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# Innovation or Recycling? Mandarin Classics and the Return of the Wenyi Tradition

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the Return of the *Wenyi* Tradition**

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## Innovation or Recycling? Mandarin Classics and the Return of the *Wenyi* Tradition

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### Abstract

Romantic melodrama, or *wenyi pian*, is the master genre of Chinese-language cinema. *Wenyi* used to be the staple for Taiwan popular cinema and served as the backbone of the industry of the 1960s and the 1970s until the advent of the New Cinema. *Wenyi* the vernacular was replaced by *wenxue* (literature) the respectable in the New Cinema in order to transform Taiwan cinema into a serious art with a substantial social and cultural currency. The disappearing *wenyi* tradition appears to enjoy a return in recent attempts to rehabilitate Taiwan popular cinema. In films of Ang Lee, for instance, we see a transplantation/transposition of Mandarin classics of the 1950s and the 1960s to his *Eat Drink Man Woman* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The paper examines the return not as simply a connection with the patrimony of Taiwan cinema, but a self-aware appropriation and talk back to the cinematic fathers.

### Classical vicissitudes

Evoking the concept of the classical in Chinese-language cinema is a risky proposition. Not only has the concept itself been understudied in Chinese film criticism, but the body of work that could be labeled “classic” was until recently unavailable or hard to see. But these conditions did not prevent critics and distributors from utilizing the term “classics” for convenience of taxonomy, value judgment and marketing.

Classical or classic usually refers to films with special significance or magnitude. Classic as a category also helps create a cultural and historical distinction for the medium of cinema. In Chinese-language cinema classics have been defined by loose categories ranging from politics, popularity, cult value, national specificity and stylistic achievement. Hence we have so-called classics running all the way from leftist realism (*Street Angel*, 1937, dir. Yuan Muzhi), socialist realism (*Two Stage Sisters*, 1964, dir. Xie Jin), healthy realism (*Beautiful Duckling*, 1965, dir. Li Xing and Li Jia), opera film (*The Love Eterne*, 1963, dir. Li

Hanxiang), model opera film (*White-haired Girl*, 1950, dir. Wang Bin and Shu Hua), the films of Bruce Lee, Shaw Brother's costume dramas (*Empress Dowager*, 1975, dir. Li Hanxiang), MP and GI's musicals (*Mambo Girl*, 1957, dir. Yi Wen), martial arts (*Dragon Gate Inn*, 1967, dir. King Hu), pre-revolutionary melodramas (*Spring in a Small Town*, 1948, dir. Fei Mu), Taiwan New Cinema classics (*Terrorizers*, 1986, dir. Edward Yang), Fifth Generation classics (*Yellow Earth*, 1983, dir. Chen Kaige) to the Chinese-Hollywood classic *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (CTHD). But if we choose to deal with style exclusively, we could narrow down our discussion of Chinese classics to two types of styles--*wenyi* and *wuxia*. *Wenyi* can be described as a Chinese melodrama characterized by interior staging, female pathos and Confucian ethics, while *wuxia* refers to swordplay films embedded within chivalry and righteousness. *Wenyi* and *wuxia* were both staples of the industry from the advent of film production in China at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although both disappeared in the mainland film after 1949, they were the backbone of the rationalized, Fordist modes of production in Hong Kong and Taiwan for nearly three decades.

It is notable that in the recent renaissance of Chinese-language cinema, *wenyi* and *wuxia* return together as powerful source materials for filmmakers to venture onto global screens. Examples include *In the Mood for Love* (2000, *wenyi*), *Hero* (2002, *wuxia wenyi*), *Yiyi, a One and a Two* (2000, *wenyi*) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) and *CTHD* (both *wenyi wuxia*).<sup>1</sup> *Wuxia*, often used as a synonym for kung fu, has unprecedented mainstream exposure in the US and the hype is still on the rise.<sup>2</sup> I think we can attribute this resurgence of *wuxia* to Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, especially his attempt to return to the "classic" ingredients in making a film synergy, one that puts *wenyi* inside *wuxia*, and *wuxia* within *wenyi*, in a way that dialectically energizes both.

