

# Hero and house of flying daggers



The movies to be analyzed for this paper, Hero and House of Flying Daggers, were made in the wuxia genre. In wuxia movies, fight scenes are generally the most important aspect of the movie, coupled with cinematography (Wikipedia, “ House of Flying Daggers”, 2006). The word “ wuxia” comes from two characters: wu and xia.

“ Wu” is used to describe things having to do with martial arts, war, or the military. The second character, “ xia” refers to a chivalrous man or woman, such as a knight or a warrior, and is a synonym for chivalry. The wuxia films thus work around elements of martial arts, war, heroism, and chivalry (Yin, 2001, para. ).

Wuxia films grew from Chinese literary traditions which include fantasy films with flying swordsmen, and the more conventional martial arts kung-fu films. Modern wuxia movies have a strong fantasy components, with much use of special effects to simulate palm power and flying. The literature from which wuxia films evolved has its roots in prose romances from the Tang Dynasty which contained many of the elements found in modern wuxia genre (such as magic, supernatural events, vengeance) and from huaben tales of Song Dynasty storytellers. Subjects for these huaben tales included tale of strange events and martial heroism, as well as detective stories (Yin, 2001, pars. 26-27). In other words, wuxia literally means “ martial arts chivalry” or “ martial arts heroes”.

The translation alone provides for an overview on what to expect from wuxia films. The wuxia genre is a distinct and unique genre in Chinese literature, television, and cinema. Wuxia figures take iconic status in Chinese popular

culture (Wikipedia, “ Wuxia”, 2006). Wuxia movies are deeply rooted in the social and cultural milieu of ancient China, thus movies such as Hero and House of Flying Daggers already provide for a glimpse on Chinese cultural and political history. The genre was first introduced to Hollywood through the movie Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon in 2000, directed by Ang Lee.

He was followed by Zhang Yimou who directed Hero in 2003, and House of Flying Daggers in 2004, with both movies released to the international market. The awesome cinematography, fight scenes, and costumes entertained American viewers, but what should be noted is that even the costumes and weapons used for these movies were depicted from ancient Chinese traditions. Storylines in wuxia films are fictitious and border on being soap-opera plots. It is entertainment at its best, with romance, martial arts, war, and chivalry, all sewn together. However, the important thing about analyzing movies made in the wuxia genre is that these are still strong indications of ancient Chinese culture.

The storylines may border on fantasy films, but the costumes, the fight scenes, the decorations, and all the other nuances in the films are reflections of Chinese history and values. The movies Hero and House of Flying Daggers also reflect the growing unrest of the people during the respective dynasties and under the particular government institutions the heroes in the movie rebelled against. House of Flying Daggers The film House of Flying Daggers, directed by Zhang Yimou, was critically acclaimed both in China and in the U. S. for its cinematography and strong depictions of Chinese culture.

It was released on July 16, 2004 in China and on December 3, 2004 in the U. S and has been described as an action/romance movie made in the wuxia genre, similar to movies like Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon and Hero. The film is set in 895 AD during the decline of the Tang Dynasty. Before its decline, the Tang Dynasty was one of the most enlightened empires in Chinese history at its height. Unfortunately, during its decline, the nation was ruled by an incompetent emperor who could do little to control his increasingly bureaucratic and corrupt government. Many rebel armies have spread throughout the country protesting against their rulers, and the largest and most prestigious of these rebel groups is an underground alliance called the “ House of Flying Daggers” which operates by stealing from the rich and giving to the poor.

The House of Flying Daggers is based in Feng Tian County, and enjoys the support, admiration, and cooperation of the local people. The rebel army has had a long history of mutual hatred for the local deputies. The House continued to thrive even after local deputies killed the rebel leader, and when a new and mysterious leader took his place, the House grew even more powerful. Two of Feng Tian County’s local captains, Leo (Andy Kau Tak Wah) and Jin (Takeshi Kaneshiro), were ordered to capture this new leader within ten days, so they come up with a plan.

