Daoism and Diaspora in Post-millennial Taiwanese Martial Arts Films

ABSTRACT
Martial arts films create cinematic universes that encourage audiences to imagine Chinese culture and history. Through analyzing Ang Lee’s Wohu Canglong (Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, 2000) and Hou Hsiao-hsien’s Cike Nie Yinniang (The Assassin, 2015), I argue that Taiwanese martial arts films have shifted away from the genre’s conventional narrative of the Confucian code of honor in the 1960s and 1970s to Daoist’s wuwei (no action, no achievement) in the new millennium. Engaging with Taiwan’s political context in relation to the Sinophone, this article goes beyond the genre study and explicates that Daoism offers Taiwan’s second-generation waishengren (people from foreign provinces) filmmakers a liminal space to search for their own diasporic identity in an ever-changing society.

The martial arts film is one of the most popular and oldest genres in Chinese-language cinema. Often adapted from wuxia (martial chivalry) fiction, martial arts films create cinematic universes that might be described as jianghu—a fictional world of martial artists that is either parallel to or intersects with mainstream society. Through the visual spectacle of fight sequences, narratives of heroic morality, and settings that feature Chinese landscapes and historical spaces, the genre shapes the public’s imagination of Chinese culture and society. Like its Hong Kong counterpart, Taiwan

produced many martial arts films in the 1960s and 1970s.¹ But in the new millennium, Taiwan has only produced two films in this genre—Ang Lee’s Wohu Canglong (Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, 2000) and Hou Hsiao-hsien’s Cike Nie Yinniang (The Assassin, 2015). Despite this limited output, the genre remains a socioculturally significant one. By probing the films’ incorporation of the Chinese philosophical school of Daoism, in particular the idea of wuwei (no action, no achievement), this article examines the shifting narrative concerns of Taiwanese martial arts cinema and explores how Daoism enabled Lee and Hou to articulate the unique experience of Taiwanese waishengren (people from foreign provinces) in an increasingly de-Sinicized society.²

In his 2016 book on Chinese martial arts cinema, Stephen Teo notes that in the wuxia tradition “the xia or knight-errant acts as an agent of history, conscious of his or her role in shaping events and the destiny of the nation.”³ Tracing the literary history of the concept back to Sima Qian’s Shiji (Records of the Grand Historian), Teo demonstrates Confucianism’s fundamental influence on Chinese martial arts literature and cinema. According to Teo, Sima Qian (ca. 145–86 BC), who had studied with two prominent Confucian scholars, Dong Zhongshu (ca. 179–104 BC) and Kong Anguo (ca. 156–74 BC), defended xia’s use of violence to embrace Confucianism-inscribed heroism and chivalry.⁴

If we trace the origins of xia even further, we learn that one of the earliest definitions appeared in Legalist scholar Han Fei’s (ca. 280–233 BC) text, Han Fei Zi. Han writes, “ru yi wen luanfa, xia yi wu fanjin” (scholars use their writings to challenge the law; xia use their martial skills to transgress the forbidden).⁵ Defending a ruler’s absolute power and strict law enforcement, Han criticizes both Confucian scholars and xia for disrupting the social order and undermining authority. For this reason, Han argues that these scholars and xia should be punished.

Confucianism’s support of xia, in particular their violence, stems from the belief in ren (kindness, benevolence, and altruism) over the absolute authority and law.⁶ While also upholding a hierarchical social order and the ruler’s power over subordinates, Confucianism argues for zhengming

1. Examples include Qingguan (Temptation, Lee Chih-shan, 1968), Da Chifengling (North Warrior and South Errant, Chang Fang-hsia, 1969), Qingshan Ke (He Heals and Kills, Chen Hung-ming, 1971), and Wan Li Xiongfeng (Rider of Revenge, Hsiung Ting-wu, 1971).
2. Waishengren refers to those migrants who moved to Taiwan from mainland China shortly before and after Kuomintang (also known as the Nationalist Party) took over the island in 1945. The concept is opposed to benshengren, who are either native or migrated to Taiwan before or during Japan’s colonial rule. For further discussion of the two concepts, see Syaru Shirley Lin, Taiwan’s China Dilemma: Contested Identities and Multiple Interests in Taiwan’s Cross-Strait Economic Policy (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 30.
4. Teo, 19.
(rectification of the name). According to Confucius’s interpretation of zhengming, a ruler can only be regarded as a true ruler when he acts according to “the way of the ruler,” or in other words, in the way of the name. Otherwise, he is not a true ruler, “even though he may popularly be regarded as such.” To a large degree, zhengming testifies to the accordance between the actual subject and its perceived designation. Emphasizing the uttermost importance of ren, Confucianism argues that those people in power and at the high end of the hierarchical social order must possess the essence of ren to verify their names as the true rulers. Although later developments in Confucianism, during the Han dynasty (202 BC–220 AD), increasingly stressed the hierarchical ethical codes of zhong (vertical loyalty and devotion to the senior, ruler, or nation), xiao (filial piety), and yi (honor, lateral loyalty to friends and brothers, righteousness, and justice), Confucianism does not oppose xia’s challenges to the ruler or existing social order if he or it does not act in the way of the name.

Despite their opposing views on xia’s relationships with authority and social order, both Legalism and Confucianism associate xia with the martial artist’s active role in shaping society and conscious participation in worldly affairs. Rooted in classic Chinese thought, martial arts cinema thus is often celebrated as a distinctive cultural product that uses xia fantasy to contest the construction and deconstruction of Chineseness and Chinese identity. Interpretations such as these of the martial arts film largely ignore Taiwan and its sociopolitical contexts, despite the significant role that Taiwanese cinema has played in shaping the genre. As this article demonstrates, both Wohu Canglong and Cike Nie Yinniang challenge the genre’s central convention—that of xia’s essential role. As such, Taiwanese martial arts films produced in the new millennium deviate substantially from those produced by mainland Chinese and Hong Kong filmmakers. With their international funding sources and global distribution and consumption, Wohu Canglong and Cike Nie Yinniang can be seen as examples of transnational cinema. And yet I argue that they are also distinctively Taiwanese, not just because both films represented Taiwan at international film festivals such as the Cannes Film Festival and award ceremonies such as the Academy Awards.

7. Fung, 41.
8. Fung, 42.
9. Fung, 42.
10. Before the Han dynasty (202 BC–220 AD), Confucians identified five main social relationships: sovereign and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brothers, and friends. Dong Zhongshu selected the first three relationships and argued that in each of these three relationships, the former governs the latter and thus holds the status as the master toward the latter. These three hierarchical relationships become known as sangang, or Three Principles, that guide Confucian ethical codes. For the development of Confucianism, see Fung, Short History, 191–203.
but also because their narratives are closely based on the filmmakers’ personal experiences as Taiwanese waishengren.

Lee and Hou are veteran filmmakers associated with the New Taiwanese Cinema, but they tapped the martial arts genre for the first time in their filmmaking careers with Wohu Canglong and Cike Nie Yinniang, respectively. Moreover, these films mark their first attempts to situate a story in premodern China before Taiwan became a separately ruled territory. But these films are more than just firsts. By studying Wohu Canglong and Cike Nie Yinniang as Sinophone films—a critical framework proposed by Shih Shu-mei that emphasizes transformations of time and space in relation to Sino-centrism—I argue that Lee and Hou observe a complex sociopolitical undercurrent in Taiwanese cinema.

