

Crouching Tiger

Hidden Dragon

Creating Tranquility and Intimacy Using
Solos

A Film Music Analysis by Drew Redman

Table of Contents

Introduction-----	03
Plot Summary-----	04
Narrative Themes-----	10
Finding Inner Peace-----	12
Action Sequences and Percussion-----	14
Melodic Themes & Motifs-----	16
Li Mu Bai & Shu Lien's Love Theme-----	17
Jen & Lo's Love Theme -----	18
Lo's Song (The Desert Love Song) -----	19
Conclusion-----	21

Introduction

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is a film made in 2000 based on the fourth novel of a five part epic (“The Crane-Iron Series”) by Wang Dulu. The novels are of a Chinese literary genre called *wuxia*, which translates to “martial hero”. Generally, *wuxia* stories consists of a protagonist that has considerable fighting skills, no lord or master, and a strong, righteous moral code.¹

The film was directed by Ang Lee, and the score composed by Tan Dun. Tan Dun is a Chinese contemporary classical composer who - having been raised in a village in the Hunan province of China - grew up with a heavy influence from rituals of the village shaman. These rituals were usually set to music comprised of natural items, such as water or rock. Having studied music in both China at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, and in the United States at Columbia University, he has formed his unique voice fusing both Eastern and Western traditions.² These influences are very apparent in his score for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

In this analysis, I will examine how the score’s use of soloing instruments of both western and Chinese origin gives the film a unique character and warmth. While creating a very intimate and emotive support for the story, the solos often reflect the characters’ inner emotional dialogue, whilst creating an overall colour to the score that ultimately supports the main theme of the film - the search for inner peace.

¹ Teo, Stephen (2009). *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition*. Edinburgh University Press. pp. 17–19.

² Frank J. Oteri. "Tradition and Innovation: The Alchemy of Tan Dun." *Tan Dun Online*, October 15, 2007. Accessed November 1, 2013.
<http://www.tandunonline.com/mystory>

Plot Summary

The film is set in the Qing Dynasty during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor. The protagonist, Li Mu Bai, is a legendary Wudang swordsman that has given up his meditations, having failed to reach enlightenment. There was something keeping him from finding inner peace - his love for Shu Lien.

He seeks out his old friend Yu Shu Lien to ask her to transport his legendary sword - "The Green Destiny" - to their mutual friend Sir Te in Beijing. This was a difficult decision for him as he had yet to avenge his master's murder by killing the Jade Fox.

Shu Lien successfully delivers the sword to Sir Te who reluctantly accepts the grand gift, claiming that he will be the sword's custodian. Te then discusses the relationship between Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien, stating that although they are both brave warriors, they are cowards for not expressing their feelings for each other.

When placing the sword in a room that seems to display several other artifacts, Shu Lien meets Jen, the daughter of Governor Yu - a visiting aristocrat. Jen, who is to be wed soon in an arranged marriage, is enamored and envious of Shu Lien's adventurous lifestyle.

That evening, a masked thief wearing all black sneaks into Sir Te's estate to steal the sword. A guard named Bo catches the thief in the act, but is quickly outmatched by the thief's superior martial arts skills. Bo sounds the alarm and gives chase after the thief. The thief easily evades Bo and the other guards by running on rooftops, however, the thief is then confronted by Shu Lien.

During their fight, somebody interferes by blowing a dart at Shu Lien. Shu Lien catches the dart, but while she is distracted, the thief manages to escape somewhere in Governor Yu's compound.

During the chase, Bo had crossed paths with an undercover police man named Tsai and his daughter from a different region of China. They were hunting a criminal named Jade Fox, and they believed her to be hiding among the Yu family's staff. After posting "wanted" fliers around Beijing, the Jade Fox sends the policeman a message to meet her to settle things. Tsai, his daughter and Bo meet with Jade Fox to kill her. Even with numbers, the three of them find themselves outmatched by the Jade Fox.

Li Mu Bai enters the conflict, and effortlessly bests the Jade Fox. Ten years earlier, the Jade Fox had poisoned Li Mu Bai's master, and stole the Wudang secret manual. Just as Li Mu Bai was about to finally avenge his master, the thief interferes wielding the Green Destiny sword, and although the thief is clearly no match for Li Mu Bai, she proves to be more talented than her master, the Jade Fox. The conflict ends after the Jade Fox kills Tsai. Jade Fox and the thief make their escape.

