

Environmental Force, Transcendence, and Freedom in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*: On the Mystery of Jen's Jumping off Wudang Mountain

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Abstract—In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, there is a complex relationship between characters and their surroundings. One dominant power is the environmental force, which affects these people's decisions and behaviors, either negatively or positively. Jen, as the main character, attempts to transcend her civilized society by wandering into the opposite world, the wilderness. Yet in both civilized and wild environments, Jen fails to gain her freedom. In the civilized world, she is constrained by her traditional gender role, according to which she has to submit herself to patriarchal elders. Leaving the civilized world for the wilderness, Jen wants to create a system of her own, according to which she has the power to dominate others. Despite her effort in maintaining the system, she is not successful in gaining her freedom, because she has to deal with her irrationality of attaining excessive power. A relinquishment of her delusion of power eventually leads Jen to realize how to have a self-sufficient sphere of her own. Through the symbolic act of jumping from the physical Wudang Mountain to the spiritual world of eternity, Jen connects herself to the spiritual universe; accordingly, she gains her freedom with sacredness.

Index Terms—*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, environmental force, freedom, transcendence

I. INTRODUCTION

At the end of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), the main character Jen or Yu Jiaolong (Zhang Ziyi) jumps off Wudang Mountain into the world of the unknown. Indeed, her jump is a challenge against the constraints of her cultured environment. As Deppman [1] states, her action represents "her liberation from the bondage of an aristocratic life governed by feudal ideals". Such "bondage" refers to the concept of conformity, according to which a female has to submit her own personal independence to males' discourse without complaints. In order to liberate herself from the "bondage", Jen has to shape herself into a woman warrior, who can use martial arts to gain her physical and spiritual freedom. After a long fight, she reaches the final step for her liberation. When she is on Mudang Mountain, she finds no sign of patriarchal dominance. Her patriarchal father is out of her sight; the superior master Li Mubai (Chow Yun Fat) has gone; the poisonous enemy Jade Fox (Cheng Pei Pei) has been vanquished; the modeling sister Yu Xiulian (Michelle Yeoh) also has no wish to shape Jen into a conformist who is consistent to traditional gender roles. Moreover, with the help of her love Lo Xiaohu (Chang Chen), she can choose a better environment to establish her ideal of a self-sufficient life. In a

word, there is no obstacle for Jen to enjoy her freedom. However, she relinquishes all the favorable conditions by her suicidal jump. In front of her unknown future, is Jen an escapee or an adventurer?

In order to unravel the mystery of Jen's final decision in the film, the study puts Jen in different environments. First, in a cultured environment, Jen is constrained by the Confucian "li" ("礼") or "propriety", according to which she has to accept her secondary gender role. Since she has no intention of repressing her impulse for gender equality, she then wanders into the wilderness—the alienated regions permeated with the chance to build up new social orders. Next, after her struggle with her excessive desire to dominate others in the wilderness, she goes to Wudang Mountain, a world of Taoism. In all these physical environments, Jen has to deal with what Lawrence Buell (2001) calls "environmental determinism". This concept refers to the shaping force of physical environments, positively or negatively, can influence people's welfare. Specifically, for instance, in terms of spatial (e.g., enclosed or open), cultural (e.g., conservative or liberal), and geologic (e.g., rivers, forest lands, or deserts) sense, environmental force is powerful enough to direct people to adjust themselves to certain patterns of life. As Buell states, compared to Fredric Jameson's "political unconscious", "embeddedness in spatio-physical context is even more intractably constitutive of personal and social identity, and of the way that texts get constructed, than ideology is, and very likely as primordial as unconscious psychic activity itself" [2]. In other words, environmental force plays a significant role in shaping both socially advantaged and disadvantaged people. In Jen's case, born into a governor's family, she has the privilege of receiving better education and having a prosperous lifestyle. However, she is also trapped in the conservative environment, where she has to repress her true passion for freedom. In order to be free, Jen wanders from civilization to wilderness to the world of Taoism. Further, she jumps into the world of eternity. The question is this: in her path to freedom, does her jump symbolize her ultimate triumph over environmental force?