To understand Taiwan’s cultural sensitivity that underlies the shifting narrative of xia’s action in Taiwanese martial arts films, this article first defines the genre within the framework of Sinophone cinema. Then, I map the rise and fall of Taiwanese martial arts cinema and offer a detailed account of how Taiwanese martial arts films have shifted their narrative emphasis from xia’s youwei (taking action, having an achievement) to non-xia’s embrace of the Daoist concept of wuwei. Finally, this article further contextualizes this shift by examining how the cross-strait tensions between Taiwan and the mainland have impacted the second-generation waishengren’s sense of cultural belonging. Instead of viewing Wohu Canglong and Cike Nie Yinniang as films that contest the notion of being Chinese, this article argues that Daoism provides Taiwanese (migrant) filmmakers with an outlet to confront their unique dilemma—namely, the confusion inherent in a Taiwanese identity that remains in a state of flux due to uncertain cross-strait relations with mainland China.

DEFINING TAIWANESE MARTIAL ARTS CINEMA

The nationality of Taiwanese films has always been contested due to Taiwan’s colonial history and the ongoing political tension surrounding the One China policy after the second phase of China’s Civil War (1945–1949) fought between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Communist Party (CCP). Although Taiwanese cinema was largely controlled by Japan before 1945, the development of its postwar industry was heavily influenced by traditional Chinese culture after the KMT took control of the major film studios in Taiwan. During the postwar era, the KMT government adopted a nationalist approach to promoting Sino-centric patriotism and cultural belonging. The frequent talent exchange between Taiwan and Hong Kong cinemas further blurred the cultural borders of various Chinese-speaking regions. As a result,

12. New Taiwanese Cinema initially refers to the rise of younger generation of filmmakers, such as Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang, in Taiwan at the turn of the 1980s. Later in the 1990s, some other filmmakers, including Ang Lee and Tsai Ming-liang, made their names internationally, and they were often credited as representatives of the second wave of Taiwan New Cinema.


14. Chen Feibao, Taiwan Dianying Shihua [History of Taiwan cinema] (Beijing: China Film Press, 2008), 41–63.
Confucianism-oriented martial arts films blossomed in Taiwan in the 1960s and 1970s. However, the popularity of Taiwan-produced martial arts films poses an important question: Should they be seen as part of Taiwanese or Chinese cinema, given that the genre is based on Chinese classic literary texts and frequently adopts traditional Chinese cultural codes?

Examining the heterogeneity, dissonances, and fractures that make up the ambiguous Chineseness of various nation-states and their cultures, Shih argues that the Sinophone provides a useful framework to analyze Chinese-language films and diasporic screen cultures produced and consumed outside mainland China. Yet, recognizing the Sinophone as inherently transitional, Shih also stresses that geographic specifications are easily traversed by the global and intra-regional flows (of representations, translations, and the like) between China and the Sinophone sphere. Accordingly, she argues that analyses of the Sinophone, including Taiwanese cinema, must be “place-based” and “sensitive to time” in order to attend to “the process of its formation and disappearance.”

Shih’s observation that place and time are crucial reminds us that while the prefix trans (when applied to the national) suggests processes of change and crossing over, the main stem of the word transnational specifies the geographic and cultural boundary that is being transgressed. Recognizing such a border, whether it is tangible or imagined, is not to suggest that cinemas and screen cultures are segregated by fixed sovereignty or cultural borders. Instead, it highlights a liminal space and condition in which the negotiation of national identities and cultural belonging is taking place.

With Taiwanese cinema, then, Chinese and Taiwanese identities are not entirely separable. Noting that the Sinophone is often “the site where powerful articulations against China-centrism can be heard,” Shih is correct to point out that “post-martial law Taiwan cultural discourse is very much about articulating symbolic ‘farewells to China.’” Despite the KMT’s post-war effort to promote Sino-centric patriotism in Taiwan, the newly founded Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) quickly became a major political rival to the KMT in the 1990s. Shih’s analysis applies especially well to this period, when the DPP won the presidency and ended the KMT’s one-party rule in 2000; since then, the DPP’s policy of Taiwanization and de-Sinicization has increasingly dominated Taiwanese politics and culture.

The process of identity transformation is by no means linear. Neither can the social attitudes toward Taiwanization or Sino-centrism simply be placed under a binary paradigm of embracing or resisting One China and Chineseness. Underneath the dominant political discourse exist various individual experiences that are closely entangled with the sociocultural fabric of Taiwan’s relationship with China and Chinese culture in the past.

17. Shih, 7, 30.
18. Shih, 34.
20. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was founded in 1986.
and present. Such heterogeneous experiences suggest that the projection of Taiwan's future and cultural identity is not always easy to express or predict.

Thus, Taiwanese martial arts cinema cannot simply be defined by its funding sources, production conditions, and sites of consumption. Neither can it be defined solely in terms of its differences with martial arts films produced in Hong Kong or mainland China. What’s more, because both genre conventions and national and cultural identities are constantly being constructed and are perpetually evolving, Taiwanese martial arts films have always been transnational, or at least trans-regional. Instead, Andrew Higson suggests an “inward-looking means” for defining national cinemas—that is, in terms of its relationship to an already existing (national) political, economic, and cultural identity and set of traditions. Despite the hybrid nature of Taiwanese martial arts cinema and its frequent ties to China and Chineseness, its narrative concerns are fundamentally shaped by filmmakers—filmmakers whose contemplation of their experiences of Taiwan as well as Taiwan’s cultural and political conditions grants the films an inward-looking (quasi-) national quality.

As I will detail later in this article, Confucianist xia became a norm in the postwar Chinese-language martial arts cinema. Xia-inspired fantasy has continued to dominate the narratives of many recent martial arts films produced in mainland China and Hong Kong, in both kung fu and swordplay films. For instance, *Yingxiong* (*Hero*, Zhang Yimou, 2002) portrays xia’s self-sacrifice for national unity; the narrative of the *Ye Wen* series (*Ip Man* series, Wilson Yip, 2008, 2010, 2015, 2019) depicts xia’s resistance to oppression and upholding of China’s national dignity; and *Longmen Fei Jia* (*The Flying Swords of Dragon Gate*, Tsui Hark, 2011) focuses on xia’s pursuit of benevolence and kindness to the vulnerable.

Like many classic martial arts films produced in the 1960s and 1970s—such as King Hu’s *Da Zui Xia* (*Come Drink with Me*, 1966) and Chang Cheh’s *Du Bi Dao* (*One-Armed Swordsman*, 1967)—recent films often position Confucian ideals of zhong, xiao, ren, and yi as the ultimate moral achievements that motivate xia’s action. Such narrative concerns reflect a convergence between Hong Kong and mainland commercial cinemas, with many Hong Kong filmmakers moving to the north to seek job opportunities after the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) was signed in 2003. Primarily targeted at mainland China’s vast market, these films—and their Confucian tendencies—are also in line with the Chinese government’s post-1997 agenda of promoting a unified greater China.

