Asian Shakespeares on Screen: Two Films in Perspective, special issue, edited by Alexander C. Y. Huang, *Borrowers and Lenders* 4.2 (Spring/Summer 2009).

Martial Arts and Masculine Identity in Feng Xiaogang's *The Banquet*

Yu Jin Ko, Wellesley College

Abstract

As cinematic clichés go, the image of the Asian martial arts master is about as well-worn as it comes. And yet in the hands of a director like Feng Xiaogang, the image is revitalized in ways that not only make it fresh again, but also reflect how the director re-imagines Shakespeare's characters. This paper considers the role of the martial arts in the conception of masculinity in Feng's *The Banquet*. As an adaptation of *Hamlet*, *The Banquet* subtly negotiates the strand in theatrical and critical history that effeminizes Hamlet as the sensitive melancholiac — but within a specifically global context in which China is an emerging superpower. As the paper examines how Feng refigures masculine identity in *Hamlet*, it will also argue that the film is confronting the issue of Asian masculine identity itself as represented in global cinema.

In a fantasy sequence of the film *Last Action Hero* (1993), a parodic Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle that sends up action movies, Schwarzenegger takes on the role of Hamlet and converts the "sweet prince" into an action hero. "You killed my father," he says to Claudius, before flinging him out the window of a castle to certain death; after musing, "To be or not to be" in between puffs on a cigar, he concludes, "Not to be," as explosives go off in the background and the entire castle is blown to bits. This little sequence is as cleverly insightful as it is comical; though Hamlet is cast by his father — and the play's genre — as an avenging hero, he hardly fits the role and could learn a few things from a Schwarzenegger-type action hero.[1] Of course, it is precisely because Hamlet departs so radically from expectations and types that he has fascinated readers and theater-goers for centuries. Nonetheless, the meditative melancholy and existential searching that define Hamlet to such a deep extent and that the Romantics, in particular, seized on as the representative features of subjectivity and inner resistance, have often been gendered feminine, including by the

Romantics themselves.[2] Indeed, of all the major Shakespeare heroes, only Hamlet has a tradition of being played by and as a woman, as in the silent film of *Hamlet* (1921) with Asta Nielsen in the starring role.[3] Imagining Schwarzenegger as Hamlet thus plays on the distinction between not only heroic action and contemplative inaction, but also outsized, superhero masculinity and delicate, sensitive femininity.

This legacy of a feminized Hamlet is, however, generally not of great concern to contemporary directors; though Claudius may try to shame Hamlet for displaying "unmanly grief," directors are far more likely to embrace the stronger legacy that associates sensitivity of Hamlet's kind with everything from rebellious self-invention and "grunge" subversiveness to prophetic clarity. However, in the case of the film *The Banquet* (2006) — a loose retelling of the *Hamlet* story by the contemporary Chinese filmmaker Feng Xiaogang — the image of a feminized Hamlet does, I believe, shadow the entire work, particularly in ways that reveal Feng's cultural location in the realm of international cinema. As Yomi Braester has recently argued, Feng (along with the more widely recognized Zhang Yimou) is very much the embodiment of a "cultural broker" — a major player in the transnational circulation of cultural and commercial capital that sustains the media industry across international borders (2005, 549). Indeed, the eponymous figure of the big-shot mogul (or *dawan'r*) in Feng's *The Big Shot's Funeral* (2001) is a self-parodic image of the filmmaker as international business mogul who has to negotiate the various forces and pressures — including those resulting from China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001 — that shape the cinematic product. Within this global market, the image of China itself becomes a crucial form of currency whose value, or exchange rate, is left floating and open to continual modification. Surely Zhang Yimou was highly cognizant of this fact when he designed the stunning, magnificent Opening Ceremonies for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, as was, as he has explicitly acknowledged in interviews, even the Taiwanese filmmaker Ang Lee when he made the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000).[4] As Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar have argued in *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation*, all so-called Fifth and Sixth-Generation Chinese filmmakers (mid-1980s to the present) who aspire to a global audience are concerned at some level in their films with national identity.[5] Feng Xiaogang, I believe, is really no different in being intensely conscious of the image that China, writ large, cuts for an international audience in his films. In *The Banquet*, this concern gets mediated principally through the Hamlet character (Prince Wu Luan), and in particular through the representation of his masculinity. As Feng translates Hamlet into Wu Luan, the character becomes a figure for Chinese masculinity.[6]

