

## King Hu? (The Lost Art and Aesthetics of Wuxia Cinema)

(By Toshio U.-P.)

In today's rapidly evolving world of media entertainment where streaming sites and instant online viewership take priority over trips to the movie theatre and the video store, film 'consumers' are likely to miss out on classic martial art films of the wuxia style. While such masterful films—from auteurs such as the renowned King Hu—represent a true golden age of cinema, traditional wuxia norms and conventions are soon to be lost in an age where younger generations are no longer flocking to independent theatres or learning about such genres through academic milieus and film societies. Through the study of three important Chinese films, we will discuss the importance of promoting soon-to-be-lost film styles such as wuxia by paying homage to King Hu and his artful, revolutionary style of martial art directing.

In Taiwanese film Goodbye, Dragon Inn (1), the viewer is transported to Fu-Ho Grand Theatre in Taipei, where a final screening of King Hu's classic "Dragon Inn" is taking place. Set in a quasi-modern era where 'no one goes to the movies anymore', the film nostalgically explores how the medium is changing and how films of King Hu's caliber risk being lost in this transition. Through the bewildered eyes of a young Japanese spectator in the soon-to-be-closing theatre, we meet some of his martial art film idols viewing the final screening as 'ghosts' of an old 'haunted' theatre or former actors collectively engaging in a last trip down wuxia cinema's memory lane.

In Ang Lee's critically acclaimed modern wuxia film Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2), a younger generation of film enthusiasts are introduced to a film made in homage to the famed and fabled King Hu. Through updated special effects of the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and remarkably rendered landscapes and cinematography reminiscent of the traditional wuxia style, the viewer is transported to a mythical realm with warrior characters testing their supernatural fighting skills against rivals in an ancient form of swordplay combined with traditional Kung Fu. In the film's narrative, a young female martial arts disciple who is torn between following her pride of becoming a top warrior with seemingly 'limitless' potential or following her heart and the guidance of a pair of righteous warrior elders who try to sway her from becoming an ill-fated 'poisoned dragon'.

After a trip to one of the few remaining video stores in my part of Canada, I was happy to purchase a recently remastered Blu-Ray version of King Hu's classic The Valiant Ones (3). Directed and produced by the auteur himself, the film delves into an impossible battle with the troublesome Wokou, a group of pirates with ties to Japanese invaders, seeking to take over the mainland from afar. While the Wokou problem never seems to go away, a group of 'valiant' warriors, skilled at both archery and swordplay make an attempt to find the 'Wokou nest' hidden away on a mysterious island, in order to take on the notorious Hakatatsu, an evil ruler and warlord behind the foreign invasion.

While King Hu's films still remain to be found as DVD or Blu-Ray hard copies for his faithful fans to view, the need to reference his titles and even to attempt recreating his magical martial art fighting realms is ever-important for the sake of younger generations, who may be exploring traditional Kung Fu cinema in the hope of finding such an important bridge to the aesthetic perfection of "Dragon Inn", "A Touch of Zen" and "The Valiant Ones".

Sources:

1. Goodbye, Dragon Inn (2003). Dir. Tsai Ming-liang. Homegreen films. Taiwan. 81 min.
2. Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000). Dir. Ang Lee. Sony Pictures Classics. China. 120 min.
3. The Valiant Ones (1975). Dir. King Hu. King Hu Film Productions. Taiwan and Hong Kong. 92 min.