

The changing roles of women in house of flying daggers

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Women's roles in film are changing significantly as a way to reflect society's changing attitude towards them. This is beautifully illustrated in the film *House of Flying Daggers*, where the director, Zhang Yimou, portrays the changing roles of women, in this Chinese Wuxi martial-arts action-adventure movie, with a strong female lead protagonist, Mei, who is constrained by her loyalty to the House of Flying Daggers, but comes to realize that what she truly needs is a way to be free and loyal to herself. This fits into the theme of the consequences of constrained women. Her character is in most combat scenes and her role drives the narrative forward. This illustrates how women's roles are becoming influential on film narratives. Women's active roles, and transition in the way that they were perceived in earlier films, is made evident in *House of Flying Daggers*. Rather than portraying women as inferiors to their male counterparts, Yimou, uses role reversal to prove our interpretations of the female and male roles false, as his main female protagonist, Mei, is the one who plays the most active part in the film. Mei regulates the forthcoming events, which enables audiences to identify with her and demonstrates the feminist nature of the film.

House of Flying Daggers is an epic big-budget, Chinese Wuxi martial-arts, action-adventure movie. In the beginning, the film appears to be about clashes between an aging, corrupt government, and a resistance alliance. But then, the film focuses on two characters, Mei (Zhang Ziyi), the believed daughter of the dead leader of the resistance group, now working in a brothel, and a police captain, Jin (Takeshi Kaneshiro), who are on opposite sides of the battle, and fall in love. They deceive each other about their true identities and motives, and the true identity and motives of the third

character, Jin's partner, Leo (Andy Lau), who is revealed to be Mei's lover, and a spy for the rebel group, and becomes dejected over Mei's escalating love for Jin. The film then becomes a story of their love triangle, concluding with the three characters fighting one another, and once realizing they cannot consummate their love, each chooses to die for the person they love.

House of Flying Daggers is a Chinese Wuxia martial-arts film, featuring the genre elements of spectacular fighting, breathtaking acrobatics, and exotic fantasy. The film combines these elements with a tragic triangular love story and a narrative where nothing is as it first appears. Yimou touches on the themes of love, betrayal, unhappiness, and consequences of constrained women in this film. He emphasizes visual imagery and metaphors to convey the messages of this film to the audience. Viewers can observe the emphasis on the shot composition and color symbolism in the last scene, where the forest suddenly gets covered in white snow, this unfolds the events to come and symbolizes the end and the new beginning. It's more of an art film than action movie as it contains breathtaking scenes such as the early brothel scene, the bamboo forest battle, and climaxes with a visual and emotional finale.

House of Flying Daggers is visually distinctive in many ways, as Yimou uses a number of cinematic techniques and mise-en-scene to make the film stand out. The three main powering forces of mise-en-scene in this film are color, lighting and setting (including decor and props), which take a more center stage than the narration. All three join to promote the character and narrative development. The settings in House of Flying Daggers, mostly in

China, establish a sense of atmospheric realism and gives a truthful representation of time period and location from the interiors of the brothel to the green lily pond. Extravagant Tang Dynasty costumes, authentic detail of interiors, props, musical instruments, panoramic landscapes, bamboo forests, and fields, give dramatic effect through visual imagery, color, composition, and provide the setting for the emotion and the imagination of the film. The decor and props used in House of Flying Daggers are lavishly decorative and visually appealing so to be accurate to the period. They take on a symbolic function and are used in the film for characterization and narrative development. For instance, there are an array of props and decor present in the brothel, including musical instruments and chimes to beaded curtains and painted wallpapers. This is a distinct contrast to the stark headquarters of the House of Flying Daggers, with only a wood table and chairs. The appeal of luxury and pleasure in the brothel is contrasted against the practical beliefs of the Flying Daggers. Every detail in the film, including the swords, the instruments played in the entertainment house, and even the torture devices, are meticulously chosen to replicate ancient times during the Tang Dynasty. Also, the props used show us the different characters abilities such as when Mei throws the two daggers at Leo from her horse, this shows us her strength, physical ability, and establishes Mei as a strong female lead protagonist in the film.

The director uses professional actors in House of Flying Daggers, and the actor's excellent performances make the film feel authentic. Zhang Ziyi, proves herself as Mei, the full action, strong female lead protagonist whose

identity shifts throughout the course of the film. When the audience is first introduced to Mei, she is portrayed as a blind member of the Flying Daggers who is forced to dance erotically for the male guests. However, as the film progresses, the audience witness the true strength and depth of Mei. During the cleverly choreographed fight scenes, Mei demonstrates her superiority over the male soldiers, and her drive to protect the Flying Daggers. This is an example of how Yimou flips the roles on viewer female/male expectations. Kaneshiro is dashing as the easygoing Jin and fills the role with proper physical presence. Lau, exhibits authentic emotion as Leo, a reliable, cautious undercover character who has endured much of the suffering. Highly stylized choreography of fight scenes is significant in House of Flying Daggers. The setting is integrated into the choreography of the fight scenes and often blends the natural with the dangerous, as in the scene where a hidden presence kills a band of soldiers using wooden daggers. This shows the landscape's danger despite its beauty. House of Flying Daggers displays detailed and beautiful costumes that are suitable for the time era. For example, the scene at the Peony Pavilion perfectly sets the mood of ancient China with interiors of elaborate richness; fashionable, colorful costumes and extravagant jewelry which depict high class courtesans of the Tang Dynasty. Another scene which demonstrates how the costumes contribute to the visual feeling of the film and define the different characters, is in the bamboo forest fight scene, Mei's clothing is a male outfit and her hair is hidden, going against typical clothes and look for a woman. This illustrates that Mei can do as much as a man can do and signifies the changing role of women.