At the heart of Feng's revision of *Hamlet* lie two clichéd images. First is the image of the Asian martial arts master, which is about as well-worn a cinematic cliché as there is. Yet this cliché has enjoyed a remarkably sustained life largely because it has so many dimensions (not just Bruce Lee, but also Jackie Chan, Chow Yun-Fat, and countless others) and is continually being revised. One notable feature found in many reworkings of the past two generations of Hong Kong martial arts movies has been the extensive use of wire-work in action sequences, which has given the aerial fight work a balletic, supernatural grace. One index of the artistic potential of this technique can be found in the films of Zhang Yimou, such as *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), in which Zhang seamlessly combines a romantic story of epic sweep with action sequences of ethereal beauty. In fact, Zhang's *House of Flying Daggers*, along with Shakespeare's own *Hamlet*, might be said to be an *Ur-Hamlet* for *The Banquet*. Zhang's film provides, more specifically, a graceful, dreamy vision of heroic action that would clearly appeal to Feng and recall, in the combination of traditionally feminine and masculine qualities, the elusive sensibility of Hamlet. However, Feng's representation of Hamlet/Wu Luan is also mediated by another well-worn cliché that has enjoyed a remarkably long life in the West: the effeminized Asian male. This image has been played with, deconstructed, and attacked, yet it still colors Western ideas of the East and of eastern masculinity in particular. David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1988-1990) has hardly been the last word, and Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banque*t (1993) has only complicated matters in interesting ways.[7] Among the many fascinating elements of Feng's Shakespearean film is the complex way in which he reworks the cinematic image of the martial arts hero as a means of negotiating the balance between the feminine and masculine; he does so, however, in order ultimately to renew the masculine and offer a fresh vision of masculine national identity.

The opening sequence sets out the terms, and raises the stakes, of this negotiation (see Scott-Douglass in this issue), with cuts between the Emperor's assassins in black armor riding horseback, and Wu Luan, masked and clothed in gauzy white linen, practicing a mesmerizing dance in a grand temple-like theater in the mountains (Huang 2009, 231-33). A distinction is established between, on one side, melancholy romance and the arts (see Ross in this issue), and, on the other, political power and male, martial action. The soundscape reinforces this distinction, switching between a haunting, lyrical love song (composed, it turns out, by Wu Luan himself) and the pounding of hooves and the clatter of armor.

The effeminization of the Hamlet-figure is further evident when Wu Luan manages to take up residence at the imperial palace. His first encounter with his Empress (and now aunt, though still formally his mother-in-law) — played by the stunningly beautiful Zhang Ziyi — is a case in

point, as the scene reveals the degree to which his status is continually defined in relation to her. He shows up in her opulent "closet" (let us say) wearing his mask — looking rather like Jason from the *Friday the 13th* series — and carrying a sword case. As the two engage in a dialogue, Wu Luan kneels before her and asks whether the story of a scorpion having killed his father is true or not; she hugs his head and says, with tears in her eyes, "The pain in your eyes breaks my heart; do not ask so many questions . . . The best way to soothe your father's spirit is to make sure we two are well. Especially you." Though she is, as the narration tells us, four years younger than he is, she appears almost as a mother figure at this moment, protective of him as though she were driven in the end by the purity of an unconditional love. He, in turn, appears to be very much an adolescent (not unlike someone of Jason's age) who is infantilized by a more powerful female figure. Further, though Wan does come close to breaking down in a traditionally "feminine" way, she manages to catch herself and regain her self-possession. This is another instance in the film in which we find the Empress straining under extraordinary emotional or psychological pressure, but not cracking; whether she is sexually put upon by the Emperor or is witnessing the brutal beating of a general (Governor Pei Hong) who challenges her status, she maintains her composure and follows through with resolute action. Indeed, she is always shown to possess the uncanny ability — or rather, she is played as having that ability by the uncanny Zhang Ziyi — to discipline her emotions with the grace of someone guided by a higher vision, elusive as her particular vision may be for the audience.