Captain Leo suspects that Mei (Zhang Ziyi), the beautiful new dancer at the local Peony Pavilion, is secretly the daughter of the old leader of the House. Mei is arrested and brought in for questioning, but she refuses to divulge information on the House of Flying Daggers. Captains Leo and Jin hatch another plan – Jin is to pretend to be a lone warrior called Wind and rescue

Mei from prison, thereby earning her trust and escorting her to the secret headquarters of the House. The plan is successful, but unexpectedly, during their long journey to the House's secret lair, Jin and Mei start to fall for each other.

It turns out however that Captain Leo is actually working for the House of Flying Daggers as an undercover agent assigned to destroy government forces. He becomes upset when he finds out that Mei, whom he has long harboured feelings for, seems to be falling for Captain Jin. The three of them end up in battle (Sony Pictures Classics, 2006; Wikipedia, "House of Flying Daggers", 2006). The term "House of Flying Daggers" literally means "ambush from ten sides", and figuratively means "ambush from all sides". The title is also the name of a very famous traditional Chinese music piece for the pipa which describes the battle between Xiang Yu (a Chu general) and the Han forces prior to the formation of the Han Dynasty in China.

In fact, a very short version of the music is played on guitar in the movie's soundtrack. Costumes, props and decorations used for the movie were also taken almost completely from Chinese paintings during the Tang Dynasty (Wikipedia, "House of Flying Daggers, 2006). Thus, the music and production of the movie reflect ancient Chinese culture. Political Issue in House of Flying Daggers The political issue in House of Flying Daggers is the unrest of the people who have started rebelling against their incompetent government. Warriors who fight for the House of Flying Daggers underground movement are driven by their strong sense of nationalistic pride and loyalty.

They feel like their country deserves better than their current set of rulers. There is a Robin Hood complex at work wherein the House warriors steal from the rich and give to the poor. This indicates that the House warriors feel like they have to take care of the people since their government is failing in this aspect. Again, this Robin Hood complex signifies nationalistic pride and loyalty. It is a bit ironic though, since the warriors in House of Flying Daggers espouse “knight”-like qualities such as chivalry, honor and heroism, but they do still steal from the rich, even if they give away their bounty to the poor.

The political message thus is empowerment of the people by resorting to rebellion to free themselves from oppressive and ineffective rulers. Rebellion has been defined as “open, armed and organized resistance to a constituted government” and as “an act or a show of defiance toward an authority or established convention” (The Free Dictionary, “Rebellion”, 2006). In House of Flying Daggers, the rebellion is clearly embodied by the House of Flying Daggers underground movement. The defiance is against the constituted government of Emperor Xuanzong who ruled the declining Tang Dynasty. The rebellion environment shown in the movie is also a true reflection of what was occurring in the Tang Dynasty during its decline. Prior to its decline, the Tang Dynasty was marked by a strong and benevolent rule, successful diplomatic relationships, vast economic expansion, and strong cultural identity.

Tang China emerged as one of the greatest empires in the medieval world (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006, para. 1). Unfortunately, during the eighth century, during the later part of Emperor Xuanzong’s reign, the Tang empire began to decline. Emperor Xuanzong was correctly depicted in the <https://assignbuster.com/hero-and-house-of-flying-daggers/>

movie House of Flying Daggers, but the House of Flying Daggers rebel army is fictional. The movie showed how Emperor Xuanzong was incompetent, and this is realistic since Emperor Xuanzong, in real life, became very extravagant during the latter part of his reign, and was obsessed with his concubine to the point of neglecting state affairs. The ministers he appointed were fraudulent and treacherous, and political corruption threatened his government, as correctly portrayed in the movie House of Flying Daggers.

As political stability began to crumble, rebellion began to spread throughout the country, particularly the rebellion of Jie Du Shi (a prominent official) and An Lushan. These uprisings led to civil war in China, with a view of ending the corrupt rule of Yang Guozhong, one of the ministers whom Emperor Xuanzong appointed. A peasant uprising which lasted for a ten years also fought against unequal land allocation and heavy taxes (TravelChinaGuide.com, “ Reasons for decline”, 2006, pars. 1-23). These rebellions, as shown in House of Flying Daggers, plagued China during the Tang Dynasty, and fear of the government and underground movements were a way of life, as shown in the film.

