions in realms of the martial arts world.

This paper categorizes the *nüxia* characters as the following three types: 'heroine', 'villainess', and 'ambiguous (neither heroic nor villainous)' through the Chinese ideals of feminine qualities, namely, *san cong si de* 'three obedience and four virtues'. Within the films' setting of olden day China where patriarchal hierarchy was

strictly observed, these ideals were linguistically even more highlighted than today through mediation of both verbal and non-verbal communications. The representations of *san cong si de* traits concerning linguistic characteristics will be discussed in detail in the next section. Because selflessness and self-mastery are important male traits in the *wen-wu* philosophy, heroic *nüxias* are required to negotiate and balance their projections of masculine and feminine qualities by achieving mental nimbleness and resourcefulness.

#### 4 Analysis: Three Obedience and Four Virtues

Before going into analysis of the feminine Confucian ideals in *nüxias*, *san cong si de* needs to be explained. *San cong* states that as women are bound to the 'inside' realm (*nei*), they "must depend on their fathers, husbands and sons at different stages of their lives" (Rosenlee, 2006: 89). It required women to respect, honor and obey their parents before marriage, obey their husbands after marriage and raise their children and respect their children's choices in life should they be widowed. As the premise of the martial arts films includes teacher-student relationships as well, obedience towards teachers will be included within this *san cong*. The doctrine of *si de* consists of the following: *fu de* 'upholding moral integrity and chastity to husband and family', *fu yan* 'appropriate speech such as absence from vulgarity, interruption, hurtful words, or incessant talking/gossiping', *fu rong* 'modest manner with neat and demure appearance, and without sloppiness and seductiveness', and *fu gong* 'diligent work for husband and family by fulfilling domestic duties'.

In films which feature *nüxias*' parents, teacher or husband, those who are heroic will obey them. For example, in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, 2000), the heroic *nüxia*, Shu Lien, was involved in a community of martial artists and fighting bandits. In order to do what was right and to honor her father, she took over her father's security business and was praised for it. She humbly accepts her achievements as a part of her father's legacy.

Example 1: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, 2000), Shu Lien praised as a good daughter

Boss Giao: Sun Security has constantly been the best ever since your father started it. You're a credit to his memory.

Shu Lien: Thank you.

Similarly, Wing Chun from *Kung Fu Wing Chun* (Tung Cho Cheung, 2010) was obedient towards her father and teacher while Miu Chui Fa from *The Legend of Fong Sai Yuk* (Corey Yuen, 1993) was so obedient and respectful towards her husband that she allowed him to cane her in front of other people even though she was skilled in martial arts and he was not. The only exception to this rule was the character of Tsuei Hong from *Mad Monkey Kung Fu* (Chia-Liang Liu, 1979). Tsuei Hong did not simply disobey her husband; she fought him to her death. Nevertheless, this is still acceptable as an act of *san cong* since she became the mistress of the villain to save her older brother's life, and she later sacrificed her life to assist her brother's revenge against the villain due to her loyalty to her brother.

Out of the nine *nüxias* who died at the end of the film in the data, seven of them went against the *san cong* doctrine regardless of the three categories. For example, the following 'ambiguous' characters demonstrated ties with their husbands, teachers, and families but ended up disobeying them. Xiao Mei in *House of Flying*

*Daggers* (Yimou Zhang, 2004) sneakily refused to follow her teachers' orders as she developed feelings for their enemy, and Li Siu Wan in *The Legend of Fong Sai Yuk* became unfaithful to her husband after falling in love with someone else. Little Melon in *Taichi Master* (Woo-Ping Yuen, 1993) could be said to have the unfortunate circumstance of having the villain lust after her and thus, could not obey him. As for the villainous *nüxias*, they are rarely shown to have strong attachments to their families or teachers, and have little concern for upholding the *san cong* doctrine. For example, Turquoise from *Reign of Assassins* (Chao-Bin Su, 2010) murdered her husband and his family, and attempted to sever ties with her teacher simply because she disliked them.