In this first re-encounter with Wu Luan, the Empress's discipline expresses itself particularly as a switch from tender embraces and near breakdown to ever-so-slightly erotic caresses, from which he recoils and forcefully reassumes his posture of a subject. Once again firmly in control as his sovereign, then, the Empress playfully gets Wu Luan to open up his sword case and discovers a scroll on which is written the lyrics to the love song that had played in the opening sequence. With the scroll in hand, she initiates a truly balletic, aerial sword-play dance that is an extension of her graceful discipline. The dancing enables a moment of nostalgic reverie as the two perform something that they seemingly learned together in their much younger days and thus becomes a vehicle for emotional release that avoids sloppy brooding and excess in the manner of Wu Luan.

With the dance, moreover, the Empress is firmly located in a line of female martial arts heroines that stretches back through not only the set of roles made famous by stars such as Lucy Liu and Michelle Yeoh, as well as Zhang Ziyi herself (particularly in *House of Flying Daggers*), but also extends to far earlier women warriors in the *wuxia* (or sword-fighting) genre of film. These are characters who often become paradoxically hyper-feminized by their martial arts prowess and thereby even more erotically charged; importantly, however, the particular androgynous mix

of sexy, stylized artistry and lethal force define them as women of extraordinary, sometimes supernatural, power who can outduel men.[8]

For such characters, there is the danger of their being understood by reference to the orientalist and misogynistic "dragon-lady" cliché. The number of popular online reviews (e.g., *Variety* [Elley 2006] and *DVDTalk* [Review 2006]) that compared Zhang's Empress Wan with Lady Macbeth is one indication of how prevalent the cliché is in the minds of viewers, and how often it leads to terrible misprision. Charles Ross's and Amy Scott-Douglass's essays in this issue offer interpretations that are different from my own. But Empress Wan is no Lady Macbeth, at least not as the term is generally used, to describe a conniving, manipulative bitch whose feminine wiles and unnaturally masculine overreaching define her as evil. Rather, Empress Wan is a highly complex character who is, among other things, the film's primary figure of discipline — the kind associated with the arts of both dance and combat — and who thus stands in contrast to the brooding, impetuous, and sometimes befuddled Wu Luan. Though certainly purity might be a defining quality of Wu Luan's passions, he also appears, in contrast to the Empress and as Claudius says, a little too "unfortified," "impatient," "simple," and "unschooled" — that is, "unmanly" (*Hamlet*, 1.2.94-97).[9]

A related conclusion might be drawn about a scene that combines elements of both the play-within-the-play and the duel with Laertes from *Hamlet*. In honor of the Empress's coronation, Wu Luan practices a sword display with some of the palace guards, but (and some lacunae in the narrative leave matters a bit ambiguous) a guard, seemingly at the direction of the Emperor, uses a real sword he has hidden behind a pillar to attack Wu Luan. Throughout the entire scene, Wu Luan does earn his *bona fides* as a fighter, displaying some acrobatic and visually spectacular maneuvers. However, despite his fury at discovering the real knife, he eventually is pinned down and requires the intervention of Empress Wan, who glides in gorgeous slow-motion through the air to take up a weapon and deflect a potentially deadly blow. We are continually reminded that Wu Luan's martial skills, dazzling and impressive as they may be, remain inadequate in the end, requiring his rescue by a truly disciplined individual, Empress Wan. In other words, in a world of dynastic struggles and courts ruled by men, disciplined power of the Empress's kind is gendered masculine, while injured emotionalism and artistic absorption are gendered feminine.

