
FACING THE WAR: EXPLORING THE DILEMMAS OF HEROES IN CHINESE MOVIES

面对战争：探索中国电影英雄的困境

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For over 30 years I have had different opportunities to involve people from different walks of life in Asia and in Europe in workshops on Confucian ethics with a focus on the “hero,” defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “the main character or the main male character in a book or film, who is usually good”. This type of a hero thus sticks to his or her values of respect, loyalty, compassion, and wisdom in the middle of adversities and challenges. Within the Chinese tradition of “hero” however we may not always be assured of a “Hollywood Happy Ending” as heroes do face the tragedy of war and deadly conflicts; nevertheless, the key highlight for a more systematic narrative analysis of the different dramas of heroes is to recognise in their struggles with a host of obstacles and moral dilemmas, while always facing death and destruction, a unique opportunity to reconnect to one’s own better self.

Rather than consuming new movies simply as entertainment, this approach consists in highlighting some key lines of a movie’s basic narrative while discovering the ethical dilemmas the different heroes are struggling with. It is based on the conceptual framework outlined in a research

project by Mark Bandsuch on “Narrative Analysis of Heroic Characters in Film as a Promising Method for Moral Education in Contemporary China” (Bandsuch, 2019). A decisive moment happens when viewers start recognizing their own struggles and dramas facing various forms of death and destruction. In fact, visual images may in a very special way provide profound insights into the true nature, for example, of

the Communist Party as model for everyone. The pair then also participates in the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War and become heroes for their acts of courage. In a dramatic battle scene when Feng Liu is ambushed along with his troops, he tries to drag a companion out of the mud. During this operation he succeeds in saving the comrade’s life, but his right arm is so badly wounded that he needs to have it amputated.

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martial arts which far from glorifying violence and brutal force do reveal the processes by which Confucian values such as honesty, integrity, modesty, determination, loyalty, and truthfulness are shaped.

Feng Xiaogang – *Youth* (2017): Going beyond the “Youth Myth”:

Discovering true enthusiasm and self-sacrifice

“*Youth*” (Chinese: 芳华; pinyin: *Fānghuá*) is a 2017 Chinese film, written by Geling Yan and directed by Feng Xiaogang, whom I consider as one of the most outstanding living directors in China. The film is focused on the enthusiasm provoked in the lived experiences of a group of adolescents performing in a People’s Liberation Army art troupe during the Cultural Revolution. They felt deeply inspired and uplifted by the Red Dream of their Chairman and Supreme Leader Mao Zedong. The film shares the story of two key characters, Feng Liu and Xiaoping He. Xiaoping He, a naïve and innocent recruit, and Feng Liu a morally impeccable character, whose comrades praise for being a real-life Lei Feng, the exemplary good soldier promoted by

A typical feature throughout the film relates to the experience of being bullied and being mobbed. In the case of Xiaoping He, who becomes the target of her roommates’ bullying because of her background from the countryside, she is taunted for smelling bad since she is not used to taking frequent showers. These acts are often spearheaded by Hao Shuwen, the daughter of the regional commander. Similar to other ground-breaking movies of Feng Xiaogang, such as “I am not Madame Bovary” (“我不是潘金莲”), the movie contrasts fake ideals for living with the reality of genuine altruism and love often embodied by adherents of Buddhism.

After the war, in Reform-era China, Feng Liu and Xiaoping He are honourably discharged from the Army but struggle to survive financially within an environment which no longer recognises their heroic efforts. The film often also contrasts fake attitudes and buildings – say a fake White House – with genuine characters, like a warm-hearted Buddhist monk, in the midst of a society which seems to crave materialistic wealth and social promotion. However, even without any recognition the exemplary figures of Feng Liu and Xiaoping He continue to display their idealistic

care for others. The film also portrays scenes of deep clashes with authorities who seem to lack any appreciation for them.

The amazing span of 50 years covered by the movie starts with the earthly God Mao Zedong who unleashed the Revolution dedicated to a “new” culture, which would radically break with the “old” ideas, such as religions and a decadent Confucian philosophy that was dismissed as bourgeois. Young people like the members of the military art troupe considered themselves the cutting edge of this supposed revolution. Watching it unfold over half a century enables viewers to experience the leap of a whole country into an “open door policy” under Deng Xiaoping with the rallying cry that getting rich is glorious. While millions had been inspired by the “words of wisdom” contained in Chairman Mao’s *Little Red Book*, it was to give way to another national hero namely Deng who would radically question the rationale of the Cultural Revolution. In fact, Deng emerged as paramount leader out of the ashes of the Cultural Revolution and the chaos provoked by the Gang of Four.