Villainous *nüxias* also ignore most of the *si de* ideals. In Example 2 below, the male hero of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Li Mu Bai, confronted his archenemy, Jade Fox, an infamous *nüxia* who killed his teacher. In this exchange, Jade Fox insulted his teacher.

Example 2: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, 2000), Jade Fox talks back to Li Mu Bai

Bai

Li: ... You don't remember me... But you should remember my master. You infiltrated Wudan while I was away. You stole our master! Now it's time for you to pay!

Fox: Your master underestimated us women. Sure, he'd sleep with me, but he would never teach me. He deserved to die by a woman's hand!

'Ambiguous' and 'villainous' *nüxias* are often projected to be unchaste or seductive as seen in the past behavior of Jade Fox in Example 2. Jade Fox's student, Jen, had a secret lover and ran away from home to be with him right before her arranged marriage. Xiao Mei in *House of Flying Daggers* seduced the enemy with revealing attire and entertainment skills. In *Return of the One-armed Swordsman* (Cheh Chang, 1969), Hua Niang 'Thousand Fingers' lured men with her femininity, and Turquoise from *Reign of Assassins* was a nymphomania.

In contrast, most heroic *nüxias* are neat and demure without revealing traits. Indeed as women venturing into martial arts communities, many of them adopted masculine dressing although this could be considered inappropriate in women's traditional domestic realm. Such examples include Golden Swallow in *Come Drink with Me* (King Hu, 1966), Wing Chun in *Wing Chun* (Woo-Ping Yuen, 1994) and *Kung Fu Wing Chun*, Master Ng Mui in *Kung Fu Wing Chun*, and Ling Yanqiu (Fig.1.1) in *Flying Swords of Dragon Gate* (Hark Tsui, 2011).



Figure 1: Examples of heroic *nüxias* dressing: (1) Still from *Flying Swords of Dragon Gate* © Distribution Workshop (HK). (2) Still from *My Young Auntie* © Celestial Pictures Ltd. Permission for reprint received 2013. All rights reserved.

One of the heroic *nüxias*, Cheng Tai-nun, in *My Young Auntie* (Chia-Liang Liu, 1981) could be an exception as she occasionally dressed inappropriately (Fig.1.2).

However, they were part of the humorous plots and she only did so in comedic scenes.

The appropriate speech part of the *si de* ideals is followed by most heroic *nüxias* as they spoke respectfully in accordance to the social hierarchy surrounding them, and it was the case even when they were in uncomfortable circumstances. For example, Zeng Jing in *Reign of Assassins*, despite being angry with her landlady for trying to match-make her with some men, her response was still respectful and polite.

Example 3: *Reign of Assassins* (Chao-Bin Su, 2010), Zeng Jing's angry response

Zeng Jing: Wait a minute. I already said I'm not going.

Landlady: If you don't go, I will be in trouble. ... If you don't like him, you can leave anytime. ...

[Matchmaking scene later on the same night.]

Zeng Jing: I'm leaving then. Auntie Cai, I know you're doing it for my own good, but please don't help me with these arrangements again.

While Wing Chun in *Kung Fu Wing Chun* did not start with speaking respectfully to her fiancé, she slowly acquired the Confucian (feminine) ideals after developing feelings for him. Conversely, as Jade Fox in Example 2, villainous *nüxias* can be inappropriate in their speech with vulgarity and/or insults. Example 4 below shows a speech of Turquoise from *Reign of Assassins* venting her anger on her gang member for making her go through a difficult task.

Example 4: *Reign of Assassins* (Chao-Bin Su, 2010), Turquoise's angry response

Turquoise: Screw your tortoise power! Do you know how scary it was? I may have looked dead, but I could hear everything clearly...