Crucially, however, this is not the whole story. Empress Wan's ability to transform emotion into performance also makes her a figure of deception who is supremely practiced in the art of palace intrigue and power politics. In the most radical departure from the *Hamlet* story, a series of plots and counterplots entailing assassinations and poison is woven that pits not only Empress against Emperor, but Minister Yin (the Polonius-figure) and his household against both. In the

end, however, the Empress plays the Yin household to her advantage and takes the crown. Yet the Empress cannot be pinned down as merely a scheming villainess with a ruthless hunger for power. Even in her dealings with her Emperor husband, she remains an elusive enigma whose passions — erotic and emotional — are never clear. As she plots to poison her Emperor husband, it is unclear whether or not she is faking when she falls into steamy dialogue with him and declares, with a tear rolling down her cheeks, that she has never before surrendered all of herself to anyone. Does the Empress find it tragic that she must execute this man? Even more fundamentally, it is never clear whether she plots out of thirst for power, as part of a grand scheme, or is driven to it by the fear, as Minister Yin's son (General Yin) assumes, of being discarded by the Emperor. Nor is it clear, again despite the tears she sheds for him, where Wu Luan ultimately stands in Wan's emotional landscape. And yet, as noted above, throughout it all she continually maintains a graceful, even sublime, self-composure as though she were divinely led. Or perhaps that, too, is a performance.

When Wu Luan says that he performs with a mask because artistry consists in conveying the "most complex and hidden" emotions with a mask, Wan responds first by deriding him for being so easily readable, then adds that the highest level of artistry is to "use your own face and turn it into a mask." Indeed, her elusiveness is the expression of supreme artistry. One might get tempted to say about Empress Wan what Rong Cai has said about Zhang Ziyi's character (Jen Yu) in *Crouching Tiger*: "Unintelligible and elusive, illegitimate female desire is disorderly and violent both in its structural function in the film and in its ideological characteristics" (2005, 454). I would say, however, that Feng Xiaogang has displaced Hamlet's famous complexity and illegibility onto the Empress and made her the greatest figure of intrigue in the drama. As a result, Wu Luan's emotional transparency appears all the purer and, paradoxically, provides an index of his underlying masculinity. The very element of Wu Luan that makes him appear unfit and naively emotional also makes him appear, in contrast to the chameleon eeriness of Empress Wan, the embodiment of the masculine virtue of integrity. In fact, through his single-minded devotion to the old Emperor, Wu Luan is linked to Governor Pei Hong, the man who is beaten to death for using the title Empress Dowager for the Empress, thereby implying that the Emperor is a usurper. The public and gruesome execution (alluded to briefly earlier) might easily be understood as an emblem for the death of integrity in the kingdom; in this light, Wu Luan is also a figure for a lost and essential masculine ideal.

All of this comes to a head, and a climactic turning point of sorts is reached, during the eponymous banquet scene. The Emperor orders a feast for all the dignitaries of the land and requires attendance on punishment of death. During the entertainment at the banquet, the Empress offers the Emperor a toast and hands him a cup of poisoned wine; however, at just the moment when he is

