

FLYING LEAPS,

The Fantastic World



*The jaw-dropping beauty and thrilling action of Ang Lee's recent film **Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon** shines a new spotlight on a school of wildly entertaining movies from Hong Kong. Lee's fusion of art-film style and martial arts bravura didn't just thrill seasoned genre fans; it brought the jaded critics and industry flacks to their feet in successive film festival standing ovations.*

*As **Star Wars** and **Raiders of the Lost Ark** did in the mid-'70s, **Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon** renews beloved genre archetypes with brilliantly crafted music, costumes, sets, choreography, and characterization. In this case, though, most Western movie-goers are unfamiliar with the source material it draws on. Many will be content to enjoy Lee's film and leave it at that. Many **D&T** fans, however, will want to delve deeper into Hong Kong fantasy films because they provide fabulous inspiration for gaming. Whether you simply want to play your monk character more vividly or wish to run an entire game in the high-flying Hong Kong style, a veritable treasure trove of cinematic delights awaits you. And with the success of **Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon**, you can bet that these films will soon be easier to find than ever.*

Roots and Beginnings

When film first came to China in the 1920s, it didn't take long for bright directors to put martial artists in front of the camera. Even at that early date, the filmmakers weren't creating their stories from scratch, but simply transferring the age-old mythic themes and acrobatic displays of Peking Opera to a new medium. What we unschooled Westerners see as a mixture of martial arts and fantasy elements is actually part of a seamless whole. In the classic stories of the Peking Opera, gods, heroes, and monsters freely intermingle, fighting and dying alongside one another. Key to the mythology of martial arts is the idea that advanced practitioners acquire supernatural powers, so it's no surprise that as early as the 1928 silent film *The Burning of Red Lotus Monastery* rival kung fu fighters zap one another with energy blasts.

Don't expect to find this epic in your local video store—or anywhere, for that matter. Preservation of early Asian cinema is almost nonexistent. At your luckiest, you might stumble across a special screening of one of the 1960s epics of director King Hu, like *A Touch of Zen* (1969) and *Dragon Inn* (1966). These influential works serve as the foundation of the modern generation of

martial arts fantasies. *A Touch of Zen* treats seriously the Buddhist philosophical underpinnings of the material; its reverence and stately pacing are closer in spirit to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* than its wacky, gleefully impious descendants of the '80s and '90s.

In the '70s, elements of the fantastic began to fade from martial arts cinema. Bruce Lee brought serious martial arts to the screen. In the wake of his death, a legion of imitators huffed and puffed their way through innumerable fight movies, all virtually plot-free and shot too cheaply to allow for special effects. Even the big-budget period kung fu epics produced by the Shaw Brothers often kept their heroes' feet squarely on the ground. Jackie Chan came to the dying genre's rescue by pairing death-defying stunt work with slapstick comedy. But you'll never see Jackie flying through the air or emitting energy blasts.

It was director Tsui Hark who brought the fantasy back into martial arts with 1983's *Zu: Warriors From the Mystic Mountain*. Even without other filmmakers jumping on the bandwagon, this prolific and inventive producer and director could have churned out an entire genre on his own. *Zu: Warriors From the Mystic Mountain* is readily



of Hong Kong Cinema

DEADLY SILKS

BY ROBIN D. LAWS

available in outlets that stock Hong Kong videos; it ushers in the current era of wuxia film.

The term wuxia, which lacks a literal translation, is usually colloquially rendered as “flying people movie.” The term is also sometimes used in movie dialogue to refer to “the world of martial arts,” the underground network of kung fu heroes and villains who live, love, and do battle in parallel to China’s official world of bureaucrats, merchants, and ordinary people.

Many wuxia movies are adaptations of serial novels by Hong Kong newspaperman Louis Cha, who wrote swords-clashing fantasy epics during the '60s and '70s, under the pen name Jin Yong.

Culture Shock

If *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is your first wuxia film, you’re in for a bit of a shock when you begin checking out its rougher-edged cousins.