22. Kung fu and swordplay films are two subgenres of martial arts films. Kung fu films often feature with empty-handed counterparts and tend to have more realistic settings of the modern and contemporary period. Swordplay films tend to be set in premodern China and encompass a fantastique tradition. For further discussion of the definitions, see Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters*, 6–7.
While Hong Kong and mainland Chinese martial arts films are still suffused with Confucian moral codes (and the idea that conscious action should shape the social order), Taiwanese martial arts films such as Lee’s *Wohu Canglong* and Hou’s *Cike Nie Yinniang* move away from the genre’s conventional narrative of youwei to embrace Daoist wuwei. In this way, these films also contrast with the Confucianist xia fantasies of early Taiwanese martial arts films in the 1960s and 1970s, such as *Yidai Jianwang* (*The Swordsman of All Swordsmen*, Joseph Kuo, 1968), *Feilong Shan* (*The Fly Dragon Mountain*, Chen Hung-Ming, 1971), and *Shiwan Jinshan* (*The Ghost Hill*, Ting Shan-hsi, 1971). More so than these earlier films, *Wohu Canglong* and *Cike Nie Yinniang* focus on young martial artists who withdraw from their families and social duties. In fact, the films differ to such an extent from their predecessors—they center on the characters of Jen (Zhang Ziyi) in *Wohu Canglong* and Nie Yinniang (Shu Qi) in *Cike Nie Yinniang*, who each experience emotional struggles—that the films garnered some criticism for being inauthentic and for deviating from established genre conventions.24

It is exactly this deviation that reveals how Taiwanese martial arts films adapt this Chinese genre to the Sinophone sphere. Drawing ideas from Daoism, Lee and Hou transform the martial artist’s journey into one of becoming a non-xia, or in a Daoist term, a yinshi (hermit, recluse). While the term yinshi broadly refers to a talented person who withdraws from the mainstream society or self-exiles from conflicts over power, I prefer the term non-xia for the way it specifies that the yinshi’s talent rests on their martial arts skills. Here the prefix non- in the term non-xia is not to suggest yingshi’s opposition to what a xia does, but to highlight their decision of adopting wuwei. Unlike xia who use their martial arts skills to pursue changes in society (either through restoring and protecting social order in Confucian terms or defying the authoritative power under the Legalist definition), non-xia shut themselves off from such action and preserve their own persons by sticking “their roots deeper (in themselves),” especially when the conditions of the times are “very much awry.”25 This is by no means to suggest yingshi avoid all action or refuse to employ their skills. The key difference here is that non-xia consciously refrain from using their martial arts skills to change the society or social order—at least until the conditions clarify themselves or the time is right.

The timing of Taiwanese martial arts films’ narrative shift toward Daoism (and the declining popularity of the genre) corresponds precisely to the rise of Taiwanese nationalism following the collapse of the KMT’s one-party governance. If the Sinophone often serves as a site of opposition toward mainland China, *Wohu Canglong* and *Cike Nie Yinniang* reveal


that the Sinophonic expression of diasporic cultural belonging and identity transformation is much more complex and ambiguous.

THE RISE AND FALL OF TAIWANESE MARTIAL ARTS CINEMA

The development of Taiwanese martial arts films speaks to the importance of the Sinophone and its sensitivity to the time and place of identity transformation. Although the Hong Kong film industry gained a reputation as the center of martial arts filmmaking, the postwar popularity of the genre would not be possible without Taiwan’s contributions. Not only did many Hong Kong filmmakers, such as King Hu, Chang Cheh, and Jimmy Wang Yu, make martial arts films in Taiwan, but many Taiwan filmmakers, such as Joseph Kuo and Ting Shan-hsi, worked on and invested in Hong Kong martial arts films.26

In 1958, Taiwan produced its first martial arts film, *Jinhu Yuli (Jade Carp in a Gold Pot*, Chen Cheng-san). Shortly after, Taiwanese martial arts cinema entered its golden age. By 1968, Taiwan had produced at least eighty-seven martial arts films.27 The genre’s popularity encouraged companies to rethink their production strategies. In 1970, for instance, the Taiwan-based private studio Union Motion Pictures produced nine films in total, with six consisting of martial arts films and one a mixed genre film combining martial arts with the historical drama.28

Due to postwar tensions between the Taiwan-based Republic of China (ROC) and the mainland’s People’s Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan was under martial law from 1949 to 1987. During this period, media content was strictly controlled. Attempting to represent the whole of China, the KMT government placed a particular emphasis on promoting traditional Chinese values, with Confucianism privileged in Taiwan’s cultural and education system; this contrasted the CCP’s Soviet-style revolutionary system adopted in mainland China. According to Chen Feibao, strict media control in Taiwan pushed the martial arts genre toward Confucian ethical codes, such as self-sacrifice for ren, filial piety, and loyalty, as a way of embracing the Chineseness promoted by the KMT government.29 In this Sinicized context, films such as *Hei Tie (Black Invitation*, Chou Hsu-chiang, 1969), *Liehuo (The Grand Passion*, Yang Hsi-ching, 1970), and *Feilong Shan* made the martial arts film one of the most popular genres in Taiwan in the 1960s and 1970s.


Strict censorship soon created conditions whereby martial arts films and a few other popular genre films, such as romantic dramas and healthy realism films, were squeezing the market, limiting the types of films available on Taiwanese screens.30 Beginning in the late 1970s, audiences already were fatigued of seeing similar films. In response, the Taiwanese film industry made an effort to modernize its production, principally by promoting young talent. Despite their initial struggle with conservative censorship, filmmakers associated with the New Taiwanese Cinema finally began to shift audience attention toward a wider array of films after the government gradually relaxed its grip on media content in the 1980s. Critics immediately recognized that New Taiwanese Cinema emphasized local production, shifting to “down-to-earth and sympathetic portrayals of Taiwanese life as well as trenchant social commentary.”31

Meanwhile, after the KMT-controlled ROC lost its seat as the sole representative of China to the CCP-controlled PRC at the United Nations in 1971, the ROC quickly lost many formal diplomatic ties. By 1979, one year after the PRC established formal diplomatic ties with the ROC’s former ally, the United States, the ROC only had twenty-two full diplomatic relationships left, a decline from sixty-eight in 1969.32 The ROC’s marginalized position on the global stage made the KMT government realize, by the 1970s, that it would no longer be possible to reclaim control over mainland China. The shifts in the ROC’s international relationships subsequently led to a demand for recognizing and improving the visibility of Taiwan’s own identity.33 As a result, the KMT government started to reexamine Taiwan’s strategic status and adopted a series of social and political reforms to reposition the island from the ROC’s temporary base for reunifying greater China to a permanent settlement and an autonomous territory. One of such changes was to promote a sense of belonging in Taiwan through democratization and economic development.34

Such cultural, political, and economic changes not only eventually witnessed the end of the one-party regime in Taiwan but also fundamentally altered Taiwan’s cinematic landscape. One direct impact was the decline of conventional genre films, such as martial arts films. In comparison to 135 martial arts films produced in 1979, the number of ROC-produced martial

30. Healthy realism is a genre promoted by the KMT authority to build the party’s legitimacy in governing the greater China. For further discussion, see Menghsin C. Horng, “Domestic Dislocations: Healthy Realism, Stardom, and the Cinematic Projection of Home in Postwar Taiwan,” Journal of Chinese Cinemas 4, no. 1 (2010): 27–43; Song Ziwen, Taiwan Dianying Sanshi Nian [Thirty years of Taiwanese cinema] (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2006), 51–57; and Chen, Taiwan Dianying Shihua, 117–181.
31. Executive Yuan, Republic of China (Taiwan), The Republic of China Yearbook 2016 (Taipei: Executive Yuan, Republic of China [Taiwan], 2016), 259.
34. Kuo, 11.
arts films dropped to only thirty-four in 1982.\textsuperscript{35} The figure continued to drop in the subsequent years together with the decline of the local film industry in Taiwan.