With a sword theft escalating to murder, and implications that both the thief and the murderer are hiding within General Yu's compound, Sir Te cannot ignore the situation any longer. The situation if handled without subtlety, would prove disastrous for the Yu family, and could place Te in a politically troubling situation, so Shu Lien decides to help.

Having suspected Jen to be the thief, she meets with Jen and her mother Mrs. Yu. She subtly hints that the thief should return the sword in order to avoid harming their family's reputations.

The ploy works. Later that night, Jen - wearing her thief clothing - goes to return the sword, but is met by Li Mu Bai. Li Mu Bai, having fought with her the other night, saw potential in her martial arts skills and offers to teach her the discipline of Wudang. Jen seems slightly intrigued by the idea, but is mostly repelled by the thought of siding with her master's enemy. They have a small fight, where Li Mu Bai effortlessly and calmly disarms Jen. She flees, leaving the Green Destiny with Li Mu Bai.

At night, the man seen earlier interfering with the first conflict between the thief (Jen) and Shu Lien sneaks into Jen's sleeping quarters. When Jen recognizes the man as Lo, they embrace and kiss.

Flash back to years earlier when bandits raided the Yu's caravan in the desert. Lo, also known as Dark Cloud, was the leader of the bandits, and managed to steel a comb that was precious to Jen. With her mother having fainted, Jen steals one of the bandit's horses and pursues Lo. She follows him for a while, they have several fights, and eventually Jen passes out from dehydration.

She wakes up at Lo's cave. He has been taking care of her. At first, she resists his kindness, but eventually, they fall in love. Yu's men search the desert for Jen, whom they believe to be kidnapped. Lo suggests Jen return to her family, with the intention of legitimizing himself to one day be able to impress her father so they can be together.

He then tells her of a legend of a man that jumped off the mountain to make a wish come true. The man's heart was pure, so his wish came true, and he did not die, but instead floated away, never to be seen again

Back to the present, Lo explains how he tried to make something of himself, but he was recognized as the famous bandit "Dark Cloud" everywhere he went. Since Jen

was due to be wed, he could not wait any longer. Jen sternly refuses him with very subtle reluctance.

The next day, Jen is a part of a ceremonial wedding parade, when Lo makes a scene. Yelling for Jen to come back to the desert with him. The Yu guards go after Lo, but he manages to escape on the rooftops.

Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai, however, manage to catch him, but decide to keep him hidden from the guards. They learn of Jen and Lo's backstory and decide to try and help them. Li Mu Bai sends him to the Wudang Mountain to wait for Jen.

On Jen's wedding night, she steals the Green Destiny again and runs away. During her travels she gets into a bar fight with people wishing to have a sparing match. She is rude and arrogant, but they are no match for her and the Green Destiny.

Meanwhile, Li Mu Bai tells Shu Lien that he had given up the Green Destiny and his journey to enlightenment to spend the rest of his days with her, because when he is with her, he feels at peace. Shu Lien's deceased husband was a brother by oath to Li Mu Bai, and had died protecting him. They had decided it would dishonour his memory if they were to be together. However, Li Mu Bai can no longer ignore his desires.

Jen eventually shows up at Shu Lien's home seeking help. Shu Lien tells Jen about Lo waiting for her at Wudang Mountain, and advises Jen to return to her family, offering to help Jen persuade them to let her live the life she wants.

On hearing that Lo was sent to Wudang Mountain through Li Mu Bai, Jen becomes angry with Shu Lien. Shu Lien can no longer put up with Jen's lack of appreciation for all the help they have given her, and breaks off their friendship.

Jen challenges Shu Lien to a fight. The Green Destiny sword makes Jen more

formidable than she otherwise would be. Sundering many of the weapons Shu Lien uses in the fight. Eventually, Shu Lien wins the fight, and gives Jen one last chance to see reason. Jen declines by striking a cheap blow to Shu Lien, cutting her arm.