II. OBEDIENCE AND ENDURANCE: CONFLICTS BETWEEN JEN AND HER CULTURED ENVIRONMENT

In the film, when Jen first meets Yu Xiulian, she presents herself inside of a relatively enclosed but cultured space: Sir Te's study. In a metaphorical sense, Jen has to restrict herself from challenging her traditional gender role; otherwise, she would not be accepted by her society. Yet she does not want to be environmentally conditioned for her whole life. As she

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confides her struggle to Yu: “I’m getting married soon, but I haven’t lived the life I want” [3]. Here, Jen expresses her dissatisfaction with the arranged marriage, due to which she has to follow a monotonous routine. Such a routine is the daily act of pretending to be an obedient female, who should be submissive to her patriarchs. In contrast to Jen’s skeptical view of her gender role, Yu Xiulian responds with a sense of acceptance of her gender role. She states, “Congratulations. It’s the most important step in a woman’s life, isn’t it?” [3]. Yu might just want to be polite, instead of showing her true feelings for Jen’s future. However, beneath her politeness, Yu is more conservative than Jen. In confessing her unattainable love to Jen, Yu would rather repress her true feelings for Li Mubai than “dishonor Meng’s [her former fiancé’s] memory” [3]. In other words, Yu is willing to accept her patriarchal arrangement. Despite their different attitudes towards their alienated positions in their cultured environments, both have to endure their frustration with their lack of power, which is prevailed by the dominant environmental force: the Confucian “li”.

Concerning the Confucian “li” (礼), etymologically, the word refers to the performance of a formal ritual with a pious heart. According to Li [4], “li” is concerned with the practice of magic in ancient clan communes. In his words, “its [li’s] origin and core is to revere and perform a religious sacrifice for one’s ancestors”. Later, at the beginning of the Chou Dynasty (c. 11 century–256 BC), “li” is more secular than religious, referring to “a whole set of decrees, regulations, systems, rules, and ceremonies” [4]. By the time of Confucius, people’s traditional belief in “li” was declining. In a world dominated by disorder, poverty, and suffering, Confucius (551–479 BC) celebrates “li” as offering better possibilities for individual development. More importantly, he believes the revival of “li” might bring law and order to the world. In terms of individual development, a practice of “li” is what Tu [5] calls “a process of humanization”. In other words, one is able to attain his or her “authenticity” and “sociality”. Here, “authenticity” is concerned with the person’s constant pursuit of personal perfection. Relatively speaking, “Sociality” refers to one’s harmonious relationship to a family, a political state, and the whole world. Taken together, the Confucian “li” is an internalized code of behaviors, suggesting one’s level of spiritual, moral, and intellectual achievement.

Furthermore, “li” can also be an externalization of a great environmental force. Taking a conservative hierarchical society for instance, an individual is imposed upon to accept the rigid rules derived from “li”. In this sense, “li” is close to what Schwartz [6] takes to be appropriate social behaviors, beneath which the concept connotes “hierarchies, authority, and power”. In Jen’s case, she is tormented by the rigid regulation of “li”: she has to accept the arranged marriage by subduing her real passion for freedom. Her sufferings intensify, when she learns Yu’s pathetic love experience, according to which Yu is unable to end the tyranny upon herself in her arranged marriage. As Yu states, “So the freedom you [Jen] talk about, I too desire it. But I have never tasted it” [3]. Here, from Yu, Jen sees her future, that is, she has to submit herself to the monotonous routine determined by such patriarchs as her father and her future husband. Yet at the bottom of her heart, Jen does not want to follow Yu’s

example. Rather, she seeks an alternative world, where “li” can have less influence on people. Such a world is “Jiang Hu”.