Many factors contributed to the decline. First, many New Taiwanese Cinema filmmakers caught global attention through their works in arthouse cinema.\textsuperscript{36} However, their critical success unintentionally resulted in the government’s cultural agency and local film industry becoming reluctant to invest in less-award-worthy genre films, including martial arts films.\textsuperscript{37} Second, beginning in 1988 the KMT government relaxed the import quota of foreign films as a preparation to negotiate Taiwan’s World Trade Organization (WTO) membership; shortly after, foreign films, especially Hollywood films, dominated Taiwan’s film market.\textsuperscript{38} As a result, the local film production dropped from two hundred to three hundred films per year during the late 1960s and 1970s to only about twenty films a year in the late 1990s.\textsuperscript{39} Third, the rise of Taiwanese nationalism in the 1990s saw many local new directors, who only entered the industry after 2000, making films that moved away from Chinese stories to specifically focus on Taiwan’s local experience either in the present or in a period before the KMT’s arrival. Among these films are Wei Te-sheng’s \textit{Haijiao Qi Hao} (\textit{Cape No. 7}, 2008), Yang Ya-che’s \textit{Nü Penyou}, \textit{Nan Pengyou} (\textit{Girlfriend, Boyfriend}, 2012), and Chen Hung-i’s \textit{Zihuaxiang} (\textit{The Last Painting}, 2017). Many of these young filmmakers received Taiwanese education during their childhood, and almost all of them chose to make films in genres that are less China-specific, such as horror films, melodramas, and thrillers. Consequently, since 2000, only a handful of Taiwanese films are set in mainland China.\textsuperscript{40}

Facing pressure from both the domestic and international changes, the martial arts film—a genre popularly associated with Chinese literary and screen heritage—fell into decline in Taiwan. \textit{Wohu Canglong} and \textit{Cike Nie Yin-niang} attempted to breathe new life into the martial arts film, and given the fact that the filmmakers are second-generation waishengren, their cinematic efforts raise questions about the complex relationships between genre convention, diasporic narratives, and Taiwanese cultural belonging.

Many film scholars have analyzed the two films in terms of shifting styles and aesthetics, and one area that deserves some further attention is the films’


\textsuperscript{38} Chen, \textit{Taiwan Dianying Shihua}, 381.

\textsuperscript{39} Executive Yuan, \textit{Republic of China Yearbook} 2016, 259–260.

\textsuperscript{40} This observation is based on a survey of film titles collected in the \textit{Cinema Year Book of the Republic of China} from 2001 to 2004 and then \textit{Taiwan Cinema Year Book} from 2005 to 2017.
stunning visual spectacle of China’s landscape. During its golden era, most Taiwanese martial arts films were filmed in the studio. Only a small number of big-budget martial arts films were filmed on location, but even in such cases, they were rarely filmed on the mainland. For instance, both King Hu’s *Longmen Kezhan* (*Dragon Inn*, 1967) and *Xia Nü* (*A Touch of Zen*, 1970) were produced by Taiwan-based Union Film Studio and filmed on location in Taiwan. By comparison, *Wohu Canglong* and *Cike Nie Yinniang* have a wider geographic coverage, filmed in several of China’s natural landscapes and historical cultural sites, such as Cangyan Mountain, Daji Lake, Gobi Desert, and Anji Bamboo Forest. To some degree, locations serve as evidence of the ongoing political exchange between Taiwan and mainland China and its impact on the film industry.

For decades, filming on the mainland was almost impossible for Taiwan-based filmmakers because of the KMT government’s strict control over public and private interaction with the CCP-controlled PRC—a control that began during the postwar era. Shaped by such cross-strait tensions, state regulations forced many Taiwan and Hong Kong filmmakers to abandon location filming in mainland China, as a show of loyalty to the ROC. It was not until the late 1980s that foreign and Hong Kong films shot on location in mainland China were allowed to screen in Taiwan and that Taiwan film producers were allowed to invest in films made in mainland China. In this regard, *Wohu Canglong* and *Cike Nie Yinniang*, by their very choice of locations, demonstrate a relaxed control in filmmaking practice across the Taiwan Strait and a closer collaborative relationship among the film industries across Chinese-speaking regions throughout the 1990s.

Yet amid this changing cross-strait relationship, the KMT government’s control was gradually eroding in Taiwan, and the PRC grew into a global superpower at the start of the new millennium. When the DPP took power, it abandoned the KMT’s postwar position of upholding the ROC as the representative of greater China and promoted Taiwan as a separate nation-state with its own unique culture and history. While the mainland PRC continued to stress the One China policy and insisted on the unification of greater China, Taiwan, especially now, is more divided on this matter than ever before, with various factions either supporting independence or upholding the notion of unification with the mainland or insisting on the need to maintain the status quo.


Facing such political uncertainties, Taiwanese filmmakers have reexamined local history and its relationship with the concept of greater China. Film scholars such as J. Heath Atchley and Victor Fan argue that it is in this context that films such as *Wohu Canglong* and *Cike Nie Yinniang* have replaced the Confucianism of the traditional martial arts film with Chan, a strand of Buddhist thought. Unlike the traditional martial arts film, which expects xia to do something heroic to restore the social order in a manner governed by Confucianist codes, neither *Wohu Canglong* nor *Cike Nie Yinniang* has a clear division between good and evil. Instead, both films are dubious about xia’s role in the jianghu. In addition, both films contain plots in which the main characters seek retirement. It is precisely the desire to leave jianghu that leads Atchley and Fan to argue that the two films enact Chan Buddhism’s enlightenment principle of *wu* (emptiness).

However, I argue that Daoism plays a much more significant role in shaping the films’ narratives of the main characters’ identities as marginalized migrants and their position in a changing jianghu of uncertainty. This is by no means to deny Chan’s influence on the two films. After all, Chan is a Sinicized Buddhist school of thought that absorbed elements from Daoism and borrowed Daoism’s terminologies in its script translation during its early dissemination stage. However, while both Chan and Daoism emphasize *wu*, inexpressibility, and the essence of nature, a key difference between the two doctrines stems from their understandings of the self in the process of achieving enlightenment.

**BECOMING A NON-XIA**

In their studies of Chinese thought, Qian Mu and Peter D. Hershock note that Chan Buddhism preaches forgetting and reducing, if not entirely sacrificing, the self to achieve the nature of virtue (in Buddha’s sense of the term)—an idea comparable to the Confucian code of *ren*. Emphasizing living in the present moment, Chan regards the act of being kind to others as a practice that reduces the self to *wuwo* (no self), a path leading to the realization of emptiness. Crucially, Chan emphasizes practicing kindness through living in society and participating in worldly affairs as they happen. Similarly, Confucianism’s *ren* stresses *renzheng ai ren* (benevolence is to love all people) and *zhishi ren ren, wu qiusheng yi hairen, you shasheng yi chengren* (the determined person of virtue will not seek to live at the expense of benevolence; they will even sacrifice their lives to preserve their virtue of benevolence).

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44. Fung, *Short History*, 241.


As such, both Chan and Confucianism place the self on a level of importance below the well-being of others and the social expectation of virtue. The only difference is that Chan regards *rushi* (entering the world, participating in worldly affairs) and ren as a preparation process leading to the enlightenment of wuwo, whereas Confucianism sees ren as an ultimate goal and regards rushi as an integral part of youwei to achieve this goal.