However, it should be pointed out that House of Flying Daggers did not have a strong underlying message contained in its storyline. The backdrop and the setting is the Tang Dynasty during its decline, but there was no overt message of nationalistic pride since much of the story focused on the romance (or rather, love triangle) between Captains Leo and Jin, and Mei. The unrest during the latter part of the Tang Dynasty merely provided for the setting, but the political issues during that period were not really the emphasis of the movie. This film has actually been criticized for lacking a

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strong storyline or message, and for its poor dialogue. The director was likewise criticized for simply trying to appeal to Western audiences with extravagant sets and cinematography, as well as his heavily choreographed fight scenes and extensive use of computer-generated imagery (Wikipedia, “House of Flying Daggers, 2006). Nevertheless, by the mere fact that it was made in the wuxia genre, the House of Flying Daggers, still contributes to providing for images of ancient Chinese traditions.

Despite criticisms as to the lack of a strong political message in House of Flying Daggers, its simple message of encouraging rebellion to free one’s self from an oppressive and ineffective regime cannot be denied. During the latter part of the Tang Dynasty, its government had already fallen into political turmoil. Rebellions and uprisings culminated to the removal of the Tang emperor and the proclamation of Commander Zhu Wen as the emperor of the Liang Dynasty which followed the Tang Dynasty. The Liang Dynasty eventually ushered in the period of the Five Dynasties of China (ChinaCulture. org, 2003, para.

4). Thus, although in this movie we see how rebellion can be a catalyst for change. It allows people to fight for what they believe in, and it serves as a vehicle for people to voice out their dissatisfaction with their government. The portrayal of the House of Flying Dagger warriors here as heroes indicate that the political message is that rebellion when used properly can steer a nation towards positive change.

In the actual history of China, the fall of the Tang Dynasty due to these rebellious uprisings ended the long period of political turmoil which marked



the latter part of the dynasty. As such, the rebellion served as a medium in which to usher in a new and improved regime. Hero The movie Hero was also directed by Zhang Yimou, and is also a film of the wuxia genre involving Chinese martial arts, drama and adventure. It was released in China on October 24, 2002, but was only finally released in U. S. theatres two years after in August 27, 2004, after intervention by Quentin Tarantino (Wikipedia, “ Hero”, 2006).

The movie is based on events which occurred in China during the 3rd century BC when from 475-221 BC, the country was divided into seven major kingdoms: Qin, Zhao, Han Wei, Yan, Chu and Qi. This period in China’s history was called “ The Warring States Period” due to the constant power struggle among the seven kingdoms. The land was plagued with countless wars and battles, and people had to endure much hardship and suffering. The King of Qin, called Qinshishuang, was the most ruthless and ambitious of all seven kings.

He has been historically chronicled as a brutal tyrant who was determined to conquer and control all of the seven kingdoms. Throughout China’s history, as accurately depicted in the movie, assassins from all over China plotted to kill Qinshishuang (Hero Movie Homepage, 2004, para. 1). In Hero, the Qin King has long been the target of three legendary assassins – Flying Snow (Maggie Cheung), Broken Sword (Tony Leung Chiu Wai), and Long Sky (Donnie Yen), who have sworn to kill the Qin King (Chen Daominh). Zhang Ziyi plays (Moon), Broken Sword’s servant who later tries to avenge Broken Sword’s death but ends up getting killed by the Nameless Hero (Jet Li) as

well. Nameless is the county sheriff who comes to the palace of the Qin King bearing the legendary weapons of the slain assassins.

The King had promised power, wealth and a private audience with the King himself to anyone who could kill these three assassins, and Nameless came to the royal capital claiming he had defeated them. The movie shows Nameless sitting ten paces from the Qin King, and flashbacks occur as Nameless narrates to the Qin King of how Nameless defeated the three assassins (Tribute. ca, 2004, pars. 1-3; Wikipedia, “ Hero”, 2006).