Concerning “Jiang Hu” (江湖), its literal meaning is “rivers and lakes” [7]. Metaphorically, “Jiang Hu” also refers to “the lands of a nation”, “a hermit’s dwelling place”, and “a worldly-wise person with vast worldly experience” [7]. Among them, “rivers and lakes” are distinctive in the meanings of “Jiang Hu”, because in Chinese characters, both “Jiang” (江) and “Hu” (湖) have the same symbol of “water”, which is marked by the three points—“氵”. As for “water”, the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu (老子) praises its detachment from the conformed values of a society. As he states in Chapter 8 of his book *Lao Tzu*, “Highest good is like water. Because water excels in benefiting the myriad creatures without contending with them and settles where none would like to be, it comes close to the way” (上善若水，水利万物而不争，处众人之所恶，故几于道) [8]. In other words, water is free, due to its embodiment of spiritual transcendence.

Perhaps for this reason, Jen is more inclined to imagine “Jiang Hu” as a better world than her conservative cultured society. She says, “It must be exciting to be a fighter, to be totally free!” [3]. In other words, Jen believes that obedience and repression cannot be found in “Jiang Hu”. Rather, each one can release his or her repressive impulse: “Roaming wild, beating up anyone who gets in your way!” [3]. For Jen, she dreams to control her own destiny without being affected by the Confucian “li”. She excitedly states, “But to be free to live my own life, to choose whom I love...That is true happiness” [3]. Taken together, Jen expects to transcend her gender role in “Jiang Hu”. She wants to realize her expectations, but she has no power. Fortunately, Jen finds the invincible sword “Green Destiny”. With the help of the weapon, Jen successfully transforms herself into a powerful fighter.

Jen’s transformation is perceived by Li Mubai. In the scene of their fight inside the abandoned Buddhist monastery, Jen is always on the attack, whereas Li is in retreat. It seems that Jen is superior to Li, but Li warns her of the danger of her thoughtless impulse. Li states, “Real sharpness comes without effort” [3]. While the English version emphasizes Jen’s radical behaviors, the Chinese version highlights Jen’s possibility of turning herself into a pathetic person, due to her frantic passion for almost unlimited power. As Li quotes from Chapter 9 of Lao Tzu in the Chinese version: “Hammer it to a point/ And the sharpness cannot be preserved for ever” (揣而锐之，不可长保) [8]. Despite the different implications in these two versions, both demonstrate Li’s precise perception of Jen’s limitations: Jen has imprisoned herself by her delusion of power, which might lead her to destruction instead of freedom. Then, when they both fight outside, Li says to her: “No growth without an assistant. No action without reaction. No desire without restraint. Now give yourself up and find yourself again” [3]. These words, by implication, indicate Li’s sincere teachings for Jen. He encourages her to recognize the power of moderation, which can neutralize the extremes of her behaviors. Furthermore, Li also reveals Jen’s unsophisticated view of “Jiang Hu”. According to her, “Jiang Hu” is all about “[r]oaming wild,

beating up anyone who gets in your way!” [3]. In other words, Jen imagines “Jiang Hu” must be dominated by the law of “survival of the fittest”. In fact, the real “Jiang Hu” is more complex than she imagines. In order to be free, she needs to keep her excessive desire of dominating others under wise control.

In a word, in a cultured environment, it is difficult for Jen to transcend her conventional gender role, no matter how hard she has tried. On the one hand, she has to pretend to be a young obedient female, following the Confucian “li”. On the other hand, she has a great impulse of challenging this conventional gender role. In other words, she has to struggle constantly to keep a balance between her ambition and the shaping force of her environment. Yet the more she tries, the more she is alienated from those of her civilized circle, resulting in her aimless life of wandering, behind which uncertain threats are hidden. Since she finds no limits in such a life, she suffers from unendurable spiritual bewilderment. She states, “I became so frightened! Everything fell apart. I had no one to guide me, no one to learn from” [3]. In a word, Jen is ambiguous about whether she should go back to her routine or go on her journey for freedom. After a struggle, she chooses the latter path. The question is this: where is the better world?