While it is certainly moving to see throughout these changes that Feng Liu and Xiaoping He remain remarkably consistent in their altruistic care for others, the unfolding of the historic background leaves no doubt how overarching the thirst for materialistic gain and prestige seems to trample down their original values of caring for the vulnerable and disadvantaged. Not only does the behaviour of officials in dealing with a genuine hero, who lost his arm in a courageous attempt to save a fellow soldier from being killed in an ambush, seem ruthless; even more ruthless seems the never-ending appetite for material gain expressed in buying cars and houses, or the ambition to get promoted at the expense of others. While the supposed great heroes and warlords of history

like Deng and Mao seem to be gradually fading away, the witness of ordinary citizens like Xiaoping He and Feng Liu witness to the fact that the Confucian values of honesty, integrity, loyalty and truthfulness that the Cultural Revolution attempted to eradicate did survive in the conscience and actions of genuine, if unspectacular, heroes.

Wong Kar-Wai – *The Grandmaster* (2013):
What the Grandmaster values more than money
and career

“*The Grandmaster*” (Chinese:一代宗师, pinyin: “*Yidai Zongshi*”) is a 2013 Hong Kong-Chinese martial arts film telling the life story of the Wing Chun grandmaster Ip Man. The film was directed and written by Wong Kar-Wai. The film begins during the Republican period of the 1930s in Foshan and moves on to his flight to Hong Kong after the Second Sino-Japanese War, carrying the story all the way to his death. The movie begins with Ip Man dressed in a cassock like a priest wearing a geeky hat, reflecting on martial arts fighting, in an iconic scene done in the rain in slow motion with about a dozen combatants. Ip Man concentrating fully during the whole fight stays focused and wins. His memories take him back to his life experiences starting with his early training in martial arts by his master Chan Wah-shun, and marriage to his wife Cheung Wing-sing.

Ip Man’s peaceful existence is threatened by the arrival of Gong Yutian, the Wudang Boxing martial arts grandmaster from northern China. After his retirement Gong had appointed Ma San as his heir in the North and suggested that the South should have its own paramount Master. Various masters attempt to challenge Gong, but they are all barred by Ma San. As the Southern masters are deliberating on a representative, Gong Yutian’s daughter Gong Er arrives and she

tries to convince her father not to continue the fight. Meanwhile, the Southern masters decide on Ip Man to represent them, and Ip proceeds to be tested by three Southern masters before he challenges Gong Yutian.

vows to never teach, marry, or have children, and devotes her entire life to seeking vengeance.

Meanwhile Ip Man moves to Hong Kong in the hope of starting a career as a martial arts teacher but ends up facing all sorts of challenges

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The salient point for us is that the apparent fight between Ip and Gong reveals an exchange of philosophical ideas. When Gong Yutian declares Ip the winner and returns to northern China, his daughter Gong Er sets out to regain her family’s honour by challenging Ip Man. Since martial arts are about precision and concentration, not violence, they agree to a rule that whoever breaks a piece of furniture during the fight will be the loser. An intense fight breaks out between Ip Man and Gong Er, which concludes with victory for Gong because Ip broke a step at the very end. Ip and Gong nevertheless part on friendly terms, with Ip saying he wants a rematch. Actually, Ip broke the step to save Gong Er. They keep in touch by letters. During the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 Ip Man and his family loses his two daughters due to starvation. In the meantime, in northern China, Ma San becomes a traitor and as a “Father murderer” kills Gong Yutian. When Gong Er returns, she is appalled by the apparently cowardly behaviour of her elders in forsaking her father, but they tell her that her father’s final wish was for her to be happy and not to seek vengeance. Gong Er refuses to accept that, and instead, she

because there are numerous other martial arts masters in Hong Kong. Despite of his growing reputation it is useful to note that he does not care about monetary success. He meets Gong Er again on Chinese New Year’s Eve 1950 and asks her for a contest one more time while implying that she should start rebuilding her martial arts school. However, Gong Er refuses, stating that many martial arts schools have disappeared. A flashback to ten years earlier shows a confrontation between Gong Er and Ma San at a train station on Chinese New Year’s Eve 1940, in which Gong defeats Ma after a brutal and intense fight. Gong herself is shown to have been seriously injured in the fight, thus prompting her desire to abandon martial arts. The film then moves on to 1952, when Ip Man and Gong Er meet each other for the last time. Gong confesses to Ip that she has had feelings of love for him right from the beginning. She dies shortly after. Ip explains, in a voice over, that in the fight with Ma San, Gong was injured so badly she turned to opium to ease the pain and this was her downfall. The final scenes offer a visual montage as Ip Man’s school flourishes, including a statement that Ip made Wing Chun popular

worldwide, and that his most famous student was Bruce Lee. Off screen, it is stated that Ip Man died in 1972.