Li Mu Bai arrives at this point. Angry that she hurt Shu Lien, he sternly gives Jen another chance to see reason. Like a rebellious adolescent, she refuses again and flies away. Li Mu Bai pursues, and follows her into a bamboo forest.

Much like their previous fights, Jen - even with the Green Destiny sword - is no match for Li Mu Bai. The confrontation is that of a teacher giving a lesson to a student. The fight leaves the forest and ends at a river, where Jen agrees to be his student if he can take the Green Destiny from her in three moves. Li Mu Bai, with little hesitation, takes the sword from her in a single move. Despite her word, Jen still refuses him.

Li Mu Bai then throws the Green Destiny off the nearby waterfall, and to his surprise, Jen jumps after it. She manages to retrieve the sword, but passes out in the process. Before Li Mu Bai can get to her, the Jade Fox flies in and takes the unconscious Jen.

Jen awakens in a cave - presumably the Jade Fox's hideout. The Jade Fox tells Jen to rest while she goes out. Li Mu Bai discovers the hideout. Jen attempts to confront him, but she has trouble moving properly. Jade Fox has drugged her.

Li Mu Bai gives her some kind of smelling salts to help snap her out of it enough to tell her where the Jade Fox is. Shu Lien and Bo arrive at the cave to find Jen and Li Mu Bai. They had followed the Jade Fox to the cave.

Suddenly, out of the shadows, the Jade Fox attacks Li Mu Bai with a volley of darts. Whirling the Green Destiny sword he seemingly deflects all the darts and deals a

fatal blow to the Jade Fox. Li Mu Bai then realizes he was hit with one of the poisoned darts. In the Jade Fox's dying last words, she reveals that she was actually aiming at Jen.

She felt betrayed by Jen, because Jen had been keeping information about techniques in the Wudang manual from her, and had then vastly surpassed her in fighting skills.

The poison affecting Li Mu Bai is a fatal one, but Jen knows what poison the Jade Fox used, and therefore, she also knows the antidote. She rushes away to retrieve the ingredients. Meanwhile, Li Mu Bai confesses his love for Shu Lien and dies before Jen can return.

Jen goes to meet Lo at the Wudang mountain. Their reunion, however, is very brief as she decides to jump off the mountain in order to make a wish come true. This wish, she asks Lo to make. His wish is for the two of them to be back in the desert together. Lo looks on with tears in his eyes as he watches Jen float away into the fog, knowing he will never see her again. It is a paradoxical ending since his wish is for them to be together, yet as the tail goes, for the wish to be granted, she must float away never to be seen again.

Narrative Themes

There are several themes throughout the film - a teacher-student relationship, forbidden love, poison, and the search for inner peace. These themes are portrayed through several characters in a parallel fashion.

The teach-student relationship focuses on Jen's desire to have someone to guide her. Having surpassed her master the Jade Fox, she felt lost. The opportunity to have a new master left her confused and conflicted because it would require her to betray her current master. With each offer from Li Mu Bai to train her, she could not help but feel slightly drawn to the promise of someone capable of giving her the guidance she desired, but was always repelled by her loyalty to the Jade Fox.

The poison theme can be seen in two respects. Poison is a weapon of the Jade Fox. She used it to kill Li Mu Bai, and his master. She also uses drugs to weaken Jen, and attempts to kill her using poisoned darts. Poison is considered a coward's weapon, signifying the Jade Fox's incapability to surpass her own limitations, thus being surpassed by her disciple, Jen.

Poison is also referenced on a more spiritual level in the film as well. The slow decay of a relationship through the betrayal of a loved one. The Jade Fox, with her dying words states, poison is "an eight year old girl, full of deceit."

The forbidden love theme is the most obvious theme of the film. Both of the love stories are about forbidden love. Jen cannot be with Lo because he is a lower class bandit, and she is an aristocrat's daughter. Jen's search for adventure stems from her desire for freedom from her parents - in regards to the arranged marriage - and from the constraints of society - in regards to the divide in classes.

Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien's forbidden love is very different. Out of respect for Shu Lien's deceased husband - who was also an oath brother to Li Mu Bai - they cannot be together. Where Jen and Lo's story is one of young, reckless love, Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien's story is much more mature and deep rooted.