Although inexpensive by Hollywood standards, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a lavish production compared to most Hong Kong movies. Don’t expect music anywhere near as entrancing as classical composer Tan Dun’s score for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*; instead, prepare for

cheesy, interchangeable soundtracks hammered out on '80s-era synthesizers. You might also want to steel yourself, possibly by drinking several cups of corn syrup, for the inevitable eruption of Cantopop ballads during emotional montage sequences. Many of the actors are, in Hong Kong, thought of primarily as pop singers. Even Jackie Chan doubles as a crooner, boasting an extensive CD catalog.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is performed in the stately Mandarin dialect and presented with subtitles that not only make sense but display impeccable spelling and grammar. Hong Kong movies speak the street-smart Cantonese dialect; their subtitles are translated in the space of an afternoon. Even if more care were taken, the subtitles would still be doomed to moments of incomprehensibility, since much of Cantonese is colloquial slang that can’t even be properly translated into other Chinese dialects. It takes a while to train yourself to stop laughing at the mistakes and odd wordings that pepper even comparatively good translations. Every so often, a line will make no sense at all.

Even more importantly, the Hong Kong aficionado needs to acquire an appreciation for the broad portrayal of

emotions. No matter what else it is—wuxia, comedy, guns-blazing action, gangster epic—a Hong Kong movie is almost invariably also a melodrama. Remember, it all comes from the Peking Opera tradition, which, like Italian Opera, is filled with over-the-top emotion.

Comedy scenes are just as broad, showing a love of potty humor and disregard for sensitivities of any stripe. (In the age of *South Park*, *Something About Mary*, and actor Tom Green, this might not require as big an adjustment as it used to.)

Don’t expect tight dividing lines between melodrama and comedy. The tone of Hong Kong movies can turn on a dime, and that gray-haired old kung fu master might suddenly spout curse words for comic effect. Scenes of slapstick goofiness can be followed by horrible tragedy.

And one more thing: Happy endings are the exception, not the norm. Asian audiences find no ending more romantic than the death of a hero, a heroine, or both. Just as Hollywood screenwriters stretch the limits of plausibility to make everything come out all right in the end, their Hong Kong brethren bend their plots to create tragic endings.

KUNG FU FEATS

The following feats allow accomplished fighters to duplicate frequently-seen wuxia powers.

CHOKER HOLD

(*Oriental Adventures*)

CIRCLE KICK

(*Sword and Fist*)

DEFENSIVE THROW

(*Oriental Adventures*)

EAGLE CLAW ATTACK

(*Sword and Fist, Oriental Adventures*)

ENDURANCE

(*Player's Handbook*)

EYES IN THE BACK OF YOUR HEAD

(*Sword and Fist*)

FALLING STAR STRIKE

(*Oriental Adventures*)

FISTS OF IRON

(*Sword and Fist, Oriental Adventures*)

FLYING KICK

(*Oriental Adventures*)

FREEZING THE LIFEBLOOD

(*Oriental Adventures*)

GRAPPLING BLOCK

(*Oriental Adventures*)

GREAT STAMINA

(*Oriental Adventures*)

KHARMIC STRIKE

(*Oriental Adventures*)

KNOCK-DOWN

(*Sword and Fist*)

LIGHTNING FISTS

(*Sword and Fist*)

PAIN TOUCH

(*Sword and Fist, Oriental Adventures*)

PRONE ATTACK

(*Sword and Fist, Oriental Adventures*)

SNATCH ARROWS

(*Sword and Fist*)

STEALTHY

(*FORGOTTEN REALMS Campaign Setting*)

STRONG SOUL

(*FORGOTTEN REALMS Campaign Setting*)

STUNNING FIST

(*Player's Handbook*)

THROW ANYTHING

(*Sword and Fist*)

UNBALANCING STRIKE

(*Oriental Adventures*)

WHIRLWIND ATTACK

(*Player's Handbook*)

The Rules of Wuxia

Every "flying people" movie makes its own rules according to the needs of its plot. However, the following generalizations offer a basis to work from when importing wuxia elements into your D&D games.