The film takes the insightful viewer beyond the stereotypes of martial arts which tend to reduce the story to an increasingly boring sequence of fights. Far from being a spectacle of arbitrary winners and losers, the film dramatizes a philosophical debate which also goes further as stereotypical contrasts and widespread mutual prejudices between “Northerners” and people from the South are explored. Gong Yutian states that any place, even including a brothel, can become a place where people can exercise virtue and reach the point of becoming Masters. This is exemplified in the life story of his daughter, Gong Er. However, the natural drive to revenge the murder of her father is not closed by the brutal fight in which she triumphs over her father’s murderer, Ma San, during which she is badly hurt. No matter how harsh she may be judged by her descent into opium, what kept Gong Er alive was the bond of love she felt from the beginning with Ip Man. The ultimate Master thus reveals himself or herself in an ability to trust: in the case of the Northern Master, Gong Yutian, who puts his trust in Ma San who would then turn out to be his murderer; in the case of the Southern Master, Ip Man, trusting in his students, among them Bruce Lee, who would recognize in martial arts above all a most demanding school enabling them to embrace Confucian virtues such as honesty, truthfulness, loyalty in a deeper way.

Zhang Yimou – *Hero* (2002): Giving up Killing

“*Hero*” (Chinese: 英雄, pinyin: “*yingxiong*”) is a 2002 Chinese martial arts film directed by Zhang Yimou. The film is based on the story of Jing Ke’s assassination attempt on the King of Qin in 227 BC (Zhang 2005). Death appears in this film an almost permanent challenge that

different key actors constantly face. During the Warring States period, Nameless, a Qin prefect, arrives at the Qin capital city to meet the King of Qin, who had survived an attempt on his life by Long Sky, Flying Snow, and Broken Sword. The king has therefore implemented tight security measures: Nameless claims that he has killed the three assassins and he displays their weapons before the king. Nameless pretends to have first slaughtered Long Sky, before traveling to meet Flying Snow and Broken Sword who had taken refuge at a calligraphy school in the Zhao state. Calligraphy, of course, is regarded as one of the highest expressions of Chinese culture. Indeed as Nameless commissions a calligraphy scroll with the character for “Sword” (劍), secretly seeking to learn Sword’s skill through his calligraphy, he becomes witness of the scene that the calligraphy school is being attacked. However, no matter how many deadly arrows are pouring in droves through the roof of the school the Master of the calligraphy continues unharmed with his writing. The core of the lesson is to attain virtues which can never be destroyed by any deadly weapon.

Nameless admits that he has mastered the special technique to kill. However, he states that the king had underestimated Sword, and says that the special technique can also be used to cause a blow that nonetheless misses all the victim’s vital organs. Another key moment of “*Hero*” occurs when Sword sends Nameless off to the Qin capital, writing the words 天下 (“*Tianxia*” “Under Heaven”) in the sand before leaving. This was his appeal to persuade Nameless to reconsider the assassination. The king is deeply impressed by the tale and by Sword’s understanding of his dream to unify China and ceases to fear Nameless. In an act of complete trust, the King throws his sword away and renders himself completely exposed and vulnerable to Nameless as he examines the scroll drawn by Sword. The hero thus becomes ready to accept the key insight that the ultimate goal

of swordsmanship and martial arts is to leave the deadly part of the sword away and with a unified heart to contribute to peace with the entire world. The karmic moment is thus to realize that giving up killing is the key to peace and the hallmark of a true hero. When Nameless realizes the wisdom of these words, he abandons his mission and spares the king. Nevertheless, urged by his court to follow the law, the king reluctantly orders Nameless to be executed at the Qin palace for his assassination attempt. He understands that to unify the nation, he must enforce the law and uses Nameless as an example. Nameless receives a hero's funeral and a closing text reveals the identity of the king as Qin Shi Huang, the first Emperor of China.

Transforming Insights

It certainly makes sense to take inspiration from Zhang's article on "*Hero*" to look at the amazingly complex stories that can be explored against the backdrop of Chinese macro history. From such a perspective surveying the large symphony and cacophony of over 5000 years, it seems particularly difficult to easily identify who should be qualified as hero and who as a villain. Films dramatizing such events enable viewers to consider all the struggling characters as heroes. In the context of the history of China, it is surely misleading and simplistic to identify the paramount hero with the Emperor Qin Shi Huang, just on the basis of his achievement in unifying China. Only when all the other characters with their unique roles and unique contributions are considered as heroic, as contributing to the unity of one's own heart as well as of the unified China would the term of "hero"—in the exemplary meaning suggested by the Confucian "*Junzi*"—be given the prominence it deserves. Not only Qin Shi Huang once upon a time a beggar, but also apparently broken outcasts and assassins like Broken Sword and

Flying Snow encapsulate decisive moments in a drama in which self-sacrifice and the pursuit of the common good becomes more influential than personal resentment, hatred, and desire for revenge.

During our workshops in China a particularly productive entry point was to ask the participants to put themselves into the shoes of the different characters: In the case of the movie of Zhang Yimou: Which figures resonate more strongly in your life? Whom do you recognize as true heroes? What helps a hero to overcome dilemmas and inner struggles? When the stories of the different struggling heroes start to resonate in our own lives, the compelling complexity of their struggles may come alive so to speak in our own struggles. Only after experiencing, if only vicariously, the bumpy road of dilemmas without apparent solutions may we finally stop making snap judgements and come to appreciate the intellectually stimulating dynamics of the different stories.



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