Rushi was deeply embedded in the martial arts genre’s convention of creating xia characters who are expected to deliver the virtue by performing ren. In the 1960s and 1970s, the portrayal of *nüxia* (female knight errants)—such as Tieh Mei (Han Hsiang-chin) in *Tie Niangzi* (*Iron Mistress*, Sung Tsun-Shou, 1969), Yang Hui-zhen (Hsu Feng) in *Xia Nü*, and Shi Fangyi (Shang Kuang Ling-feng) in *Wulin Long Hu Dou* (*The Bravest Revenge*, Chien Lung, 1970)—often serves to fulfill the mainstream patriarchal society’s expectation of a woman. Guided by the Confucian code of honor, their ultimate achievement is in fulfilling their roles as daughters, sisters, mothers, wives, and love interests for male xia. Even in King Hu’s *Xia Nü*, in which Yang Hui-zhen decides to leave jianghu and convert to become a nun, she does not do so until she gives birth to the son of Gu Sheng-tsaï (Shih Chun)—her scholar neighbor who helps her to escape execution by the notorious secret police organization Eastern Depot—so he could fulfill his patriarchal role of having an heir. Moreover, fugitive Yang comes out from her reclusion to rescue Gu and their child when they are in danger. As such, the film reduces Yang’s self and her existence to ones that serve the transformation of the male protagonist from a reluctant scholar to a xia-type character who is willing to fight against the cruelty of the Eastern Depot. It is through their conscious action of fulfilling the social expectation of serving others at the expense of themselves that these early female characters complete their transformation from swordswomen to xüxia.

By contrast, Daoism argues that one should not force or confine oneself “to the morality of human-heartedness and righteousness.” Unlike Chan’s wuwo, Daoism’s path to achieving emptiness is based on a conscious decision of being wuwei (no action, no achievement) to maintain the self. In withdrawing from worldly affairs or avoiding the center of a conflict, the Daoist yinshi achieves a form of wisdom known as *chushi* (exiting from the society, self-exile, seclusion) by walking away and refusing to participate.

Unlike Confucianism and Chan, Daoism places the self at the center of human action and argues that a person should follow their own instincts instead of those of others or society’s expectations. Daoism’s *chushi* belief, however, is not an escape from society entirely; instead, it is an attempt to “work out a system of thought that would give meaning to their action.” It is through this process of refusing and even rejecting social expectations that Daoists obtain the *dao* (way, path, ultimate principle) that leads to emptiness and rescues them from social and moral obligations.

The Daoist emphasis on the self’s position in the social order in *Wohu Canglong* and *Cike Nie Yinniang* is best illustrated through the differences
between the films’ older and younger generations of martial artists. While the older generations of martial artists, as represented by Li Mubai (Chow Yun-fat) in 
*Wohu Canglong* and Jiaxin (Sheu Fang-yi) in *Cike Nie Yinniang*, continue to uphold Confucian codes, such as xiao (filial piety) and zhong (loyalty), the younger generations of martial artists, as represented by Jen in the former and Nie Yinniang in the latter, choose to follow their own instincts and question the constraints of Confucianist social and family expectations.

It is worth noting that although both the older martial artists, Li and Jiaxin, are Daoist practitioners in the films, their actions unmistakably lead them toward Confucianism. Originally stemming from a common source—namely the *Dao De Jing*—Daoism has separate philosophical and religious strands. While the English term *Daoism* doesn’t distinguish between them, accepting the religious and philosophical currents within the belief system as interchangeable, some of their key ideas remain distinct and even oppose one another. The philosophical and religious strands, for instance, stress wuwei and chushi, but the Daoist religion—unlike the philosophical strand—absorbs ideas from Confucianism and puts forward a hierarchical system of deities. A hierarchical relationship of master and disciple follows from this, borrowing from the Confucian notion of xiao.

Like their counterparts in the 1960s and 1970s martial arts films, Li and Jiaxin regard protecting the jianghu order and the central imperial court’s stability as their duty. As a result, Li in *Wohu Canglong*, despite his wish to retire, actively seeks to retrieve the stolen Green Destiny Sword—a Wudang treasure symbolizing orthodox jianghu codes. Moreover, Li feels obligated to avenge his late master Southern Crane as an act of xiao. He also suppresses his love for Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh) for the sake of adhering to yi (lateral loyalty) to his late friend who was also Yu’s fiancé. Kin-Yan Szeto points out that Li’s attempt to indoctrinate Jen stems from a concern that the lack of discipline training might lead the young swordswoman to become a “poisoned dragon” who rejects the Confucianist moral codes of jianghu.

Similarly, Jiaxin’s actions in *Cike Nie Yinniang* are equally coded as Confucianist. Born to a royal family, Jiaxin converts to become a Daoist nun at a young age, and her twin sister Princess Jiacheng marries the lord of Weibo Tian Xu. Yet both sisters carry the burden of defending the central imperial court’s interests by influencing and suppressing the autonomous regional force, Weibo, that increasingly seeks its independence. Whereas Jiacheng fulfills her royal duty via an arranged political marriage, Jiaxin defends the imperial court’s sovereignty by training young martial artists, including Nie, to operate political assassinations. In both cases, the twin sisters sacrifice their freedom and happiness to fulfill zhong to their family and the imperial court.

49. Fung, 3.


In the two films, neither Li nor Jiaxin prioritizes personal interests over the jianghu or the central imperial court. However, in suppressing their own desires for the sake of the social order and expectations, neither manages to achieve dao in the philosophical sense. Unlike early martial arts films in which xia’s self-sacrifice is often celebrated as a heroic act, both Wohu Canglong and Cike Nie Yinniang question the Confucian moral code and its constraints on the individual’s self.  

In contrast to Li and Jiaxin, the young swordswomen Jen and Nie reject the social and family duties bestowed upon them. From an aristocratic family, Jen has a distaste for the rigid manners, ritual protocol, arranged marriages, and doctrines of jianghu. She has a romance with the bandit leader Luo Xiaohu (Chang Chen) despite the patriarchal society’s expectation that a woman keep her virginity until her wedding. She steals the Green Destiny Sword simply for the excitement offered by the adventure in jianghu—even though her actions risk damaging her family’s reputation. To fulfill her desire to become a great martial artist, she secretly studies high-level combat techniques from Wudang’s martial arts manual and hides the knowledge from her mentor, Jade Fox (Cheng Pei-pei). She fights with a group of martial artists and smashes an inn to pieces simply because she does not like the way she is questioned. In this regard, Jen violates the expectations of Confucianist xia in the jianghu and subverts the role of the submissive woman in a patriarchal society.

Jen’s actions to some degree place her on a par with Legalism and its notion of xia as those who transgress and challenge power and authority. However, the motivation behind Jen’s actions is not to change patriarchal society or reshape the jianghu order, but to follow her own instincts in her search for the self. In the film’s iconic bamboo scene, Li and Jen exchange their divergent understandings of the path to the true self. While Li is convinced that there is a true (Confucian) virtue beneath Jen’s apparent unruliness and tries to persuade the young swordswoman to be his disciple, Jen directly questions him: “Old foxes like you, what do you know about seeing a true heart?” According to the Dao De Jing, dao is an absolute concept of self-nature. Since dao is the ultimate disposition governing the whole cosmos, nothing can govern dao but itself. As such, deliberately pursuing kindness or indoctrinating ren to guide an individual’s behavior is unnatural and thus does not lead the way to dao. To Jen, Li’s discipline training, knowledge of jianghu’s rules, and his xia reputation only represent a surrender of the true self to external pressure from society.