III. REBELLION AND ENLIGHTENMENT: JEN’S ADVENTURES IN THE WILDERNESS

In fact, beyond civilization, there are also lands few people have explored. According to Henry David Thoreau, such lands are the wilderness, symbolizing spiritual purity, sacredness, and freedom. In a metaphorical sense, he states, “Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest” [9]. In the film, there are also such pieces of sacred lands of the wilderness: the desert and the bamboo forest. The former is occupied by lawless bandits; the latter is not frequently visited by people. In both open spaces, Jen is under the influence of the wild environmental force, which is characterized as boundless freedom. By embracing the force, she no longer has to repress her impulse for gender equality. Moreover, she wants to have unlimited power to dominate others. Obviously, it is impossible for her to defeat everyone, resulting in her constant struggle with more powerful rivals. In search of a balance between dominance and subservience, she develops a new concept of freedom: freedom is not absolute control over others, but about relinquishing the delusion of control. As to how Jen gets her new concept of freedom, we need to understand her contact with the wilderness, the desert and the bamboo forest in particular.

Concerning the desert, in traditional Chinese poetry, it often has a sense of desolation. As Wang Wei (王维) (701–761) states, “Solitary smoke drifts above the immense desert, / A round sun flows over the long river” (大漠孤烟直, 长河落日圆) [10]. In such an environment, one can have a chance to develop his or her hidden talents. In Jen’s case, she relinquishes her dependent female role, transforming herself into an independent woman warrior, who courageously confronts the environmental force. Such a force is embodied in the harshness of the desert (e.g., a shortage of food, a lack of water, and the attack of bandits). In

her struggle against the harsh environment, Jen develops the wild or unrestrained aspect of her personality. For instance, she can now ignore her submission to such a patriarchal figure as the bandit Lo Xiaohu. As for Lo, his given name means a “little tiger”, and his nickname is a “Dark Cloud”. As his names indicate, Lo is a strong opponent to Jen. Yet in front of him, Jen has no intention of being tamed. By accepting his challenge, Jen not only finds her romantic passion for Lo, but also incarnates the spirits of the wilderness (e.g., openness, spontaneity, and enthusiasm). In a word, she enjoys her freedom of being authentic to both her and her love in the wilderness.

Yet beneath her exciting experience in her brave new world, Jen has to leave the desert, because the Confucian “li” is still powerful there. For instance, Jen’s love Lo tends to accept the social hierarchy regulated by the “li”; otherwise, he would not have a feeling of inferiority to her. He states, “I will make my mark on the world. I will earn your parents’ respect” [3]. Here, Lo downplays his particular attraction—his embodiment of the unfettered individual freedom of the wilderness—for Jen. Instead of being a man of the wilderness, he now wants to be civilized. Specifically, he wants to practice “li”, believing the rise of his social status can give him recognition by the patriarchs from the civilized society. Obviously, Lo has turned into a submissive person. It is no surprise to see him persuade Jen to leave the desert and wait for his success to come. He must have endured great suffering from their separation, but his sacrifice is meaningless, because his decision merely makes Jen seek another path to freedom.

Jen’s new path is to liberate herself in the bamboo forest. There, she not only adroitly uses the sword “Green Destiny”, but also constantly changes her moves and positions, as if she has changed into a mythological “dragon”, as her family name “Jiaolong” indicates. In Chinese culture, a dragon has great potential of being in harmony with its environment. As Chen [11] states, “In mythologies and legends, the distinctive features of a dragon are its unpredictable change and its flexibility as to when and where it caches or exposes itself. It can dive into the water and fly into the sky. Change is a dragon’s characteristic”. Obviously, the symbolic power of change can also be found in Jen. She hides herself for a moment, but reveals herself the next minute.

In response to her change, Li Mubai turns into a symbolic dragon trainer, who is capable of conquering Jen the “dragon”. The more aggressive she is, the more pressure she feels. James [12] comments, “Li uses the flexibility of the bamboo to neutralize the advantage that Jen has with the Green Destiny in her hands”. In other words, Li is in harmony with the force of the bamboo forest; accordingly, he has a better chance to tame Jen, the wild “dragon”. By contrast, Jen is less compatible with the forest. Especially when Li deliberately provokes her to lose her rational judgment, Jen loses her balance in the bamboo forest. Their difference in connecting with the bamboo forest lies in their understanding of the physical environment. For Li, the forest is the place where he can find humanity. As he states, he wants to see the “real” Jen, the one who is “good” deep down in her heart [3]. Hence, he attempts to guide Jen to understand her inner goodness. By contrast, Jen is less compatible with the forest. She merely sees its instrumental value, hoping to stand on the

better parts of bamboo, so as to have more chances to vanquish Li. Since Jen ignores the spiritual implication of the forest, she is not enlightened enough to be equal to Li. As a result, filled with insecurity, she has to give up the symbolic world of freedom.