1. Everybody flies. Or, rather, everybody of any note in the world of martial arts flies. Fighters fly. Magicians fly. Priests fly. Every high-level character in a wuxia-inspired D&D campaign should be able to treat the laws of gravity as mere guidelines. (See the Flying Player Characters sidebar.)

2. Training matters. Kung fu fighters spend most of their time training. Inexperienced fighters must find experienced masters to train under. They call their masters sifu, and even after they leave a sifu's tutelage, they owe him the same degree of unquestioning, humble respect. It is not unusual for a wuxia hero to find herself rescuing a captured sifu or seeking vengeance against the enemies who killed him. By observing a fighter in action, an experienced warrior can identify his style; if the fighter studied under a famous sifu, the keen observer can tell that, too.

Training sequences are often shown in detail in Hong Kong movies. The 1978 Shaw Brothers film *Master Killer* is almost entirely devoted to an incredibly involved training sequence. On the other hand, it's hard to justify training times for other classes, like barbarians or rogues, and it's not fair to place a burden on some classes and not on others. Even if everyone in the group plays a monk, training sequences become difficult for DMs to portray in an interesting way after a few times. It's probably best for characters to talk as if they undergo rigorous training but hand-wave the exact circumstances under which it occurs, so that it all takes place offstage.

3. Secrets matter. Martial artists keep their training methods secret from outsiders. These secrets can be stolen and used by villainous characters who, fortunately, usually lack the discipline to completely master the secrets. Nevertheless, even partial ability often makes these thieves terrible threats for the heroes to put down. DMs should treat the theft of school secrets as the handy plot device it is. A villain might invade a temple friendly to the heroes to steal its kung fu secrets. Or, he

might have done so many years ago, committing acts that cry out for vengeance as soon as he reappears on the scene.

4. There is no such thing as an anonymous high-level character. The top warriors all know each other by reputation, if not from the firsthand experience of ringing swords. (For this purpose, treat all character classes as equal; notorious rogues are as famous as legendary Buddhist exorcists, and so on.) As soon as you accumulate 7 levels, defeat a known warrior of 7th level or above, or, at the DM's discretion, perform some other great and notable deed, word of your activities spreads like wildfire. Some warriors might become notorious even sooner, especially if they are taught by, or fight alongside, senior warriors of great fame.

When you become famous, you can expect other famed warriors to know:

- 1: Your name, including distinctive nickname, if any;

- 2: your fighting style, distinctive weapon, or signature move;

- 3: your allies, if they are also known to the world of martial arts;

- 4: your sifu, if any;

- 5: the most famous warrior you defeated, or what is otherwise your most notable deed.

Conversely, your character automatically knows all of these things about the other major figures of the martial arts world. You do not need to roll the dice to call on this information. You've gathered it over time by talking to your fellow warriors and exchanging gossip with weaponsmiths, innkeepers, and other tradesmen whose businesses bring them into contact with your kind. As soon as that seven-foot-tall bald man wielding a fan of metal knives lands in your courtyard and threatens vengeance against you for your role in the theft of the red jade dragon, you can call out "Iron Fan Cho!" with confidence, knowing that you've correctly identified the man who wants to kill you.

The martial arts underground is much more than a mutual recognition society, however. It is a melancholy world in which great accomplishment separates its members from normal society. By becoming a mighty martial artist, you step outside the boundaries of a rigidly stratified culture in which every person must remember his or

her place, on pain of death. You exist in a sort of social no-man's-land. On one level, you are physically more powerful than almost anyone else. On another, you are beneath the lowliest street-sweeper because you have side-stepped the limits of order and respectability. Noble bureaucrats of strong character might treat virtuous martial artists with respect, but this is the exception rather than the rule. Usually, others will view you with both contempt and fear. They might pay enemy martial artists to drive you out of their territories and into their rival's. If they're members of a conspiracy to take over the Imperial Court, they might try to capture, kill, or frame you.