Rejecting Li’s offer to teach her the xia codes and probe the social boundaries of acceptable behavior, Jen uses her unruliness to express her true self. James McRae argues that the tension between social expectations and one’s natural desires, corresponding to Confucian and Daoist understandings of self-cultivation, ultimately guides the conflict at the heart of the


53. Qian, Zhongguo Sixiang Shi, 69.
Despite her surroundings and the older generation of martial artists who constantly remind her of her position in a patriarchal society and jianghu, Jen eventually empowers herself by leaving her assigned life behind and following “the path of her freedom and of her temperamental and natural disposition.” As Ang Lee has commented, neither Jen’s family nor her lover Luo Xiaohu can confine her by that point, as Jen’s pursuit of the self lifts her beyond worldly affairs. In this regard, Jen’s challenge to the social order, rather than serving as an effort to change the entire social system, is her way of removing the barriers that prevent her from pursuing the self.

Likewise, Hou Hsiao-hsien has noted that Cike Nie Yinniang is not about Nie’s morality but about her search for the self. This is demonstrated by one key prop in the film, the mirror. It appears a few times either visually, in shots, or in the tale recited about the blue bird dancing to her reflection. The film also has a character who is a mirror polisher, who shows his mirror to a group of innocent children who live in a remote village. As the film’s scriptwriter Xie Haimeng has stated, the mirror has a symbolic meaning in the film; if it lets people see themselves, it also reveals their true nature. In the original Tang tale, Nie marries the young mirror polisher. The film omits this relationship, in the process emphasizing the mirror polisher’s identity as a complete outsider of Weibo, the central imperial court, and jianghu. According to Xie, the young mirror polisher serves as Nie’s mirror, through whom she sees and realizes her own self.

Trained as an assassin, Nie decides not to follow the order of her master. She abandons the task of killing her childhood sweetheart, the new Weibo lord Tian Ji’an (Chang Chen). Indeed, her decision could be seen as an act of benevolence toward Tian, according to Stephen Teo. However, it could also be interpreted as buren (no or without ren) to mass civilians who might be caught in the potential warfare, buzhu (no loyalty) to the central imperial court, and buxiao (no filial piety) to her master. Unlike her master Jiaxin who regards eliminating potential threats to the central imperial court as an obligation, Nie decides to leave the conflict as it is. In contrast to the Confucian ren, Daoism argues tiandi buren (Heaven and earth do not act from the impulse of any wish to be benevolent). The Daoist idea buren does not mean one should act unkindly. Instead, it stresses that the dao of nature does not differentiate so-called kindness and unkindness; they are subjective

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55. Szeto, Martial Arts Cinema, 45.
59. Xie, 79.
and changeable. Thus, there is no need to deliberately pursue or practice benevolence.

In this regard, Daoism’s notion of wuwei does not oppose all action. Rather, it highlights a person’s conscious decision (which is also an action) of withholding or avoiding the performance of a certain action, including ren, zhong, and xiao, that is forced upon them. Interestingly, unlike conventional martial arts films that often contain extended fighting sequences, *Cike Nie Yinniang* focuses more on Nie’s exit than her actual fighting. Throughout the film, Hou uses long takes to show Nie walking away from various fight scenes and disappearing offscreen, which is precisely what she does in her farewell to her master Jiaxin. Even in the limited combat scenes, such as the one in which Nie defeats Lady Tian (Zhou Yun) in a woodland, the choreography is deliberately brief and simple, reduced to basic slashes, followed again by a long take of Nie walking out of the shot.

As noted earlier, both *Wohu Canglong* and *Cike Nie Yinniang* tell a story of intergenerational conflicts between the older generations who follow, practice, and to some degree become victims of Confucian doctrine and the younger generation who favors personal instinct and the self over social obligations. Although Jen’s and Nie’s decisions to follow their own hearts challenge authority and established rules to various degrees, neither of them changes the system or consciously fights against the social order. The challenges they present to the jianghu and society are a result of their decision to leave established codes behind and disregard existing rules. The absence of all intention to alter existing codes, defend the existing order, or build new rules suggests that the two young martial artists cannot be seen as Confucianists or Legalist xia. Their departures from society and withdrawals from conflict suggest that both characters adopt the Daoist ethos of wuwei and pursue being a self-exiled non-xia.

**HUNDUN (VAGUENESS) AND DIASPORIC NARRATIVES OF WUWEI**

That *Wohu Canglong* and *Cike Nie Yinniang* embrace Daoism ultimately argues for further reflection on Ang Lee’s and Hou Hsiao-hsien’s own diasporic identities as second-generation waishengren existing on the fringe of an ever-changing Taiwan society. At the turn of the 1950s, many first-generation waishengren followed the KMT government to Taiwan. While the island was used as a temporary base at the time, many of those migrants maintained cultural ties to mainland China. Unlike their fathers’ generation, Lee and Hou were born or grew up in Taiwan. Accordingly, their attachment to the greater China is more of an imagined one—through cultural heritage and education—than from direct experience.

In comparison with first-generation waishengren filmmakers, such as Lee Hsing, Sung Tsun-Shou, and Pai Ching-Jui, whose films often incorporate themes pertaining to great-China patriotism, the postwar generation more often focuses on Taiwan as a changing society, on historical trauma

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62. Hou Hsiao-hsien’s family migrated to Taiwan in 1948 when Hou was one year old. Ang Lee’s family migrated to Taiwan in 1949, and five years later Lee was born in Chaozhou Town in Pingtung County.
during and after China’s Civil War, and on intergenerational relationships as illustrated in films of the New Taiwanese Cinema. These themes can be seen in a range of films, from Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *Beiqing Chengshi* (*A City of Sadness*, 1989) and Edward Yang’s *Guling jie Shaonian Sharen Shijian* (*A Bright Summer Day*, 1991) to Ang Lee’s *Yinshi Nan Nü* (*Eat Drink Man Woman*, 1994).

The social connection to One China was marginalized under the DPP’s administration after the party won the presidential election in 2000. DPP’s intensified Taiwanization and de-Sinicization campaigns have substantially changed Taiwan’s political and cultural landscape in the new millennium. One measure of the influence of these campaigns on the film industry is the change of titles for the cinema’s official yearbook. From 1969 onward, it was called *China Cinema: The Republic of China*. Later, in 2005, it became *Taiwan Cinema Yearbook*.

Lee’s and Hou’s martial arts films are also a measure of change, this time of the second-generation waishengren’s search for self-identity. In comparison with native Taiwanese and early migrants who received Japanization education during the colonial period and the younger generation who grew up in an increasingly de-Sinicized and Taiwanese society, many of the second-generation waishengren received traditional Chinese education and grew up in a time when the unification of greater China was constantly promoted as a cornerstone of national belonging. It is not surprising, then, that both Lee and Hou have admitted that they developed a personal interest in making martial arts films when they were young.

Yet both directors only made their first martial arts films later in their careers. Lee admitted that, after his “Father Knows Best” trilogy of *Tui Shou* (*Pushing Hands*, 1991), *Xiyan* (*The Wedding Banquet*, 1993), and *Yinshi Nan Nü*, he was not confident enough to make a martial arts film set in pre-modern China, and it was only after he completed three English-language films—*Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *The Ice Storm* (1997), and *Ride the Devil* (1999)—that he was finally ready. According to Lee, by then his established fame enabled him to get the project funded, but more importantly, he gained confidence in his directorial skills that would permit him to

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tackle a complex project that combines martial arts fantasy with a “humanistic ambience.”