It was widely reported that the Chinese reception of *CTHD* was not all positive.<sup>3</sup> The film was often criticized for its slow narrative pace and its lack of innovative combat staging. Indeed, *CTHD* might have appeared too slow, considering the comparison of its 6.3 seconds ASL (720/1150) with that of *The Swordsman II*, which is 3.1 seconds (660/2122). For Chinese audiences with prior exposure to martial arts styles, *CTHD* is an inadequate *wuxia*

picture because it does not attempt to create new action tricks or, to surpass the perceived standard of bodily spectacle and special effects. But these inadequacies turned out to be the key elements of the film's phenomenal success worldwide. Western audiences unfamiliar with *wuxia* were stunned by the presentation of flying figures gliding up and along rooftops, effortlessly treading on high walls as if gravity is a non-issue for these skillful swordsmen. The film's accomplishment was interpreted in the popular Chinese press and academic discourse as Lee's 'selling out,' in the sense that he diluted the *wuxia* style in order to appeal to innocent, inexperienced Western audiences. The dispute over the identity of *CTHD* (whether or not it is an authentic *wuxia* picture) is a question about style. We must return to some basic stylistic premises to explain this cross-cultural perception gap. Why must a Western-friendly Chinese film turn the Chinese audience off? Does it mean Chinese people can only enjoy Chinese films and nothing else? How then do we explain Chinese audiences' century-long embrace of Hollywood pictures? Shouldn't culture, race and language interfere with Chinese audiences' appreciation of *Titanic*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*? Might there be something wrong in the head of Jiang Zemin, the former president, when he said everyone in China should go to see *Titanic*? Why is success in the West necessarily a sellout if a Western blockbuster is required viewing for all Chinese?

Obviously these questions can be answered in a variety of approaches. But critics and scholars usually choose to deal with them in cultural and political terms, the easy ways.<sup>4</sup> My hypothesis centers on film style, that Ang Lee is not making a straight, predictable martial arts film, or at least not an offshoot of familiar Hong Kong products of the 1990s like the swordsman series (*Swordsman I, II* and *Asia the Invincible*, dir. Tsui Hark). Instead, Lee is experimenting with the possibility of softening the *wuxia* formula, by incorporating elements of another Chinese style, the *wenyi*--the interior, feminine and the Confucian--and merging those into the masculine and the martial in a new version of a Chinese cinematic vernacular.

For Lee the presiding *wenyi* and *wuxia* styles have their respective problem areas and design flaws. The melodramatic *wenyi* tends to fall into a sentimental indulgence when it was thought to lend some civic and political utility in negotiating socio-cultural discontent. A

typical *wenyi* narrative structure is organized with lots of co-incidences and compressed temporality, features considered too frankly economical and implausible, too many shortcuts. Another problem of *wenyi* is its escapism, which would push the defeated patriarchy further into a trench. Martial arts master Zhang Che once attacked *wenyi* for promoting an ultra-feminine fantasy world symptomatic of a masculine national identity on the rocks. So he set out to re-masculinize Chinese cinema, in the British colony governed by a relentless capitalist logic. *Wuxia*, on the other hand, centers on a popular cosmology loosely connected to the Taoist beliefs in immortality via enlightenment and strenuous physical training: superior skills and physicality are on display for performative and pedagogical purposes. This superhuman fantasy was often under scrutiny because it promoted superstition, unbefitting the cinema's potential role in civic education. For instance, this un-civic, undomesticated wild side of the *wuxia* style excited legions of Bruce Lee fans, who found in him an inspiring ideal of defiance. Like *wenyi*, narrative cohesiveness and consistency in *wuxia* are regularly compromised to favor the ecstasies of action-driven spectacle.

In *CTHD*, Lee tries to contain these problems by juxtaposing *wenyi* and *wuxia* and creating a synergy of these two styles. In order to soften *wuxia*'s callousness, the slower *wenyi* expressive style was utilized to rein in the high-speed sword fights; and a tragic *wenyi* coda was added to re-mortalize the chivalrous swordsman as human, rather than superhuman characters. Meanwhile, the perceived weakness of *wenyi* is balanced with an intensified image of the *xianu* (swordswoman). Female characters now are not only concerned with romance and love, but with martial arts achievements and recognition in the *jianghu*. Compared to typical *wuxia*, characterization and cause-effect relations are built up more evenly to guarantee a smoother plot progression.