Rest does not come easy for the mighty warrior. Your merest attempt to sit and slurp some congee (bean curd soup) at a roadside food stand will likely be interrupted by young warriors anxious to rob you (if they are inexperienced and do not know you) or to make a name for themselves by defeating you. The world offers you a seemingly never-ending supply of these foolish upstarts, who seem to exist only to allow you to display your martial prowess. Although they rarely pose a genuine threat, they do make it difficult to maintain a low profile or simply enjoy a quiet meal.

As you grow older and wiser, these annoyances begin to seem petty in comparison to the true melancholy of the martial artist. It is nearly impossible to retire peacefully from the world of martial arts. You can't retreat back to mundane life: Enemies will hound you, and old obligations of honor and vengeance will continue to draw you back into a life of bloodshed and warfare. Retreat to a life of spiritual meditation might seem like a noble way out, yet many of the great heroes of martial arts spend years in search of mystical enlightenment, only to find that their ties to the material world prevent them from making their final breakthroughs. Instead, they must return to the world and again pick up their swords and staves to do battle against their foes.

Romantic love brings no solace either. The ranks of martial artists are filled by both men and women afflicted by unresolved romantic yearnings toward one another. Even those few unhampered by vows or obligations preventing them from admitting their

FLYING PLAYER CHARACTERS

Following the number one rule of wuxia, all high-level characters in a wuxia campaign gain the ability to fly. Upon reaching 10th level, regardless of class, a character can fly at a speed of 30 feet with average maneuverability as described on page 69 of the *DUNGEON MASTER'S Guide*. A flyer with average maneuverability cannot hover or fly backward, but she can turn up to 45 degrees after moving at least 5 feet. A character that meets the requirements may choose to take the Improved Flying feat and increase her flying ability from average to good.

IMPROVED FLYING [General]

You can fly better than average.

Prerequisite: Base attack Bonus +11, Dex 13+

Benefit: Your flight maneuverability advances to good. As a result, you can hover in the air, fly backward, and turn up to 90 degrees midflight.

feelings know that the world is unfriendly to the happiness of sword-swinging lovers. The heroes of wuxia know that they will die as they have lived, as warriors. Nothing hastens tragic doom more than a declaration of love between warriors. Romantic love is like the butterfly: It is beautiful, easily buffeted by fate's wings, and inevitably short-lived.

5. Watch out for eunuchs! When your foes are not merely unscrupulous rival members of the wuxia underground in search of your sifu's secret technique books, they are eunuchs. The Imperial Court, by long tradition, relies on castrated high officials to administer the day-to-day affairs of the national government. In theory, the inability of a eunuch to sire rivals to the throne renders him utterly loyal to the Emperor. In practice, castration generally makes the eunuch cranky and power-mad. Eunuch warriors and magicians ruthlessly strike out at all who would loosen their corrupt hold on the land.

6. Gender confusion is the order of the day. Eunuchs are not the only members of the wuxia world who defy sexual norms. Cross-dressing and magical gender changes run rampant in Hong Kong fantasy films. Whether the princess is dressing as a man to conceal her true identity or the evil dowager is played by a male actor, these movies leap over gender boundaries as heedlessly as their heroes dash over treetops.

The Films

Enough with the generalities. It's time to go straight to the source of inspiration and check out some of the movies themselves. This list of titles represents the cream of the crop of Hong Kong fantasy films.



Zu: Warriors of the Magic Mountain (1983), director: Tsui Hark.

This is the film that started it all. With an accent more on wild imagery and inventive (if low-tech) special effects than on recognizable characterization or a clear storyline, this festival of glowing-eyed monsters, caber-tossed logs, magic swords, ogres chained to giant rocks, blood monster poisoning, possession by evil forces, and (of course) high-flying, fast-paced action looks a little primitive in comparison to some of the later movies it inspired, but is still plenty of fun. And, when looked at as game inspiration, its succession of fantasy elements and zigzagging plot line are pluses. This probably serves up more monster, spell, and plot ideas per square inch of celluloid than any other film mentioned in this article.