Particular elements of mise-en-scene and cinematography influence the characterization and narrative development of House of Flying Daggers. Cinematographer Zhao Xiaoding uses details such as lighting, sound, and beautiful scenery to portray a minimal plot and strengthen the dramatic effect. The use of color and composition brings out the oriental mood of ancient China. The predominant elements of cinematography present in this film are angles and levels of framing, long and medium-long shots, and heavy use of pans and tilts in fight sequences. Intricately choreographed fight (Wuxia) scenes with sweeping, whirling, fast tracking movements to follow the daggers, slow-motion shots, centered close-ups, long shots, and panoramic shots for setting, are cinematography techniques utilized in House of Flying Daggers to establish the setting and contribute to the development of the characters and the story. This also showcases Mei's martial arts superiority over the foot soldiers/male counterparts and enables the audience to witness Mei's strength and martial arts ability. Xiaoding uses a variety of shots and angles in the film, such as high angle shots to show both the pattern of Mei's dance in the Peony Pavilion scene and the swaying bamboo during the bamboo forest fight scene. Close-ups with the character in the center are utilized to draw focus to the character during times of importance or high tension, such as when Mei first encounters Jin. In the echo game scene, whip pan shots are used to follow the beans as they hit the drums and long shots are used to show the background in scenes like the bamboo forest, and the flower field.

Color is utilized lavishly in this film, applying various color schemes in many scenes. The use of stunning vistas and color in the scenery; such as green forests, red and gold autumn leaves in the meadows, and white snow, give dramatic effect through visual imagery, color, and composition. Color repetition and color design are another cinematic device used in the film to indicate both characterization and story development. To emphasize the dramatic intensity of the final scene, the director uses nearly all white. Since he utilizes numerous colors in the rest of the film, applying only white in the last scene makes it striking and extraordinary. Lighting techniques present in the film include use of three-point lighting to highlight character and narrative development, colored filters to highlight the swords, and soft light on the brothel scene opposed to hard light on police headquarters to show the contrasting atmospheres. The use of top light in the jail scene, points out that Mei is imprisoned, conveying her defenselessness to the viewer, so her later physical combat scenes demonstrate her development both physically and emotionally.

The rhythm and pace in House of Flying Daggers is fast-paced due to the action sequences which require fast editing. As a result, there are no montage sequences and no long takes. In the opening scene, the titles of the film fade in with traditional mandarin text to move focus from the title to the fading in black text. After this, the pace increases with frequent edits. The director also uses slow-motion and lengthy fight scenes, which have a huge variety of shots edited together. For example, during the bamboo forest fight scene, whenever Mei is fighting, there is slow motion which shows her

importance as the dominant female lead character. Also, during this scene, the editor cuts between vertical and horizontal above ground swaying soldiers. In the echo game scene, there is parallel editing to show the silk hitting the drums, and the movement of beans towards drums with close up of faces. As the shots become faster with the drums, there is temporal editing and time ellipses to show the skipping of time.

Sound, both diegetic and non-diegetic, are another technical aspect used by Yimou to effectively create meaning, a sense of authenticity, and achieve the effect of tension and excitement for the viewer which adds to the visual experience. Examples include the sounds of water droplets, the crystalline curtains in the Peony Pavilion, and sounds of falling leaves in the bamboo forest. In action scenes, action is emphasized by the sounds of swords cutting the air, counterpoint of flying daggers, whoosh of bamboo spears, and clash of bamboo poles- all these elements are mostly used when Mei is in the epicenter of the fight showing her as the dominant, strong, female lead character. The music in House of Flying Daggers is also used to add tension, indicate something important is happening, symbolize the climax of a scene, elicit emotion in the audience, and intensify the dramatic structure of the film. For example, in the scene where the military army is coming through the bamboo forest, the non-diegetic music here is haunting, building up with unpredictable guitar strumming, which creates an ominous feeling and a sense of foreboding for the audience as the tension and expectancy grows. The non-diegetic music then ends to symbolize the climax of the scene.

The director's intention in House of Flying Daggers was to show how the lives of the three main characters changed and progressed throughout the film, specifically Mei whose identity shifts in the course of the film from a helpless, blind, courtesan who is forced to dance erotically for the pleasure of male guests, to a strong, fearless, skilled warrior who opposes her loyalty to the House of Flying Daggers to be free and loyal to herself. Mei's transformation in the film illustrates the changing roles of women. Rather than portraying women as compliant inferiors to their male counterparts, director Zhang Yimou uses role reversal to prove these interpretations of the female and male roles false, by giving his lead female protagonist, Mei, the most active, strong part in the film, enabling audiences to identify with her and demonstrating the feminist nature of the film.