The search for inner peace is perhaps the most important theme of the film. Whether it is about love or vengeance; finding inner peace is ultimately the goal. This theme can be seen most clearly through Li Mu Bai and Jen's characters.

Li Mu Bai, after years of loving a woman from a distance, comes to the realization that he cannot live without her, and when trying to reach enlightenment, he finds only immense pain and sorrow stemming from his desire to be with her. Whereas when he's with her, he feels at peace.

Jen, being a very conflicted character seeks many things - freedom, guidance, love - however, her anger and confusion cause her to push away her opportunities to attain these things. This anger and confusion is her lack of inner peace. She's so troubled that she cannot make the right decisions, and ends up needlessly hurting herself as well as those around her.

The interesting thing about this theme of peace is that it permeates the entire film through means that are less obvious than some of the other themes, such as forbidden love. The film makers achieve this visually through the cinematography (drawn out close-ups in slow motion to slow the pace of otherwise very active scenes); set design (fantastic peaceful landscapes, such as bamboo forests, or flowing waterfalls); and the choreography (dance-like action sequences that are beautiful and flowing). All of this is supported and enhanced by the music.

Finding Inner Peace

Although the music has several functions within the film, re-enforcing the theme of inner peace I believe to be its primary function. Love themes still have their place, as do action cues, however, the entire score, whether it be a love scene or a battle sequence, has a unified sound of tranquility, simplicity and sorrow, with few exceptions.

This sound is achieved primarily through clever instrumentation. Although an orchestra is used for the film, it is used very subtly. The majority of the music is solo instruments - mainly the cello, harp, dizi and erhu. There are other solo instruments used as well, such as the rawap - a Chinese lute - however, the cello, harp, dizi and erhu make up the majority of the melodic content of the score.

Tan Dun uses the orchestral accompaniment to add warmth, utilizing a lot of string pads, string motion in 8th or 16th notes, and the occasional dissonant chords to usher in brief moments of rising tension.

He also uses the orchestra to provide harmonic accompaniment and size. For example, the orchestra might be slowly introduced underneath a solo, thickening the sound, adding size and importance to the scene. However, this size increase is usually kept to a minimum in order to maintain the tranquility of the film. Occasionally there are moments in the film that require a larger sound - eg. entering the big city of Beijing. The orchestra takes on this role as well, however, these moments are generally brief, and far and few between.

The solo instruments themselves are used to great effect. The cello is very warm, rich and raw sounding, and is used for most of the main themes. The erhu is a

sharper sound as it is a Chinese violin of sorts, however, they still managed to achieve a certain warmth from the instrument while still maintaining the ethnic sound. This warmth may have been achieved in the mixing stage. Much of the time the cello and erhu are interchangeable; taking on call and response roles, or harmonizing with each other's melodies.

The harp's primary role is to provide harmonies to the other solo instruments, or to play a thematic ostinato that can be heard throughout the film. This ostinato suits the film very well by



maintaining the tranquil sound, but with a touch of sadness. It is because it is a very good base that it is used frequently throughout the film - sometimes even alone, underneath dialogue.

The dizi, a Chinese flute, is used similarly to the erhu - playing main themes and melodies - however, unlike the erhu, the dizi does not have the same relationship with the cello. The dizi adds a slightly different colour to the sound. Similar to the erhu by adding a Chinese sound, but with a breathy, woodwind quality. The dizi is also capable of playing very playful passages that the other string instruments are not quite able to do.³

The four instruments work very well together; the cello and harp providing warmth, and the erhu and dizi providing a Chinese, airy colour. Together, these four

³ Listen to the first 30 seconds of "*In The Old Temple*" from the supplementary material for an example of the harp ostinato and dizi flute

instruments create the unique sound of the film, however, there is one more element utilized frequently throughout the film - percussion.

Action Sequences and the Use of Percussion

During many of the action sequences, Chinese percussion is used with minimal to no melodic accompaniment. The action sequences involving quarrels between Jen and Shu Lien have only hand drums. Having the drums alone during a fight sequence gives the sense of action, motion and rhythm, while still maintaining the film's sound of simplicity. The rhythms used generally play off of the dance-like choreography of the martial arts sequences. The scene where Jen fights a tavern full of warriors is similar, however, the flute accompanies the drums to add a sense of playfulness - reflecting her immaturity as well as her enjoyment in the quarrel.