In conclusion, in both the desert and the bamboo forest, Jen fails to find her freedom. Indeed, due to the great force of the wilderness, she can release her repressed passion for physical freedom. Meanwhile, she maintains the delusion that supreme power might bring everything under control. Ironically, she cannot make peace with herself: she constantly suffers from uneasiness, confusion, and anxiety. As a result, an escape into the wilderness is more of a hindrance than a help. Despite her experiences of frustration in the wilderness, she is still optimistic about the existence of freedom. Here, her concept of freedom is not about a fervent desire to achieve dominance over others. Rather, it is about transcending one's self-centered interests or rather about sacrificing for others. Jen forms such a concept when she witnesses Li Mubai's tragic death. In order to save Jen from Jade Fox's misleading teachings, he sacrifices his precious life for Jen, proving Jade Fox's wicked intention of harming others. From that moment, Jen realizes that true freedom is based upon an altruistic concern for others. Although her belated enlightenment cannot save Li's life, she learns from his moral intention, starting to transcend her limitations as a mortal human being.

IV. TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMORTALITY: JEN'S PURSUIT OF A PERFECT WORLD

At the end of the film, Jen leaves the wilderness for Wudang Mountain, the place reputed for its connection with Taoism. According to Lau [8], Taoism is also called "tao chia", meaning "the school of the way". As for "the way" or the "tao", it does not encourage people to drain their energy to covet transient fame, material benefits, social privilege, desperate love, and so forth. The transcendental implication of the "tao" often requires people to have a deeper understanding of their circumstances, using the best way or "tao" to deal with complex situations. For instance, Lao Tzu states in Chapter 2, "Thus Something and Nothing produce each other;/ The difficult and the easy complement each other;/ The long and the short offset each other;/ The high and the low incline towards each other;/ Note and sound harmonize each other;/ Before and after follow each other" (故有无相生, 难易相成, 长短相较, 高下相倾, 音声相和, 前后相随) [8]. As we can see, the "tao" can be construed as a mysterious power, hidden but prevalent in human lives. By following the "tao" naturally, people would not hurt themselves and others through radical behaviors. In Jen's case, when she comes to the world of Taoism, Wudang Mountain, she has a chance to develop her concept of freedom, which is imbued with the altruistic virtue of sacrificing for others, together with her spiritual elevation.

As for the altruistic virtue, it is best illustrated in Lo Xiaohu's narration of a legend about a young filial son, who truly wanted to save his parents from their sickness. Having heard of the healing power of a sacred mountain, the son offered his precious life and jumped from the mountain. Naturally, he would have been dead, but in Lo's narration,

there is an idealistic ending. As Lo describes, "He [The son] didn't die. He wasn't even hurt. He floated away, far away, never to return" [3]. Beneath the optimistic tone, there is a tragic implication that the son's rebirth is actually unknown. Nevertheless, hope triumphs over skepticism about the reliability of the story. Lo states, "If you believe, it will happen. The elders say, 'A faithful heart makes wishes come true'" [3]. Drawing from Lo's idealistic narration, Jen is convinced that the ultimate freedom is spiritual and mortal, rather than physical.