Chinese Ghost Story

Part I (1987), director: Ching Siu Tung; Part II (1990), Part III (1991).

This Tsui Hark-produced series mixes fantasy, comedy, and horror, and probably serves as your best starting point for this genre. Playing irreverently with ghost stories from China's Qing Dynasty, the first movie pits a slightly hapless young tax collector, aided by a no-nonsense Taoist priest and swordsman, against an array of ghosts (many of them seductive sirens) and some amusingly primitive stop-action zombies. In the second film, a young priest joins the tax collector, and the supernatural opposition escalates to include a giant centipede and an undead ogre who uses his snapping ribcage as an attack. Part three takes place a hundred years later and tells the tale of a young monk who gets drawn into the battle against evil, as personified by a sorcerous tree that fights with an elongated tongue.



The Swordsman

Part I (1990), director: King Hu (credited) Tsui Hark & Ching Siu Tung (actual); Part II (1991), director: Ching Siu Tung; Part III (1993), director: Ching Siu Tung.

Evil eunuchs set in motion an incomprehensibly complex plot (based on a Louis Cha novel), in which an ancient scroll full of martial arts secrets becomes the object of much kinetic kung fu action. In part two, Jet Li and Michelle Yeoh take over as heroes. They battle the man who originally found the magic scroll in the first movie; the scroll has transformed him into Asia the Invincible, who is both a whirlwind of martial arts destruction and a beautiful but implacable woman (played by Brigitte Lin). Part three, also known as *The East Is Red*, turns Lin's

villainess into an antiheroine. Among its banner scenes is her one-woman takeover of a Spanish galleon.



Bride With White Hair

Part I (1993), director: Ronny Yu; Part II (1993), director: David Wu and Ronny Yu (uncredited).

A warrior takes on an evil cult run by a set of conjoined brother-sister twins, only to fall in love with their top assassin, a feral woman raised by wolves. This wuxia epic is distinguished by its gorgeous cinematography and melancholy sense of romantic doom. In part two, white-haired wolf woman Lin wreaks vengeance on her ex-lover's martial arts school, as he searches for a way to restore her former beauty.



Green Snake

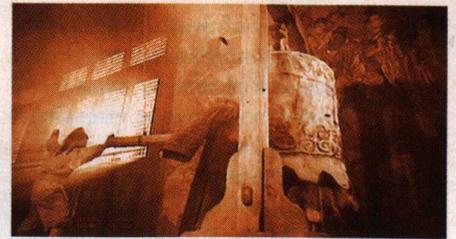
(1993), director: Tsui Hark.

Two gorgeous, mysterious women conceal a shameful secret: they're snakes who have pulled themselves up by their mystical bootstraps to assume human form. Trouble comes when one falls in love and another attracts the attention of a fanatical Taoist priest bent on sending all animals in human form back to their primal conditions. This film is interesting for its unique story and the moral ambiguity of its heroes and villain.

Kung Fu Cult Master

(1993), director: Wong Jing.

Forget the confusing plot and simply dig Jet Li in his most outrageously aerial role as Mo-Kai, an orphan adopted by a great sifu (Sammo Hung). Mo-Kai is scorned by the other students until he learns the secret solar stance. Priceless elements include the comic relief bat-winged character, Green Bat,



and the moment in which a surprised Mo-Kai reckons that his mighty opponent must have 10,000 experience points to his 8,000. The commercial failure of this energetic mishmash signaled the end of the great wuxia boom of the '80s and '90s.



Dragon Inn

(1992), director: Raymond Lee.