Here, I am not about to evaluate *CTHD* in regard to Lee's experiment in synthesis. My question is to ask, how do contemporary Chinese filmmakers revive old, out-of-date conventions? How do they evoke or mobilize the classical? In addition to cultural and ideological reassessment of classics, do filmmakers have other ways to transform old coin into new currency? In the case of *CTHD*, what are the patterns that Lee adopts to synthesize

two very different narrative styles? Is it really a martial arts film as it is perceived by both western and Chinese audience? I hope to use stylistic analysis to unpack some key issues surrounding the diverse reception of the film.

What is *wenyi*?

*Wenyi*, according to critic and *Crouching Tiger's* scriptwriter Cai Guorong, is an abbreviation for literature and art (*wenxue yu yishu*, thus short for *wenyi*), rooted in the industry's sourcing stories from literature. But *wenyi* was not a new idiom for Chinese film critics. It had been a regular term used by a variety of writers to emphasize the importance of arts and literature to society. Perhaps the best-known instance of *wenyi* is Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" (*Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotan hui zhang de jianhua*) in 1942.<sup>5</sup> Mao's defining statement on the future direction of *wenyi* even influenced many diaspora artists and writers of the following two decades. If Mao promoted *wenyi*, then his enemy might be expected to vilify it. But interestingly, *wenyi* did not become a 'bad word' for the defeated Nationalist Party who retreated to Taiwan. In Taiwan, the Party promoted a "military *wenyi*" to encourage soldiers and officers to engage in artistic production: writing, directing and composing. So *wenyi* continued to thrive in the martial law island of Taiwan, so important in the Cold War balance of power. Later in the 1960s, *wenyi* transfigured into "healthy realism" and subsequently evolved into the definitive generic term for romantic melodrama when literary adaptations became the norm.

In this regard, *wenyi* is quite close to what Ben Singer calls a "cluster concept" when he refers to the multifaceted dimensions of melodrama.<sup>6</sup> Like Singer, Cai Guorong defines *wenyi* as a form of expressing emotion and sentiment.<sup>7</sup> *Wenyi* film centers on the depiction of emotion and more important, it takes on a form of "excessive expression" (*yongli miaoxie*, similar to what Singer calls, "overwrought emotion").<sup>8</sup> However, *wenyi* is not limited to a narrowly defined romantic or sexual emotion but includes a wider range of human feelings like filial piety, parental love, compassion and mercy.<sup>9</sup> In the 1920s, writings on Chinese *wenyi* were primarily concerned with the embodiment of ethical and artistic integrity within



family melodrama.<sup>10</sup>

In a similar vein, Hong Kong *wenyi* director Lee Sun-fung describes *wenyi* as a cinema of humanity (renxing) rooted in the pathos of tragedy.<sup>11</sup> Granted, Lee Sun-fung's description resonates with Mao's *wenyi* talk in which Mao redefined humanity in literature and art as an instrument to advance proletarian revolution.<sup>12</sup> But Lee slightly revises Mao's take by seeing humanity, not entirely as a political category, but in emotional terms like compassion and mercy. To Lee, in order to achieve the highest state of humanity, cinema must utilize a style of emotion. This emotional style takes heed of editing, camera work and composition to maximize the effects of emotional catharsis.<sup>13</sup> Note there is a difference between the definitions of Cai and Lee. As a critic with extensive *wenyi* viewing experience, Cai's definition underlines melodramatic excess ("heavy-handed portrayals" or "overwrought emotion" in Singer's term) and a sentimentalism to highlight *wenyi*'s pathology. Lee, speaking from a practitioner's perspective, advocates a quasi-classicism that balances the means and the end. Symmetry, measurement and moderation are characteristics in his understanding of *wenyi* pictures. Cai's description of *wenyi* is more macro-sopic, focusing on the cross-fertilization of *wenyi* as an overlapping style which allows arts and literature to cross over between commercial cinema, dime novels, serialized fiction (like martial arts) and sentimental romances. Lee's vision leans toward 'pure' literature and arts in the fulfillment of elevating popular culture into serious artwork. Here we reach the bifocal dimensionality of *wenyi*: it is exploitable as either an entertainment commodity or a proclivity to "quality" art cinema.