about to take a drink, Qing Nü — Minister Yin's daughter and the Ophelia-figure who has gone mad for love of Wu Luan — enters to announce that she and her fellow masked dancers will perform a love song in Wu Luan's honor (in fact, Wu Luan's very own song). The Emperor, believing that Wu Luan has been killed by assassins, offers the poisoned cup to Qing Nü as a token of his joining her in honoring Wu Luan. Qing Nü drinks the wine, then performs the song with other masked dancers, who are dressed as Wu Luan's fellow dancers had been at the beginning, but collapses and dies. At this point, Wu Luan reveals himself to have been (presumably secretly) one of the dancers. After briefly mourning Qing Nü, Wu Luan unveils a sword, accuses the Emperor of regicide, and then fights his way past the imperial guards towards the Emperor with newfound determination and lethal ferocity. At that moment, Wu Luan appears to put on fully the mantle of the avenging hero; one expects that, in this version of the story, he may very well accomplish vengeance and restore true masculinity in the kingdom. However, the Emperor, who now understands that the poisoned cup had been prepared for him by the Empress, calls off the guards and asks Wu Luan, with deep admiration, whether he was saved from death by the "tenderness" of "women's hearts" or by the fact that "a million calculations cannot compare with one pure heart." Then, turning his head upwards and asking the spirit of his brother whether he has protected his son to bring "honor" back to the family, the Emperor drinks off the poisoned wine. The Empress, on seeing her husband drink the wine, drops a tear and muffles her sobs. In this sequence, what fully restores the vision of Wu Luan's masculinity is ultimately not his readiness to engage in mortal combat and avenge his father, but the purity of his heart. Purity accomplishes revenge by inspiring Wu Luan's uncle to perform a final act of honor by taking his own life. Seemingly, it is recognition of this passing of purity from nephew to uncle that provokes the tears in the Empress. Purity, that is to say, enables the male communion of father, brother, and son and restores, for the moment, the possibility of dynastic wholeness. In the end, masculine virtue becomes realigned with the artistry of dance and theater more than with mortal combat, and the elements that tend to become gendered feminine prove indispensable to defining the masculine. One might say that we catch a glimpse of an ideal vision in which a torn China is healed through this masculine virtue.

Just as quickly, however, things go tragically awry, as Minister Yin's son kills Wu Luan and is in turn killed by the Empress. In an unsettling coda, the Empress is shown mourning Wu Luan and the loss of her youth, symbolized in the loss of her name "Little Wan"; but she quickly changes her demeanor as she tries on with great pleasure her new title of "Her Majesty, the Emperor" while luxuriating sensuously in a long stream of silk that is the color of "the flame of desire," suggesting that desire reaches its apex in reaching the height of power. Then, from somewhere in the palace, a sword comes flying out and pierces her though, while the love song of Wu Luan plays in the

background. It is a haunting ending that provides a chilling, but also elegiac image of what it means to renounce the kind of purity that defined Wu Luan. The Empress may seduce herself into believing that with "masculine" discipline she can reach the sublime state of being beyond caring about injured innocence, but as the song and its associations remind us, without a tender "woman's heart" beneath the mask, she risks becoming as impersonal as the faceless source of the flying sword that kills her.

One need not, and indeed should not, read *The Banquet* simply as an allegory of a Chinese search for national identity, but the complex way in which masculinity is represented in the film is particularly interesting, and possibly telling, in the context of China's twenty-first century evolution into a global economic superpower. As someone in whom the masculine is renewed by absorbing the feminine, Wu Luan stands as a figure that challenges and subverts the cliché of the effeminized Asian male by complicating the very terms of that cliché. At the same time, Wu Luan is in many ways the opposite of how the Chinese leadership is increasingly being viewed by China's economic and political rivals, including the U.S.: as ruthlessly calculating, inscrutable, and intent on achieving global power. In this context, Wu Luan's retreat into the arts, his emotional transparency, and his ineptness at power politics suggest an alternative model of national identity. It remains unclear, however, whether this alternative vision of a masculine national identity will resonate more strongly at home or abroad.

How to cite this article: Ko, Yu Jin. "Martial Arts and Masculine Identity in Feng Xiaogang's *The Banquet*." In *Asian Shakespeares on Screen: Two Films in Perspective*. Special issue, edited by Alexander C. Y. Huang. *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* 4.2 (Spring/Summer 2009). Available online: http://www.borrowers.uga.edu/.

Notes

1. For more on this connection between Hamlet and his representation in the film, see Eric S. Mallin, "'You Kilt My Foddah': or Arnold, Prince of Denmark" (1999).
2. Perhaps most famously, Goethe has his Wilhelm Meister say the following about Hamlet (in Thomas Carlyle's translation): "A lovely, pure, noble, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden it cannot bear and must not cast away" (1885, 1:223). The operative opposition is between a hero's masculinized strength and Hamlet's "lovely" nature.
3. A recent work treats quite exhaustively this phenomenon of effeminized Hamlets in performance: Troy Howard, *Women as Hamlet* (2007).