There are a few action cues during the desert flash back that have a unique flavour to them. The primary instruments used are the hand drums, and a lute-like Chinese instrument called the rawap.

The hand drums continue their role as supporting the choreography of the action. The rawap takes on the same role as the erhu - soloing to create intimacy, while the strummed timbre of the instrument creates the "sound of the desert" for the film.

During the scene where the bandits raid the Yu's caravan in the desert, the orchestra plays a larger role, accompanying the hand drums and the rawap. The orchestra takes on the task of adding size while hinting at new themes not heard until this point in the film - essentially introducing a variation of a theme before the actual

theme is itself introduced. This theme is Lo's song, and will be discussed further later on.

There are a few action sequences involving the Jade Fox that utilize both percussion and orchestra. These are much more tense, serious and even dangerous. A stark contrast separating the Jade Fox from the rest of the characters.

I believe this is a very important contrast to make as the Jade Fox is the only character in the film incapable of reaching inner peace due to a lifetime spent as an immoral, bitter, and resentful person. This is a very valid departure from the consistent tranquil sound of the score as it draws attention to this contrast in a very powerful, yet subtle way. The music itself is powerful, but the choice to show this contrast primarily through the music, gives it a sort of subliminal influence on the viewers, rather than blatantly telling the audience visually.

This subtlety is a key feature of the film. Ang Lee and Tan Dun's decision to underscore character's deeper emotions rather than focus on what's happening gives the music the capability to achieve this duality of powerful, yet subtle; action packed, yet calm; tranquil, yet sad.

Melodic Themes & Motifs

The narrative themes are not just realized by the timbre of the music, but also through the use of motifs. The two primary motifs used in the film are both love themes. There is the love theme of Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien (which also acts as the main theme of the movie), and Jen and Lo's love theme.

Both love themes have a beautiful sorrow to them. There are two elements at work here - adaptable melodies, and emotive performances. The melodies are not inherently sad, however, they are very malleable to the character's inner emotions and changing moods within the scene without necessarily having to change anything melodically or harmonically. I believe this is achieved in no small part due to the emotive performances by the soloists - specifically the erhu player and cellist. The soloists were given great freedom dynamically, expressively (namely glissandos and portamentos), and rhythmically. Essentially, Tan Dun gave the performers the freedom to make their instruments "weep" when necessary.

Yo Yo Ma was the soloist for the cello, and much like Tan Dun, he has a strong background in both Chinese and western styles of music making him the perfect performer for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon's* hybrid score.

Yo Yo Ma manages to play the cello like an erhu at times, giving the cello a slight Chinese quality when called for, and making the combination of the two instruments more nature without compromising the unique sound of each instrument. He accomplishes through the use of glissandos/portamentos, and how he uses trills. The erhu tends to use a lot of glissandos and trills as a technique. This technique, however, is not just ornamental, it has become part of the character of the erhu sound. By

implementing the same techniques, Yo Yo Ma successfully brings the two worlds together.

Li Mu Bai & Shu Lien's Love Theme

Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien's love theme seems to exemplify this the best of the two themes - which is perhaps why their love theme was also used as the main theme of the film. Their love theme focuses on erhu and cello solos performing a kind of call and response - often playing one part of the theme twice before hearing the same in the other instrument. For example, there is a scene in the film where Li Mu Bai is practicing his sword techniques seemingly alone in an empty courtyard one night. Unbeknownst to him, Shu Lien watches him for a time before approaching to talk to him.

In this scene the erhu plays the first five bar phrase, and the cello responds with the next seven bar phrase as seen in the transcription below.⁴

Li Mu Bai/Shu Lien's Love Theme

The musical transcription is presented in two systems. The first system shows the erhu part (treble clef) playing a five-bar phrase marked 'rubato' and 'mp'. The second system shows the cello part (bass clef) playing a seven-bar phrase. The notation includes various note values, rests, and phrasing slurs.