In terms of *nüxias'* work, a number of them engaged in male related 'outside' work as compared to the 'inside' domestic work traditionally associated with women. While the films did not focus very much on the *nüxias'* work aspect, domestic work skills demonstrated by Madam Biu from *Fist of the White Lotus* (Lieh Lo, 1980) exemplified model Chinese feminine qualities. This is especially true because she survived her pregnancy after her late-husband sacrificed his life to save her and the fetus from the villain. While engaging in childrearing and domestic work, she neither neglected her martial arts nor her plan of avenging her husband. The villain Jade Fox was also engaged in domestic work as a maid. This was because the position was not suspicious to the eyes of those who were after her. She took advantage of the traditional idea of *nei* 'inside' associated with women.

## 5 Concluding Remarks: Good, Bad, and Ambiguous *Nüxias*

From the analysis, it became clear that ideal qualities of heroic *nüxias* require a delicate balancing act of knowing when to allow the feminine or masculine side of them be more dominant depending on their positions in the expected social hierarchies. On one hand, as mediated characters, *nüxias* are portrayed as desirable to men due to their submissiveness, virtues and vulnerability or weakness during 'difficult' situations (thus, needing protection). On the other hand, they are portrayed as heroic honorary males by virtue of them being martial arts practitioners; however, it also entails the fact that *nüxias* are never 'masculine' enough to be treated as real men. Like Ling Yanqiu (Fig. 1a), an exemplary *nüxia* is expected to take submissive roles to support the male heroes. Other characteristics of the heroines in the data were that they live their lives around their loved ones though mastering high martial arts skills. That is, the heroic *nüxias* still lacked a

sense of independence as many of them belonged to martial arts communities in order to fulfill their duties as daughters, wives, or mothers. The feminine ideals required for the heroic *nüxias* can be an appropriation of *wen-wu* masculinity's detachment from sexual desires that index their selflessness and self-mastery. Unlike *wuxias* whose separation from lust and love affairs demonstrates their stance of strong self-control, *nüxias'* attachments to their loved ones demonstrate their true strengths and selflessness. Moreover, however skilled they are, heroic *nüxias* are positioned as subordinate to *wuxias* and their strengths do not exceed strengths attained by *wuxia* characters. Such mediatization of heroic *nüxias* help to convince viewers that these women are desirable to men and still do require male protection.

Characterologies of the villainous *nüxias* as observed in the data reveal that they are women who do not conform to gender propriety (for both males and females) as governed by the Confucian social order. These *nüxias* with their sense of self-preservation, hysteria (lack of control) and lack of righteousness regularly pay the consequences through violent deaths in the *kung-fu* films. This reinforces the existing traditional idea that women who wish to successfully cross gender norms must uphold Confucian virtues, and that women's entrance into martial arts communities must be validated by their family circumstances.

Lastly, from the analysis, an ambiguous *nüxia* appears to be more reflective of a normal human being who is neither completely perfect nor imperfect. Their roles, however, are usually peripheral and they are typically killed at some unimportant point of the story. In the data, goodness and heroism are strongly associated with Confucian values while wickedness and villainy are straightforwardly associated with values that are in opposition to Confucian patriarchal values. This suggests that, in terms of Chinese ideals, ambiguous *nüxias* are associated more closely to the villainous counterparts than the heroic *nüxias* as they typically fail to follow important Confucian values of femininity.

## References

- Agha, Asif. 2011. Meet mediatization. *Language & Communication* 31: 163-170.
- Boyle, Ellexis. 2010. The intertextual terminator: the role of film in branding 'Arnold Schwarzenegger'. *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34 (1), 42-60.
- Bucholtz, Mary. 2011. Race and the re-embodied voice in Hollywood film. *Language & Communication* 31, 255-265.
- Chang, Cheh. 1969. *Return of the One-armed Swordsman*, Screenplay: Cheh Chang, Hong Kong: Shaw Brothers.
- Cheung, Tung Cho. 2010. *Kung Fu Wing Chun*, Screenplay: Tung Cho Cheung and Manlung Ho, China and Hong Kong: Seasonal Film Corporation.
- Dong, Lan. 2011. *Mulan's legend and legacy in China and the US*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Gomes, Catherine. 2001. Doing it (un)like a lady: rethinking gender in martial arts cinema. *Graduate Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies* 2(1): 11-20.
- Hiramoto, Mie. 2012. Don't think, feel: Mediatization of Chinese masculinities through martial arts films. *Language & Communication* 32: 386-399.
- Hu, King. 1966. *Come Drink with Me*, Screenplay: King Hu and Yang Erh, Hong Kong: Shaw Brothers.
- Jaffe, Alexandra. 2011. Sociolinguistic diversity in mainstream media: Authenticity, authority and processes of mediation and mediatization. *Journal of Language and Politics* 10 (4): 562-586.

