



# Women in Chinese Martial Arts Films of the New Millennium: Narrative Analyses and Gender Politics

By Ya-chen Chen

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*Women and Gender in Chinese Martial Arts Films of the New Millennium*, by Ya-chen Chen, is an excavation of underexposed gender issues focusing mainly on contradictory and troubled feminism in the film narratives. In the cinematic world of martial arts films, one can easily find representations of women of Ancient China released from the constraints of patriarchal social order to revel in a dreamlike space of their own. They can develop themselves, protect themselves, and even defeat or conquer men. This world not only frees women from the convention of foot-binding, but it also "unbinds" them in terms of education, critical thinking, talent, ambition, opportunities to socialize with different men, and the freedom or right to both choose their spouse and decide their own fate. Chen calls this phenomenon "Chinese cinematic martial arts feminism."

The liberation is never sustaining or complete, however; Chen reveals the presence of a glass ceiling marking the maximal exercise of feminism and women's rights which the patriarchal order is willing to accept. As such, these films are not to be seen as celebrations of feminist liberation, but as enunciations of the patriarchal authority that suffuses "Chinese cinematic martial arts feminism." The film narratives under examination include *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (directed by Ang Lee); *Hero* (Zhang Yimou); *House of the Flying Daggers* (Zhang Yimou); *Seven Swords* (Tsui Hark); *The Promise* (Chen Kaige); *The Banquet* (Feng Xiaogang); and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (Zhang Yimou). Chen also touches upon the plots of two of the earliest award-winning Chinese martial arts films, *A Touch of Zen* and *Legend of the Mountain*, both directed by King Hu.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

Ya-Chen Chen's *Women in Chinese Martial Arts Films of the New Millennium* is a full-length, intensive and passionate interrogation of the feminist possibilities of Chinese martial arts cinema. Film by film, Chen shows both the achievements of their contemporaries and how those achievements are at the pleasure of the men who control the industry. The result is a major intervention in the ongoing debate. (Chris Berry, Goldsmiths, University of London)

A refreshing look at an age-old genre that injects an energetic feminist perspective into the jaded analysis of a Chinese cinematic legacy. (Ying Zhu, author of *Television in Post-Reform China: Serial Dramas, Confucian Leadership and Global Television Market*)

#### About the Author

**Ya-chen Chen** is an assistant professor of foreign languages and literature, and director of the Chinese Language Program at Clark University.

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