Similarly, Hou had been interested in Nie Yinniang’s story for years but did not move forward with his film because it took time to find the right actress to play the main character. It was not until 2000 after Hou Hsiao-hsien cast Shu Qi in *Qianxi Manbo* (*Millennium Mambo*, 2001) that he was in a position to solve the casting problem. However, at the time, Hou was already contracted to film *Kohi Jiko* (*Café Lumière*, 2003) and *Le voyage du ballon rouge* (*Flight of the Red Balloon*, 2007). Unlike a few mainland filmmakers, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, who quickly followed the global success of Lee’s *Wohu Canglong* to produce martial arts blockbusters, Hou decided to hold off on his project. Even when he finished *Le voyage du ballon rouge*, Hou spent another year researching the historical background of Nie’s tale, that of the Tang dynasty (618–907), before he started preproduction in 2009.

The long preparation in some ways shows that both filmmakers appear to be motivated by the Daoist idea of wuwei in their filmmaking practices. In other words, during the (pre)production process, they sought to lay down deeper cultural roots and did not take action—in this case, making the martial arts films—until they felt that the moment was right. To some degree, then, there is a parallel between these directors and their characters. As Hou once commented, what Nie does most as an assassin is not kill but wait. Indeed, *Cike Nie Yinniang* frequently shows Nie waiting in the trees, in the woods, behind screens and curtains, and on the roof. This waiting gives Nie time to listen, observe, and arrive at a decision (to leave), as demonstrated in the scene in which she hides on a ceiling beam at Tian Ji’an’s official court when Tian’s officials debate about Weibo’s relationship with the central imperial court and the action that Weibo should take.

In addition, whereas both films claim Confucianism, Chan, and Daoism as influences on their characters and their development, it is the search for self-realization by the young martial artists that appealed to the two filmmakers most. Lee revealed that the script of *Wohu Canglong* borrowed many ideas from *Dao De Jing*, and to him, Jen is the real hero in the film; she “does not scruple to pursue her true self.” Likewise, Hou admitted that he was attracted to Nie’s story because the film’s Daoist elements make the character different from the traditional xia.

Daoism’s appeal to Lee and Hou is inseparable from their own experiences as second-generation waishengren in a fast-changing society. Throughout their filmmaking careers, both directors witnessed Taiwan’s transformation from a Sino-centric to a de-Sinicized society. During this
transformation, many second-generation waishengren’s hybrid identities remained marginal, ambiguous, and uncertain. Lee explains, “[I am] a mixture of many things and confusion of many things. I’m not native Taiwanese, so I’m alien in a sense in Taiwan today with the native Taiwanese pushing for independence. But when I go back to China, I’m a Taiwanese.” Similar to Hou describes his hybrid identity as one of a “Taiwanese film-maker who is ‘culturally Chinese.’”

These fused identities reveal why the two young swordswomen Jen and Nie were appealing to Lee and Hou. Much like these second-generation waishengren filmmakers, both Jen and Nie are caught in a conflict between a central power that wants to maintain its control and a regional force that seeks autonomy. As a flashback in Wohu Canglong reveals, Jen’s father was a high-ranking official who was in charge of regional stability and administration in Xinjiang before the family was relocated to Beijing. Although it is not explicitly explained in the film, Xinjiang was a highly autonomous region that often posed a threat to the central imperial court’s control during the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). This threat is exemplified in the scene in which Luo Xiaohu and his gang attack Jen’s family on their way back to Beijing even though the family is guarded by armed soldiers. Luo even sneaks into Jen’s Beijing residence to ask her to abandon her family and leave with him back to Xinjiang. Similarly, Cike Nie Yinniang is set in autonomous Weibo where the growing regional force is becoming rebellious and developing a desire for independence from the central imperial court, which tries to suppress the threat through various tactics, including political marriage and assassinations.

Like Lee and Hou, Jen and Nie are members of a second-generation diaspora who grew up in the autonomous region but received Sino-centric education. In the films, Jen and Nie are pulled between a centralized authority (as represented by their families and masters) and a regional force that opposes the central authority (represented by Luo Xiaohu in Wohu Canglong and Tian Ji’an in Cike Nie Yinniang). However, instead of choosing a side in the conflict, the two young swordswomen decide to stay out of the friction between the center and the regional and avoid being consumed by their dilemmas of identity.

Szeto argues that the martial arts genre enabled Lee to capture Jen’s marginality in Wohu Canglong, often as an outsider to the mainstream society; the “valorization of the marginal is an ideological subversion of Sinocentrism that continues with the Mainland Chinese sense of cultural superiority,” she writes. Jen seems to have embodied Lee’s own self-contemplation and interest in such forms of subversion. Indeed, the director has commented on his father’s impact on his own sense of belonging: “On the one hand, I sought for self-fulfillment and rebellion; and on the other hand, I felt deep guilt for not carrying on the duties. Such ambivalence is not just my feeling.

73. Hou Hsiao-hsien, quoted in Wilson, New Taiwanese Cinema, 76.
74. Szeto, Martial Arts Cinema, 57.
to my father, but also my feeling to the shifting of Chinese culture in Tai-
wan.” 75 However, Lee’s portrayal of the marginal is more than an ideological
subversion of Sino-centrism. As Lee further states, “To me, a Chinese father
is the origin of pressure, responsibility, self-respect, and honor. . . . From my
father’s generation, I saw the heritage of Chinese culture in Taiwan and its
impact on my own development.” 76 In a sense, Lee, through the character
Jen, questioned the diaspora’s centripetal connection with, and centrifugal
departure from, their (Chinese) cultural roots.

Caught in a liminal space, the ambiguity of the diaspora’s sense of
belonging is not always easily articulated or expressed. In this regard, it is
not surprising that both Wohu Canglong and Cike Nie Yinniang have open
endings regarding Jen’s and Nie’s destinies. Leaving audiences few clues as
to Jen’s and Nie’s futures, these open endings illustrate Daoism’s belief in the
inexpressibility of the hundun (vagueness, bafflement). Wohu Canglong ends
with Jen jumping off a cliff and floating down in the air, slowly. Unlike the
original novel, which gives a clear conclusion (Jen survives the jump, and the
novel provides a comment on her decision to walk away and hide from soci-
ety), the film leaves her fate open. 77 More importantly, with no explanation
of Jen’s motivations, the ending leaves audiences pondering the real reason
behind her leap and its implications.

Cike Nie Yinniang also denies the viewer a definitive answer about Nie’s
fate. In the original Tang tale, Nie is at first employed by Tian Ji’an as an
assassin to kill Tian’s political rival Liu Changyi, a regional military governor
sent by the central imperial court. However, Nie comes to admire Liu’s code
of honor and instead decides to serve and protect Liu—an action that codes
her as a Confucianist xia who guards the “true” ruler of the name. 78 Despite
his importance to the novel, the character of Liu Changyi is nowhere to be
found in the film, which raises unanswered questions about who represents
the true ruler of the name. Moreover, unlike the original tale, in which Nie
chooses sides among the rivals, the film does not provide closure to Weibo’s
conflict with the central imperial court. Instead, it ends with a long take of
Nie and the mirror polisher walking across a vast field until their bodies
disappear. Consisting only of a natural landscape—of mountains, lakes,
and a cloudy sky—the last shot positions Nie in a space that is removed from
human society. Furthermore, the film deliberately keeps Nie and the mirror
polisher’s relationship vague by removing the original plot of their marriage
from the tale. As such, the ending of Cike Nie Yinniang leaves the audience
wondering where and whether Nie will settle.