⁴ Listen to "Yearning of the Sword" for the cue to this scene.

They then continue this pattern throughout the rest of the theme by repeating the melody below.

Li Mu Bai/Shu Lien's Love Theme Cont.



The choice to have this interaction between the erhu and cello could be a reflection of the interactions between the two characters. They both love each other, but will not say so with words. The music takes over this role of inferring the character's inner emotional dialogue to the audience through the soloist's exchange.

Jen & Lo's Love Theme

Jen and Lo's love theme have many of the same elements in regards to melody and expressive performances - the themes are even harmonically compatible. However, this theme differs very slightly in function. Jen and Lo's love is young, and passionate.⁵

Jen/Lo's Love Theme



⁵ Listen to "Silk Road" starting at 1:22 to hear the above love theme.

There is a slight tinge of hope embedded within this theme that is not present in Li Mu Bai's motif, and as such, its variations are used with a much wider range of emotional contexts and functions. Including one that is entirely hopeful for the scene in which Lo convinces Jen to go back to her family, but promises to return to her a changed man, and a variation (image to the right) used as a transition.



Lo's Song (The Desert Love Song)

Lo's song doubles as a theme for the desert, and as an honorary love theme. As mentioned earlier, this theme is first introduced as a variation in the orchestra during the bandit raid. However, it is first introduced in full as source, not score.

Lo is singing this melody as he tends to his cooking fire before being hit over the head by a still vicious Jen. Jen escapes, only to pass out of dehydration and be rescued once again by Lo. After she recovers, he offers her fresh clothing and a bath. So that she feels comfortable, he starts to sing this song once again so that she can know that he's not peeking at her.



The manner in which he starts singing the song in her presence is very flirtatious. It's clear that he likes her, and is using the song as a part of his courting her. So although this theme is not technically used as a love theme, it is still an active part of their love story.

It is also worth noting that this source music is keeping with the tranquility of the film in the same manner as the score. That is, through the emotive performance of the musician, as well as the intimacy inherent in a solo instrument - in this case, Lo's solo voice.

Conclusion

Although the theme of unattainable romance is the primary content of the story of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, it is the underlying theme of finding inner peace that is the dominant concept of the film. Li Mu Bai finds peace in Shu Lien, and wishes to leave his warrior lifestyle behind to be with her. Meanwhile, Jen's turbulent and conflicting emotions cause her to make impulsive decisions in an attempt to find herself.

This theme is supported through the music by its overall sound of tranquility and simplicity. Although there are exceptions to this, the majority of the score sticks to this sound fairly consistently. Tan Dun achieves this by utilizing the orchestra, percussion and soloing instruments in various roles.

The orchestra's primary role is to control the size of the music while providing harmonic accompaniment. The orchestra's great dynamic range enables Tan Dun to make things sound huge when necessary or to simply support the soloing instruments harmonically, adding warmth to the overall tone.

The percussion is used primarily to support scenes rich with action and movement. Keeping the percussion simple, rhythmically active and small in size (meaning very few drums playing at a time) enables the music to support the action of the scene without adding size or tension. Any tension needed in the scene can be controlled through the accompaniment of the orchestra or soloing instruments, although several times there is no accompaniment at all.

The choice of soloing instruments - cello, harp, erhu and dizi - add to the sound of tranquility. The cello and harp add warmth, while the erhu and dizi add an airy, Chinese ethnicity to the sound.

The performances by the soloists play a huge role in blending the various soloing instruments. For example, the cello is played using techniques used to play the erhu - namely glissandos and trills - giving the cello an ethnic character to the sound.

The soloists are also given great freedoms dynamically, expressively, and rhythmically. This enables the melodies to really hone in on the underlying emotional dialogue of the characters in any given scene. It also creates an intimacy that greatly supports the theme of finding inner peace.

The love themes make up the main motifs of the film, and are great examples of all of the techniques and methods used by Tan Dun to create his sound for the score.

Tan Dun's score for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a very simple score by design. The music very successfully supports the visual aesthetics of the film while conveying the underlying emotional dialogue of the characters to the audience. This score is a fantastic illustration of the concept "less is more" - a concept that more film composers should consider adopting.