The development of Taiwan cinema in the 1960s and 70s exemplified these two-pronged, forking configurations of *wenyi*. Since the early 1960s *wenyi* relied on two source materials when it was incorporated into the official policy of film production in Taiwan. One of the sources is Italian neo-realism and another is popular fiction; one foreign and classical; another indigenous and vernacular. These two sources were brought to the healthy realist pictures, a style put forward by the party-owned Central Motion Picture Corporation, the largest studio in Taiwan. Healthy realism is a didactic construction of

romantic melodrama and civic virtue, a sort of purified *wenyi*. It mixes the interior/private *mise-en-scene* specific to family melodrama with the civil, public space to accommodate government policy, enabling a smooth integration with state ideological apparatuses. Romance novels by the author named Qiong Yao and other woman writers provided vast resources for screen adaptation during the golden age of Taiwan film production. We may safely assume that the literary *wenyi* feature helped create a distinctive reputation for Taiwan cinema abroad.

At the beginning of the 1980s, *wenyi* ceased to bring high returns to the film establishment and was thus seen as a problem, even a crisis. Qiong Yao films could no longer sustain their popularity, even with new faces and new stories. Eventually vernacular *wenyi* was replaced by the serious *wenyi*, the respectable, committed *wenxue* (literature) of the Taiwan New Cinema. It was not until Ang Lee, an outsider to the New Cinema and an overseas Chinese director, who re-visited the classics, and re-activated the *wenyi* style in Taiwan film.<sup>14</sup>

Lee is not a naif when it comes to rediscovery of the old treasures. He is very judicious and cautious in his relation with the classics. But Lee is also a crafty trickster who uses the *wenyi* style to mediate his improvement of Chinese cinema.<sup>15</sup> The tension between *wenyi*'s sentimental inclination and its classical equilibrium, once again, helps Lee to revive an outmoded style for modern delights.

### Stylistic features

As the master style of Chinese and Taiwan film, what are the stylistic features of *wenyi*? *Wenyi*, as indicated earlier, is a pronged, forking configuration hovering between two sets of choices, between a style of restraint and a style of excess. As a style of restraint, *wenyi* is predisposed to long takes and long shots in composing a tranquil backdrop. Fluid camera movement is often accompanied by long takes to create an elongated spatiotemporal continuity capable of playing out rich, often sumptuous staging. *Mise-en-scene* in the *wenyi* of restraint requires discreet performances to suppress more assertive expressions of emotions.

The *wenyi* of excess, on the contrary, features brazen modes of expression in bringing emotion to light. This type of *wenyi* exploits optical variations such as zooms and pans, limiting cuts to medium shots/medium close-ups. As David Bordwell suggests, in lieu of establishing shots, such choices facilitate quick and easy transitions without sacrificing spatial orientation. Jim Udden in another place also points out that this serves as an economical solution to cost-saving on set building and film stock.<sup>16</sup> Contrary to the low-key acting method in the restrained *wenyi*, the *wenyi* of excess demands actors fully discharge their emotions to deliver a lucid, propulsive narration. In the following, I illustrate these two distinct styles from two films—the restrained *wenyi* *Spring in a Small Town* (1948, dir. Fei Mu) and the excessive *wenyi* *Cloud of Romance* (1977, dir. Chen Honglie)

Restraint <i>Spring in a Small Town (1948)</i>		Excess <i>Cloud of Romance (1977)</i>
Staging	<p>Literary treatment of locales: space as causal agent and fulfils metaphorical function: decrepit genteel mansion mirrored the psychological and emotional state of the characters</p> <p>Plan-séquence</p>	<p>Pragmatic treatment of spatial setups: customary locales with typical, generic functions: woods, beaches and neighborhoods for romantic encounters while living rooms, bedrooms and coffee shops for argument and negotiations</p> <p>Point of view peripheral decor used to spruce up ‘luxurious’ visual effects</p>