There are four versions to the story that Nameless weaves, the lie, the supposition, the reality, and the finality, and each version differs depending on the mind of the teller (Durham, 2006, para. ). The same story keeps getting retold in different versions, and the characters themselves change with each version. For instance, in the beginning Broken Sword was shown as a brawler, and latter on in the film he turns out to be a forward-thinking and insightful warrior. There is a surprising twist in the end as Nameless attempts to but refrains from killing the Qin King himself, so there is a realization that perhaps the three assassins offered up their lives in self-sacrifice just so the Nameless Hero could come within ten paces from the King of Qin. Political Issues in Hero The political issue in Hero is the fight for a unification of the nation.

A related political issue about the movie is that it espouses worship of China’s autocratic empire (Chen, 2005, para. 12). In the movie, it is shown how the seven kingdoms of ancient China go to war with each other so that one may emerge as supreme and conquer the rest. The King of Qin in the

movie has a vision of a unified China, not one subdivided into seven states, and to do so he acknowledges that he must conquer the six other kingdoms.

The film takes its cue from the real-life history of China. In the text at the end of the movie, the Qin King is identified as Emperor Qin Shi Huang (born Ying Zheng), who in 221 BC did in fact succeed in uniting China under his command. He became the first emperor as well and reigned from 221-210 BC. In addition to that, he unified smaller structures into the Great Wall of China, standardized a system of weights and measures, and invented a singular writing system that is still used today (Wikipedia, “ Hero”, 2006).

The film depicts this bit of history well through the character of the Qin King who, in the movie, justifies his actions as necessary for the unification of China. In the film, the Qin King points out, as by way of example, how the Chinese written language has been convoluted because of the separation of the seven kingdoms. In the movie, the Qin King is portrayed in a sympathetic light and this has been criticized by Confucian scholars who insist that Qin Shi Huang was actually a brutal tyrant (Wikipedia, “ Hero”, 2006). Related literature and historical accounts indicate that in real life, Emperor Qin Shi Huang was actually very aggressive and ambitious. Like his movie version, the historical Emperor Qin Shi Huang wanted to unify and subjugate the six other states of Han, Zhao, Wei, Chu, Yan and Qi under the powerful political, economic, and military strength of the Qin State, which he ruled supreme.

He built the first feudal and centralized empire in Chinese history in 221 BC, called the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC). When he became the first emperor of a united China, Ying Zheng proclaimed himself as “ Qin Shi Huang” which

means “ first emperor” of China, a title that lasted two thousand years (TravelChinaGuide. com, “ Emperor Qin”, 2006, pars. 2-3; Chao, 2006, para. 1). In the film Hero, it was not shown how the Qin King actually succeeded in unifying China.

Rather, what was shown was how the people rebelled against such unification and strived to maintain the independence of each kingdom. The assassins thus were seen as heroes, especially at the start of the movie. But as the movie progresses we see how the assassins themselves feel torn between their patriotic responsibility and the realization that perhaps there is some merit to Qin King’s ambition and plan. Perhaps a unified China is not only necessary but also inevitable for the future. Even the Nameless Hero himself seems to have realized this when he refrained from assassinating the Qin King even if he had the chance (Hu, 2003, para. 3).

Thus, even the viewer feels torn as we watch the political conflict unfold. On the one hand, there is sympathy for the people who fight to maintain the independence of each state. These warriors do it out of patriotism and love of their own respective kingdoms. On the other hand, there is also merit to the ambition of the Qin King in unifying all seven kingdoms.

There is strength in numbers after all, and as a unified nation, China would have more impact in a bigger international community. This conflict was very clearly shown in the movie, unlike in House of Flying Daggers where the message is not very clear. The Qin King on different occasions during the movie Hero appears to be bloodthirsty and overly ambitious, but there are scenes, especially in the end, when his vision of a unified China seems to be

forward-thinking and progressive. In real life, Qin King, as mentioned, unified China, but he was also known to be ruthless – he imposed harsh laws and cruel punishment to those who disobeyed his orders (Bos, “ Chapter 2”, 2005).