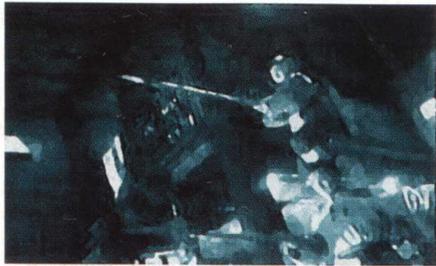
Heroes flee across a desert with kids they've rescued from an evil eunuch sorcerer. They arrive at an inn in the middle of the desert, which happens to be crawling with martial artists. Maggie Cheung is great as the cynical innkeeper, but watch out for the secret ingredient in her sticky buns. Its eye-popping moment occurs in the climactic sand-dune battle, in a moment of gory "chef fu." This is a remake of a mid-'60s King Hu classic.



Moon Warriors

(1992), director: Sammo Hung.

In this film, a poor but honest fisherman, whose best friend is a killer whale, protects the Emperor from his usurping brother and gets mixed up in a love triangle. Maybe not the best wuxia film ever, but it has a great cast, and its final sequence is one of the best illustrations of the principle that every major character in one of these films knows a martial arts fighting style. Yes, we're talking whale fu.



New Legend of Shaolin

(1994), director: Wong Jing.

Jet Li and his scrappy young son are the only survivors of a massacre that wipes out the Shaolin temple; he races with a deformed sorcerer who rides a killer cart to find a treasure map tattooed on the backs of a gaggle of children. Check it out for a great performance from prepubescent star Xie Miao, who already has the “don’t mess with Clint” glare down pat.



Mr. Vampire

(1985), director: Ricky Lau.

A mighty eye-browed exorcist, alternately aided and hindered by his two bumpkin assistants, deals with a plague of hopping vampires and a seductive ghost. This is not a wire-fu film, but a period horror-comedy that launched countless imitations, many of them featuring the formidable-looking Lam Ching-Ying as a straight-arrow exorcist. This film is fun if you’re already tuned into the goofy, lowbrow sense of humor typical of Hong Kong comedies.



Once Upon A Time In China

(1991), director: Tsui Hark.

Except for gravity-defying kung fu, this film lacks fantasy elements but is nonetheless a classic worth mentioning, with many sequels trailing behind it. Jet Li plays Wong Fei Hong, an idealistic doctor and posterior-booting hero,

fighting off bandits and British imperialists in 1870s Canton. Wong Fei Hong was a real person, and he has been portrayed in countless Chinese movies and TV shows over the decades; he’s sort of a combination Lone Ranger and Marcus Welby.



Savior of the Soul

(1991), director: Corey Yuen and David Lai.

A super-cool assassin (played by Anita Mui) blinds arch-villain Silver Fox (Aaron Kwok), and only a handsome city mercenary (Andy Lau) can protect her from his vengeful clutches. This movie, which unfolds like a comic book you’ve only started reading with the fourth issue, is one of many that mixes modern-day and wuxia elements. It doesn’t make much sense, but the imagery is great, and the characters are extremely cool. You can import the characters (minus pistols) into your D&D game or look at it as inspiration for a genre-spanning campaign. **D**

LEARNING MORE

This article should serve as an introduction to the world of Hong Kong cinema. Thanks to the state-side success of performers like Jet Li, Chow Yun-Fat, and Michelle Yeoh, Hong Kong movies are now easier than ever to find in video stores, even the unhip ones. The best way to learn about this film genre is to see what you can find on your local shelves, rent movies as you can, and go from there.

Useful books include *Hong Kong Babylon*, by Frederic Dannen & Barry Long, which couples an excellent listing of the central Hong Kong films with an exposé of triad involvement in the Hong Kong film industry. *Hong Kong Action Cinema*, by Bey Logan, delves more exhaustively into the history of Chinese action movies

and is lavishly illustrated with photos. This book will help you match actors’ names to faces. *Sex and Zen and A Bullet in the Head*, by Stefan Hammond & Mike Wilkins, provides a more tongue-in-cheek introduction to the field, with fun lists of bizarre subtitles and other less-than-reverent sidebars.

Finally, the Internet is crammed with Hong Kong movie websites and discussion groups. Pop a few relevant keywords into your favorite search engine and your kung fu will undergo an immediate power increase.