Cinematography	<p>Pans, tilts, tracking shots</p> <p>Deep focus</p> <p>Long and medium shots</p> <p>Low angle</p>	<p>Quick zooms</p> <p>Soft focus, rack focus</p> <p>Medium shots, medium close-ups and close-ups</p> <p>Straight level, average height</p>
Editing	<p>ASL: 46 seconds</p> <p>Dissolves</p> <p>Few shot reverse shots</p>	<p>ASL: 10 seconds</p> <p>Cuts, fades and occasional montage</p> <p>Shot reverse shots</p>
Sound Design	<p>Sync sound</p> <p>Voiceover</p> <p>Minimal use of non-diegetic music; diegetic singing of folk songs</p> <p>Lacking sound effects</p>	<p>Dubbing</p> <p>Dialogue</p> <p>non-diegetic pop songs used for narrative transitions and as “dialogue breaks”</p> <p>Thunderous sound effects</p>

Narrative	Subjective narration complemented with omniscient point of view  Occasional unmotivated temporal ellipsis	Objective and linear narration with clear, complete character motivation  Clear indication of time and space; Spatiotemporal continuity primarily carried by dialogue

*Spring in a Small Town* and *Cloud of Romance* both deal with triangular love relationships and extramarital affairs. *Spring in a Small Town* is considered the ranking Chinese classic for a variety of reasons and one specific factor has to do with the film's connection to the restrained *wenyi*.<sup>17</sup> The film features a controlled (contrast between interior and exterior staging), reserved style (minimalism in sound effects and the avoidance of close-ups) to advance inner emotional turbulence. (Figure 1-2) This is believed to be very 'Chinese' in the sense that emotion is supposed to be conveyed through understatement and subtle movements, not proclamations. Cinematic devices carry the restrained *wenyi*, underlined by delicate, horizontal pans and tracking shots. But the film also has a 'modern' touch. It tries to balance opposing views, between the sickly husband and his young wife. Voiceover narration of the female lead provides an unrestricted narration while low angle composition emphasizes the eye-line match of the bedridden husband. This, too, is considered a brilliant *wenyi* treatment, a trope borrowed from (western) literature and women's film such as *A Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948, dir. Max Ophuls).<sup>18</sup>



Figure 1 (*Spring in a Small Town*)



Figure 2 (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*)

*Cloud of Romance*, on the contrary, uses bombastic zooms, sound effects and intensified montage to stage a tempestuous love relationship (Figure 3-4). True to conventions of the excessive *wenyi*, *Cloud* favors overstatement over understatement. Decorative lamps, flowers, plants, trees and windows are placed either in the center or at the peripheries of the frame to garnish the romantic adventures of a sentimental couple. David Bordwell calls this a ‘flashy’ style in his recent studies on Hou Hsiao-hsien and Taiwan popular cinema of the 1970s.<sup>19</sup>

Dialogue and songs are keys to plot arrangement; quick zoom-ins and close-ups are frequently used to stage confrontations. Performances are bracketed in shot/shots to emphasize emotional hyperbole. In the excessive *wenyi*, directors do not need to rely on sophisticated setups and lengthy rehearsals to bring the story to light but to follow a set of conventions to coordinate lush melodies of songs, locales, stars and decorative art.



Figure 3 (*Cloud of Romance*)



Figure 4 (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*)

*CTHD* as a contemporary *wenyi*

Now, where does Ang Lee's *CTHD* stand between these two *wenyi*? With the martial arts covering up as the dominant form for the film, can Lee maneuver between these two distinct *wenyi* devices? Granted, *CTHD* is not a typical *wuxia*. Unlike the conventions of a *wuxia* picture, which presents its opening fight straight away (in the first five minutes or at the very beginning), *CTHD*'s first fight was delayed for more 10 minutes. The first 16 minutes of the film were composed of three sequences of deliberate visits, meetings (about retirement, of all things), arrivals and more talking and meetings.<sup>20</sup> The third sequence particularly features "drawing room conversation," directing our attention to a typical interior *wenyi* setup of acquaintances, exchanges and reunion. In order to match the somber opening Lee delivers a fine coordination of establishing, medium shots and medium close-ups. The ASL of the opening is 6.4 seconds. Compared to, say, the 3 seconds ASL of the opening of King Hu's *Dragon Inn*, the pace for this segment is really slow. And since the progression from master-medium-close-up is so clear, the pace moves like a *wenyi* more than a *wuxia* picture with their more percussive, jagged patterns.