Leaving room for interpretation, these ambiguous endings reinforce the
inexpressibility of the route to dao. In Wohu Canglong, Jen does not always
know what she wants. Her curiosity and unruly (and sometimes paradoxical)
behavior are her way of searching for the self. In Cike Nie Yinniang, Nie only

75. Szeto, 57.
76. Zhang, Huaren Zongheng Tianxia, 120.
77. Wang Dulu, Wohucanglong [Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon] (Taiyuan: Beiyue Liter-
78. For the original Tang tale, see Fei Xing, “Nie Yinniang,” collected in Xie, Xing Yun Ji,
241.
speaks nine sentences throughout the entire film. Written to be a character with Asperger’s syndrome, Nie cannot articulate or express herself explicitly through words, even though she is clearly in tune with her feelings and her internal struggle. As such, both characters’ choices to withdraw from the jianghu are based on an instinctive response toward the hundun of a changing society.

It should be pointed out that Jen’s and Nie’s names themselves suggest the Daoist idea of inexpressibility. While the character long in Jen’s Chinese name Yu Jiaolong (transliteration meaning, Jade Gorgeous Dragon) associates Jen with the hidden dragon in the film title, Nie Yinniang’s name (transliteration meaning, Nie Hidden Lady) also symbolizes a space somewhere “between the light and the shadow.” In both cases, names are used to foreshadow the characters’ eventual decisions to hide—to distance themselves from the conflicting sides that they also have some sort of connection with. Through their rejection of participating in the conflict between the central and the regional, both characters display hesitancy toward their unknown futures. Their wuwei is a result of an inexpressible liminal identity, one shaped by the experiences of a marginalized second-generation diaspora.

The complex relationship between the centralized imperial court and rebellious regional powers in the two films finds parallels in the current cross-strait tensions between the PRC and Taiwan. Despite the current conflict between pro-greater China and pro-independence camps in Taiwan and the strong beliefs held by various political parties on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, the fact is that, at the time of this writing, the political future of Taiwan is unknown. According to a survey conducted by the Election Study Center at National Chengchi University, the number of Taiwanese citizens who recognize themselves as Taiwanese is growing, and, in 2005, the figure surpassed those who regarded themselves as both Taiwanese and Chinese for the first time. However, in another survey carried out by the Election Study Center, the majority of Taiwanese citizens indicated that they favor policies that maintain the current cross-strait relationship and delay any decisions related to Taiwan’s national status, revealing a widespread ambivalence toward immediate change, either in the form of unification or independence.

These surveys show that many Taiwanese citizens prefer to wait, observe, and take no radical action, or in the Daoist term wuwei, to act only when the right moment for social change presents itself. During this wuwei period, people are questioning, reflecting on, and meditating on their own identity as well as Taiwan’s relationship with greater China. In this regard, Lee’s and

79. Xie, Xing Yun Ji, 19.
80. Xie, 36.
82. Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, “Taiwan Minzhong Tong Du Lichang Qushi Fenxi” [Taiwan independence vs. unification with the mainland], accessed January 10, 2022, https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?id=7805&id=6962.
Hou’s martial arts films and the Daoist principles therein capture the dilemmas of identity inherent in today’s Taiwan and in Taiwan’s ambiguous status on the global stage, especially for the Taiwanese diaspora.

**CODA**

Creating unique Chinese cinematic universes, jianghu and the associated film genre of martial arts films provide audiences with a space for imagining social organization and relationships. Taiwanese martial arts films have shifted from an emphasis on Confucian codes of honor in the 1960s and 1970s to the Daoist pursuit of the self in the new millennium. This change corresponds to the island’s shifting political landscape, particularly in terms of de-Sinicization and Taiwanization. Although *Wohu Canglong* and *Cike Nie Yinniang* represent rare instances of the Taiwanese martial arts films over the last two decades, these films are culturally significant for having brought Daoist thinking to question Taiwan’s own diasporic identity. For directors Lee and Hou, Daoism’s wuwei provides a useful tool to examine the diaspora’s sense of belonging in autonomously ruled regions.

However, it simply must be pointed out that in the current political context, in which there is a push for increased Taiwanization, the voices of Chinese migrant filmmakers, including second-generation waishengren, are being marginalized in Taiwan. Hou’s *Cike Nie Yinniang* remains, for now, the last Taiwanese martial arts film.83 Not only have younger generations of Taiwanese filmmakers steered away from stories about China and Chinese history (and thus the martial arts genre)—focusing primarily on local stories and Taiwan’s global connections beyond China—but Taiwanese audiences also have shown less and less interest in films produced by mainland China and Hong Kong.84 These shifts have ensured the disappearance of Chinese diasporic narratives within Taiwanese cinema.

Over the last two decades, intensified political conflict has resulted in soaring nationalism on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. Facing a difficult sociopolitical situation, Lee and Hou, as internationally acclaimed Taiwanese auteurs, are frequently caught between opposing views regarding Taiwan’s future and cultural belonging, as exemplified by the political tensions at the 55th Golden Horse Awards ceremony in 2018.85 The Daoism of their films in a sense reveals their own ambiguous positionality as Chinese diasporic Taiwanese filmmakers. It is thus understandable that after 2007’s *Se, Jie* (*Lust, Caution*), Lee has only focused on English-language films, and Hou has not

83. This observation is made after the author surveyed every Taiwanese production listed in the Taiwan film yearbook from 2015 to 2020.
84. Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute, *Taiwan Dianying Nianjian [Taiwan Cinema Yearbook 2018]* (Taipei: Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute Press, 2019), 96.
85. At 2018’s 55th Golden Horse Awards ceremony, Fu Yue, the director of the Best Documentary *Women de Qingchun, zai Taiwan* (*Our Youth in Taiwan*), expressed her wish to see Taiwan as a truly independent country in her award acceptance speech on stage. Her speech was immediately regarded by many mainland Chinese filmmakers as confrontational. In 2019, the 56th Golden Horse Awards was boycotted in mainland China. A few Hong Kong films also withdrew under political pressure. As the chairperson of the Golden Horse executive committee, Ang Lee has been careful to keep off subject when answering questions that probe his political position.
directed a film since the release of *Cike Nie Yinniang* in 2015. As do Jen and Nie, both Lee and Hou are moving away from the center of conflict by not participating or refusing to take a position on the region's political tensions.

In a sense, the shifting themes of the Taiwanese martial arts film, from the Confucianism popularized in the 1960s and 1970s to the Daoist idea of *wuwei* more recently, reveal the distinctiveness of waishengren filmmakers. While Hong Kong and mainland Chinese filmmakers continue to adhere to conventional Confucianism, with narratives of national unification and sovereign integrity, Lee and Hou adopted Daoist ideas, using the philosophy as an outlet to hide, walk away, observe, or avoid direct participation in an era of political uncertainty.

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86. In October 2023, Hou Hsiao-hsien’s family announced that the director had stopped work on his planned feature film *Shulan He Shang (On the Shulan River)* and retired from filmmaking due to dementia. Thus, *Cike Nie Yinniang* is Hou’s last film. Just as his protagonist Nie who exits the jianghu, Hou exits the filmmaking world.