So, similar to his film version, the actual Emperor Qin Shi Huang in real life was forward-thinking, yes, but also ruthless. Thus, even though the actual Qin King’s reign was aggressive and often times brutal, that period of history is looked upon more objectively by modern scholars who recognize the positive effects of Qin Shi Huang’s unification plan, particularly with regard to language, weights and measures, currency, and for the construction of a national transport network. His character in the movie Hero showed a revisionist portrayal of the historical figure (Wikipedia, “ Hero”, 2006). It is this “ revisionist portrayal” that causes much controversy for the movie particularly as to the political message it seems to be conveying. The movie blatantly advocates the call for a unified China. The political issue portrayed is that there is an implied conversion to Beijing authoritarianism (Chen, 2005, para.

4). The film has been criticized outside of China for alleged pro-totalitarian and pro-Chinese reunification subtexts. Critics argued that the ulterior message behind the movie is the triumph of security and stability over liberty and human rights. The pervading theme of “ tian xia” in the movie alone sparked much controversy. Literally, “ tian xia” means “ all under heaven” which comes from a Chinese proverb: “ To suffer yourself when all under heaven suffer, to enjoy only when all under heaven enjoy. ” This has been likened to the American motto of “ one nation under God”, thus the

distributors of the movie, Miramax, chose to translate the Chinese saying as “our land”.

According to critics, the use of this translation (“our land”) indicates justification of the incorporation of Tibet and Xinjian within the People’s Republic of China, and to promote the reunification of Taiwan with China (Wikipedia, “Hero”, 2006). Yet it should be noted that during this particular time in their history, the Chinese people really did have the opinion that they were the very center of the universe. The Chinese term for China in fact is “Zhongguo” which literally means “middle-country” or “central kingdom.” It is with this concept in mind wherein we see Broken Sword, one of the assassins, begging Nameless to allow the Qin King to succeed for the benefit of the entire nation (“all under heaven”) (Wikipedia, “Hero”, 2006). The Qin King in Hero stated in the movie that the imposition of cultural and ideological uniformity was one of the goals behind his intention to unify all the scripts of the warring states, yet after watching the movie, one wonders who the real hero is.

Could it be the Qin King himself for his vision, or Nameless for refraining from assassinating the Qin King, or the three assassins who gave up their lives for their country? (Eng, 2004, para. 8). That these political issues surrounding the film should arise can also be founded on the circumstances in which the film was released. First of all, the Chinese government funded several millions of dollars for the project. This move sparked controversy as to a Chinese propaganda to promote totalitarianism which is deemed “not only justified but preferable, for what we lose in freedom, we gain in security” (Chen, 2005, para. 12).

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Second, the film premiered at Beijing's Great Hall of the People, the site of the newly ascending Chinese premier's Hu Jaobing election. The director, Zhang insists that the movie's political message is not an ode to authoritarianism but a message of peace (Jakes, 2002, para. 11). Submitting to the unification of China is recognizing that domination is the highest form of peace; therefore the movie shows obvious reluctance as to the ultimate efficacy of fighting (Chen, 2005, para. 4). Yet this submission to domination may also be viewed as a pro-dictatorship propaganda.

In sum, in Hero, through the wuxia genre, there is exposure to Chinese cultural and political history. The struggle of the seven warring states and the ambition of Emperor Qin Shi Huang were portrayed accurately. But we also see the mixed emotions of the people towards this ambition of the Qin King in the movie – how some just wanted to hold on tightly to their independence as separate kingdoms or states, while others could see the inevitability and future need for a unified China. And as the characters come to grip with this, we see how they weigh their priorities and values, and sacrifice their lives for love of their nation.

It is patriotic responsibility and nationalistic loyalty which drives the three assassins and Nameless in the movie. Yet the Qin King cannot be said to be totally lacking of patriotic responsibility either, for his vision of unifying the states was to allow a stronger nation to emerge. Thus, the heroic ideals or the “ Hero” alluded to in the title can be any of the main characters, depending on what the viewer believes in and feels strongly about. The political issue in Hero emphasizes the need for submission to a higher form of authority and control.

There is emphasis on the need for unification and domination as the highest form of peace within the country. This may be regarded by others as authoritarianism or dictatorship, as separate kingdoms come under the rule of one strong ruler. There are obvious pros and cons in this form of unification espoused in the movie. It may be forward-thinking on the one hand as it serves to standardize political and social systems within one big nation, but on the other hand, it deprives the people of their regional identity and freedom.