In this condition, although Jen has a chance to be physically free with Lo, she refuses to go back to the wilderness and enjoy physical freedom with Lo. For one thing, Lo or the "little tiger" has been greatly tamed through his experience in the civilized society. Such a tamed "tiger" is not fit for Jen the wild "dragon". For another thing, Jen does not want to be shaped again into a reckless being that is strongly driven by her irrational impulse. Having accepted Yu Xiulian's token of altruistic virtue (i.e., the jade hair clasp), Jen is very likely to understand the necessity of having a balance of power between rationality and irrationality, or rather civilization and wilderness. For this reason, she sketches a relatively sophisticated psychic landscape, where she can be more elevated as a meek human being. Here, her meekness has nothing to do with vulnerability, but suggests her view of freedom: to be free is to humble herself to the benevolent universe. By interacting with it, she could have a sense of spiritual elevation. As Jen echoes Lo's words in her action: "A faithful heart makes wishes come true" [3]. Her "wishes" can be particular: a relief to cease the agony caused by her strong desire for power, a deeper understanding of Jade Fox's jealousy at her talent for martial arts, her empathy with the unfulfilled love between Yu Xiulian and Li Mubai, or her willingness to relinquish Lo Xiaohu's ardent love. Moreover, her "wishes" can also be universal, suggesting her sympathy for every single soul who is willing to sacrifice for other suffering souls in the world. Both kinds of her "wishes" suggest her harmony with the mysterious universe, resulting in her sacrificial act of jumping off Wudang Mountain.

Although she falls into the world of the unknown, she does not have a feeling of sorrow or anxiety. She is at ease in her soul. One way to make sense of her easiness is to understand her natural harmony with her surroundings. In particular, she is floating with white clouds. In some traditional Chinese myths, such a state often has a spiritual implication: one's transfiguration from a mortal creature into a sacred being. For instance, in the Chinese classic novel *The Journey to the West* (《西游记》) written by Wu Cheng'en (吴承恩) (c.1500–1582), when the Handsome Monkey King (美猴王) learns how to travel by jumping magically upon clouds, he is no longer constrained by the limits of his physical body. Rather, he can enjoy the freedom to be equal to the divine gods in the heavenly palace. In a similar case, Jen is also willing to become a transcendental being, spreading her metaphorical wings (her arms) and embracing the world of eternity. In an idealistic sense, Jen is rewarded with the pleasure of enjoying her sacred freedom and becomes what Emerson [13] describes, "a part or parcel of God".

As we have seen, although Jen's jump probably suggests her mortal death, the tragic act is counterbalanced by a hope for her spiritual rebirth. Metaphorically, her jump suggests

the untamed “dragon” eventually finds its lasting place in the paradise of spiritual freedom. In both literal and metaphorical senses, Jen experiences what Buell [2] calls “environmental awakening”: “retrievals of physical environment from dormancy to salience—and of distortion, repression, forgetting, inattention”. Now, Jen is aware of her belonging to the immense universe. While looking back at her lifelong journey, in the past, she struggled greatly with her worldly position, hoping to gain great power to change her secondary gender role. However, now, her struggle no longer exists, probably because she feels a yearning for worldly power is less significant than the elevation of the soul. No doubt she is now coexisting harmoniously with the natural world: lofty mountains, ethereal clouds, strong pines, and large stones. These beautiful images symbolize a natural state of living, which Jen is now enjoying forever.

V. CONCLUSION

In sum, Jen is courageous enough to undertake an adventure in search of physical to spiritual freedom. In the civilized society, she is supposed to be a submissive female, but in her courageous struggle with the cultured environmental force, she changes herself into a powerful person, who can even survive in the wilderness. On the other hand, she is enslaved by her fetishization of unlimited power. As a result, she brings nothing but chaos. After relinquishing her delusion of power, Jen realizes the essence of freedom: the formation of a spiritual bond with the immense universe. In practice, she jumps off Wudang Mountain, and the act has the symbolic connotation that she is spiritually awakened. In the process, Jen probably has to endure solitude, but her endurance is paid off. As Nietzsche [14] states, “Choose the good solitude, the free, high-spirited, light-hearted solitude that, in some sense, gives you the right to stay good yourself!”. In Jen’s case, her solitary act of jumping suggests that she successfully triumphs over environmental force and her limitations as a mortal human being: her obsession with destructive power. It is certainly true that she is not perfect, but at least she courageously deals with her imperfection. Not surprisingly, after she is enlightened enough to transcend her limited mental scope, Jen can eventually enjoy her everlasting happiness in the infinite universe.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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