4. See Kenneth Chan, "The Global Return of the *Wu Xia Pian* (Chinese Sword-Fighting Movie): Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*" (2004), in which he discusses the ways in which Lee's film negotiates anxieties about representing "Chineseness" (4) for a global market and in which he quotes Lee as saying, "The film is a kind of dream of China" (7).
5. See especially Chapter 1, "Cinema and the National."
6. For an excellent introduction to the issue of how gender and national identity intersect in Chinese films, see *China on Screen* (2004): Chapter 5, "How Should A Chinese Woman Look? Woman and Nation," and Chapter 6, "How Should Chinese Men Act? Ordering the Nation."
7. Allan Luke, "Representing and Reconstructing Asian Masculinities: This is not a Movie Review" (1997).
8. For an alternative perspective, see Rong Cai (2005).
9. The reference is to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans (1974).

References

The Banquet. 2006. Director Xiaogang Feng, performers Ziyi Zhang, You Ge, Daniel Wu, Xun Zhou. Huayi Brothers.

Berry, Chris, and Mary Farquhar. 2004. *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation*. New York: Columbia University Press.

The Big Shot's Funeral. 2001. Director Xiaogang Feng, performers You Ge, Rosemary Kwan, Donald Sutherland. China Film Group.

Braester, Yomi. 2005. "Chinese Cinema in the Age of Advertisement: The Filmmaker as a Cultural Broker." *The China Quarterly*: 549-64.

Cai, Rong. 2005. "Gender Imaginations in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and the *Wuxia* World." *Positions* 13.2 (Fall): 441-71.

Chan, Kenneth. 2004. "The Global Return of the *Wu Xia Pian* (Chinese Sword-Fighting Movie): Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*." *Cinema Journal* 43.4: 3-17.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. 2000. Director Ang Lee, performers Yun-fat Chow, Michelle Yeoh, Zhi Zhang. Asian Union Film & Entertainment, Ltd.

Elley, Derek. 2006. Review of *The Banquet: Ye Yan* (China-Hong Kong). *Variety*. 3 September. Available online: http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117931451.html?categoryid=31&cs=1.

Friday the 13th. 1980. Director Sean S. Cunningham. Georgetown Productions, Inc.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. 1885. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Translated by Thomas Carlyle. 2 vols. New York: Worthington Co.

Hamlet. 1921. Directors Svend Gade Heinz Schall, performers Asta Nielsen, Mathilde Brandt, Eduard von Winterstein. Art-Film GmbH.

House of Flying Daggers. 2004. Director Zhang Yimou, performers Takeshi Kaneshiro, Andy Lau, Ziyi Zhang. Beijing New Picture Film Co.

Howard, Troy. 2007. *Women as Hamlet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Huang, Alexander C. Y. 2009. *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hwang, David Henry. 1988-1990. *M. Butterfly*. Eugene O'Neill Theatre, N.Y. 20 March, 1988-27 January, 1990.

Last Action Hero. 1993. Director John McTiernan, performers Arnold Schwarzenegger, F. Murray Abraham, Austin O'Brien. Columbia Pictures Corporation.

Luke, Allan. 1997. "Representing and Reconstructing Asian Masculinities: This is not a Movie Review." *Social Alternatives* 16.3: 32-34.

Mallin, Eric S. 1999. "'You Kilt My Foddah': or Arnold, Prince of Denmark." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 50.2: 127-51.

Pang, Laikwan, and Day Wong, eds. 2005. *Masculinities and Hong Kong Cinema*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Review of *The Banquet*. 2006. *DVDTalk*. 2 November. Available online: http://www.dvdtalk.com/reviews/25325/banquet-the/.

Shakespeare, William. 1974. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Edited by G. Blakemore Evans. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

The Wedding Banquet. 1993. Director Ang Lee, performers Dion Birney, Jeanne Kuo Chang, Winston Chao. Ang Lee Productions.