Furthermore, *CTHD* is structured with six major and two minor martial arts fights, and an exciting but frivolous chase in the dessert. In between these fights and chases, we have many conversations and some love scenes, which are composed in ways similar to the opening sequences, with the love scenes featuring more close-ups, intending a clear emotional expression. For example, in the scene where Jen reunites with Lo, an American shot showing him entering her bedroom is immediately cut to close-ups of the couple embracing each other. This is where Ang Lee is clearly adopting compositional devices from the excessive *wenyi*. (Frame grabs: *CTHD* vs. *Cloud*) But in another romantic scene between Li Mubai and Yu Xiulian, another ill-fated couple, Lee switches to the principles of the restrained *wenyi* in order to show suppressed feelings of these two swordsmen. (Frame grabs: *CTHD* vs. *Spring*). Following established patterns of *wenyi*, Lee pictures one hot-tempered couple with the excess and another tame couple with restraint.



In addition to these two contraries, *wenyi* and *wuxia* complement each other in key moments of revelation. For instance, there is a moment of action choreography utilizing a tiny teacup during Yu's second visit to Jen's. Yu suspects Jen's connection with Jade Fox and in order to prove her speculation, Yu performs a trick on Jen. In an elegant drawing room, Yu sits down with Jen and Jen's mother at a round tea table after having a few polite exchanges. As they all sit down to chat, Yu reveals the identity of the man murdered by Jade Fox. Jen's mother responds with some mindless comment, meanwhile, Yu picks up her teacup, only to drop it surreptitiously. Jen instantly catches it from down under (still in the air), and flips it over back to the table, unnoticed by her mother. This is all done in two seconds and two very quick shots. But the tacit martial arts "bickering" between Yu and Jen underneath the table marks a brilliant, but silent, interlude to an otherwise dull tea break. This spectacular act is not just a trial, but a secret communication. Yu uses physical kung fu to disclose her thoughts to Jen, who in turn, answers it in the same language. *Wenyi* above and *wuxia* underneath prove to accommodate, yet intensify/synergize the mutual attraction and dependency of these two styles and these two *xianu*. (Figure 5-7)

### Renovating a classic<sup>21</sup>

Before *CTHD*, Ang Lee had already undertaken an experiment in revising the *wenyi* conventions. *Eat Drink Man Woman* is an example of a quiet exception taken to the *wenyi* classics. It appropriates a Mandarin classic, *Our Sister Hedy* (Tao Qin, MP and GI, 1957), from Hong Kong's colonial treasury, a story about four young women living with their father. Like *CTHD*, *EDMW* reworks the classic according to standards of international art cinema. Here there is a recuperation of *wenyi* classics beloved by a generation of Chinese viewers, in order to address a world market for foreign language cinema and specifically the burgeoning popularity of Chinese-language art film.



Figure 5 (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*)



Figure 6 (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*)



Figure 7 (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*)

Lee's *EDMW* changed four daughters to three and made the father a famous chef. And what becomes of father, a semi-retired chef and widower? Given the romantic conundrums of his daughters, this is an embarrassment. Parents, let alone a widower, can never discuss romance and sex with their children. For Lee, this "awkwardness" is the main emotion that binds all his stories of filial relations. This awkwardness is not just interpersonal, but historical. It comes from Chinese films' long engagement with the problem of filial piety in changing times, and this is a perennial problem in *wenyi*. Lee sees it as the departure point where he comes to terms with the classic and its twisted representation of filial relations, the emotional encounter of father and daughters. To Lee, this relationship is potentially romantic, though buried in silence and denial. Lee's remake therefore results in notable disparities in narrative and style.

For instance, in 1957 Hong Kong, father and daughters dwell in the same socioeconomic world, but Taiwan is layered with different, clashing temporalities.<sup>22</sup> While *Our Sister Hedy*'s colonial setting is glamorous, cosmopolitan, Lee uses a sleepy, subdued Taipei as a backdrop for a love story of a father and his three daughters. In *Our Sister Hedy*, the quarrels of the daughters are primarily with each other, not with the father, while in *EDMW*, father is the major problem.