- Jaworski, Adam. 2007. Language in the media: Authenticity and othering. In: Johnson, Sally & Astrid Ensslin (eds.), *Language in the media*, 271-280. London: Continuum.
- Lee, Ang. 2000. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, based on book by Du Lu Wang, Screenplay: Hui-Ling Wang, James Schamus and Kuo Jung Tsai,
- Lippi-Green, Rosina. 2011. *English with an accent*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. London: Routledge.
- Liu, Chia-Liang. 1979. *Mad Monkey Kung Fu*, Screenplay: Kuang Ni, Hong Kong: Shaw Brothers.
- Liu, Chia-Liang. 1981. *My Young Auntie*, Screenplay: Chia-Liang Liu, Hong Kong: Shaw Brothers.
- Liu, James J. Y. 1967. *The Chinese knight-errant*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lo, Lieh. 1980. *Fist of the White Lotus*, Screenplay: Tien Huang, Hong Kong: Shaw Brothers.
- Reynaud, Bérénice. 2003. The book, the goddess and the hero. In: Chute, David & Chen-sim Lim (eds.), *Heroic grace: The Chinese martial arts film*, 27-31. Los Angeles: UCLA Film and Television Archive.
- Rosenlee, L. Lisa. 2006. Confucianism and women: A philosophical interpretation. New York: SUNY Press.
- Scollon, Ron. 1998. Mediated discourse as social interaction: A study of news discourse. Longman, London.
- Su, Chao-Bin. 2010. *Reign of Assassins*, Screenplay: Chao-Bin Su, China, Taiwan and Hong Kong: Beijing Gallop Horse Film & TV Production, Media Asia Films and Zhejiang Dongyang Dragon Entertainment Venture Investment.
- Tsui, Hark. 2011. *Flying Swords of Dragon Gate*, Screenplay: Hark Tsui, China: Beijing Liangzi Group, Beijing Poly-bona Film Publishing Company and Bona Entertainment.
- Yuen, Corey. 1993. *The Legend of Fong Sai Yuk*, Screenplay: Kung Yung Chai, Kin Chung Chan and Jeffrey Lau, Hong Kong: Eastern Productions.
- Yuen, Woo-Ping. 1993. *Taichi Master*, Screenplay: Kwong Kim Yip, Hong Kong: Eastern Productions and Golden Harvest Company.
- Yuen, Woo-Ping. 1994. *Wing Chun*, Screenplay: Elsa Tang and Wing-Fai Wong, Hong Kong: Peace Film Production Co., Sil-Metropole Organisation and Wo Ping Films Company Limited.
- Zhang, Yimou. 2005. *House of Flying Daggers*, Screenplay: Feng Li, Bin Wang and Yimou Zhang, China and Hong Kong: Beijing New Picture Film Co., China Film Co-Production Corporation and EDKA Film.

**Acknowledgement:** We thank Benita Lim, Lim Wan Yee, and Sim Wanqing for linking *san cong si de* with our project. We would also like to thank Elaine Espindola and the anonymous reviewer for their comments. Also, our sincere thanks go to Distribution Workshop (HK), Ltd. as well as Celestial Pictures Ltd., who kindly gave us permission to include the artwork used in this paper.