Compared *EDMW*, *Our Sister Hedy*'s sibling differentiations are stark, putting up the girls for scrutiny on the same "block." The sisters' display betrays a patriarchal, and masculine, ideology; note the reverse angle close-up of father admiring his daughters. Perhaps Tao's film should have been called "My Daughter Hedy." At the outset, the presentation of the sisters seems like a kind of test, like a Biblical parable. The full frontal aspect is striking: four lovely daughters on display. "Four thousand gold," as the Chinese title says, suggests a beguiling treasury of feminine charm, but also four very willful, fractious, and not entirely dutiful offspring anxious to find individual, not just the family's happiness. Display and incipient discord, nubility and filial piety, charming daughters and scheming sisters who compete for attention, even stealing boyfriends . . . such dichotomies are clearly transmitted in this portrait of a modern, urban, and very refined Chinese family.

If *Hedy* qualifies as a female *wenyi*, Lee's *EDMW* could be called a male *wenyi* because it shifts the emotional burden onto father. Father takes center stage as the lead, not off stage as a spectator or (as in *Hedy*), referee. In contrast to Tao Qin's emphasis on sorority display, it is Chef Zhu who receives a grand, theatrical introduction, along with his culinary martial arts. Ang Lee's introduction of his three sisters is comparatively modest and economical, crosscutting each daughter in characteristic activity: the eldest, Jialian listening to hymns on a faulty Walkman; Jiaqian in a high-rise office checking spreadsheets; and Jianing working at a branch of Wendy's, an American burger chain.

### Conclusion

Capitalizing on a classic, Lee re-activates traditions that had been consigned to collectors, catalogues and film courses, delivering a new, improved commodity in accessible terms. What makes *EDMW* important is its ambition of reworking a model film and a cinematic tradition: the Golden Age of Mandarin films of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>23</sup> Lee revisits a classic *wenyi* and recuperates it within a contemporary Taipei setting. He adjusts the colonial modernity of *Hedy* and the ultra-feminine quality of the Cathay/MP & GI line, but goes even further, twisting and even deforming these elements to articulate his father complex. The "breezy," British colonialism is replaced with a cosmopolitan hodgepodge (Wendy's, *Toys R Us*, French language labs); modernity turns to neoclassical nostalgia, and Cathay's urban femininity becomes patriarchal anxiety and hysteria. In *CTHD*, the appropriation works in reverse; *wenyi* emotion governs the physical thrusts and parries of *wuxia* action. Lee's evocation of the *wenyi* traditions from the past, *despite never having worked in the Chinese film industry*, is a patent reconnection with an authoritative cinematic treasury. By reviving and renovating an old style for new audiences, Lee is able to talk back to the fathers of Chinese cinema and expose their denials and disguises. By "re-patriating" *wenyi*, Lee also lays claim to a historical and authorial authenticity. *Eat Drink Man Woman* and his later sensation *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* present Lee as more than a craftsman

working in Hollywood, but an auteur affiliating with a classical treasury and a cinematic patrimony.

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<sup>1</sup> We should also note that the Taiwanese-language puppet film *Legend of the Sacred Stone* (2000, dir. Chris Huang) is a *wuxia* picture, while romantic *Blue Gate Crossing* (2001, dir. Yi Zhiyan), a urban melodrama about (homo)sexual initiation belongs to the category of *wenyi*.

<sup>2</sup> *Kill Bill I and II, Hero, House of Flying Tiger* and especially *The Art of Action: Martial Arts in Motion Picture*, a documentary film narrated by Samuel Jackson (Columbia TriStar, 2002) highlights the martial arts craze in Hollywood.

<sup>3</sup> Negative or ambivalent reviews on the global success of *Crouching Tiger* can be seen in popular and academic publications across Hong Kong, mainland and Taiwan. To cite just a few examples: Sam Ho, “Cramped Endeavors of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*,” (Wo hu cang long tiao bu chu kuang kuang de xiake xing) *Hong Kong Economic Daily*, July 8, 2000, C01; Pang Hong, “Glory and Embarrassment of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*,” (Wo hu cang long de rongyao yu ganga) *Journal of Hunan Mass Media Vocational Technical College* 1, no. 2 (Dec. 2001): 39-42 and Lan Zuwei, “*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*,” *Liberty Times*, July 9, 2005, C 30.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, see Wu Chia-chi, “*Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* is not a Chinese Film,” *Spectator: USC Journal of Film and Television Criticism* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 67. See also Lee Ken-fang, “Far Away, So Close: Cultural Translation in Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4, no. 2 (2003): 281-295.

<sup>5</sup> Mao Tse-tung, “Yenan Forum on Literature and Art,” in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, 3 vols. (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Context* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 45 and Cai Guorong, *A Study on Modern Chinese Wenyi Pictures* (Jingdai zhongguo wenyi Dianying yanjiou) (Taipei: Film Library, 1987), 2. Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford

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University Press, 2001) also provides a succinct discussion on excess.

<sup>8</sup> Cai, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Cai, 4-7.

<sup>10</sup> Yu Dafu's 1927 article "Film and Literature and Art," (Dianying yu wenyi) *Yinxing* (Silver star), no. 13 (1927) and Zheng Zhengqiu, "Problems of Sourcing in Chinese Shadow Play," (Zhouguo yingxi qucai de wenti) both reprinted *Chinese Silent Film* (Zhongguo wusheng dianying) (Beijing: China Film Press, 1996), 447-450 and 290-293.

<sup>11</sup> See the series of writings by Lee in relation to wenyi picture such as "Major Issue for 1951: What Constitute a Good Wenyi Pian?" and "What Makes a Tragedy" and "The Art of *Decoupage*" in Wong Ain-ling and Sam Ho, eds., *The Cinema of Lee* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2004), 138-145.

<sup>12</sup> Mao, "Yenan Forum on Literature and Art," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Beijing: People's Press, 1966), 3: 827.

<sup>13</sup> These descriptions are not dissimilar to studies on melodrama in the U.S. But there is a distinction to be made here between a (Chinese) *wenyi* expression and a (Western) 'melodramatic imagination,' a la Peter Brooks in his *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976). Western studies on melodrama value historicizing of sexual, class and racial politics, see Christine Gledhill's edited volume *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987) and Jane Gain's "Fire and Desire: Race, Melodrama, and Oscar Micheaux," in Jacky Bratton, et al eds, *Melodrama: Stage Picture Screen* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 231-245. Chinese writing on *wenyi*, however, evades political interpretations. A psychoanalytic-Marxist exercise on Chinese *wenyi* would be quite unthinkable in Chinese criticism. Rather an incorrigible humanism is more often at work, as in the writing of Lee Sun-fung.

<sup>14</sup> Zhang Jingpei and Ang Lee, *My Ten-year Dream as a Filmmaker* (Zhinian yi jiao dianying meng) (Taipei: China Times, 2003), 389-394.

<sup>15</sup> See Emilie Yeh and Darrell Davis, "Camping Out with Tsai Ming-liang," *Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island* (New York: Columbia University, 2005), 217-248.

<sup>16</sup> David Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging* (California University Press, 2005). James Udden, "Taiwanese Popular Cinema and the Strange Apprenticeship of Hou Hsiao-hsien," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 127-134.

<sup>17</sup> The film was not canonized until early 1980s when Chinese government began to open their pre-revolutionary cinematic treasure to the world. Hong Kong critics found the film amazing for it embodies a *high* wenyi style rarely seen in most wenyi films made in the 1960s and 1970s.

<sup>18</sup> The awareness of a female subjectivity juxtaposed with a recessive masculine position surpassed any leftist's blunt treatment of class, national or gender struggles. This partly explains why it was *Spring in a Small Town*, not *Street Angel*, was chosen for a remake by Tian Zhuangzhuang, the renowned Fifth Generation director. Tian's remake is called *Springtime in a Small Town* (2002).

<sup>19</sup> David Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light*, 193.

<sup>20</sup> Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis, *Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island* (Columbia University Press, 2005), 216.

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed analysis on Ang Lee's remake of *Our Sister Hedy*, see Yeh and Davis, *Taiwan Film Directors*, 201-215.

<sup>22</sup> As noted, Jiaqian works for a national airline, while Jialian, the eldest, is a teacher at a top city high school. The youngest daughter, Jianing, works a McJob at Wendys, indicating both



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consumer globalization and international proletarianization of labor. Yet of all the sisters she is the most easygoing, freely taking the initiative in love and sex.

<sup>23</sup> In this, Lee mediates between ordinary remakes and true homages like those of Tsai Ming-liang, whose direct references to classic films and performers are foundational to his own idiosyncratic works.

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