

**The Inevitable Dances With The Unpredictable: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon***  
by Michael Ventura  
*The Salt Journal – Summer, 2001*

**Part One**

From its first moments *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, by the Taiwanese director Ang Lee, announces that it is a spiritual tale -- and more, a tale of spiritual crisis. We see a tall, substantial man, Li Mu Bai [Chow Yun Fat], walking his horse through a 17th Century Chinese town. Because of the centeredness of his bearing and the surety of his gait, we are not surprised at the excited announcement shouted by servants: “*Master Li* is here!” He is an initiate, a Master. The shout alerts a woman of equal substance, Shu Lien [Michelle Yeoh]. Like Li she’s in her mid to late thirties. Her face is beautiful without any concessions to the merely pretty, a face of wisdom, discipline, and experience. Both their faces radiate great sorrow grounded in a capacity for joy - faces that serve as visual emblems of a thought expressed by the 15th Century Japanese Zen master Ikkyu: “Pleasure and pain are equal in a clear heart.” This, of course, is not an American notion; today Americans tend to operate on the premise that sorrow is a curse, or at best an inconvenience, to be “resolved” or “cured” or “healed,” so you don’t find such faces in our cinema. American films prefer the gaudy all-purpose smile of Julia Roberts, with its “I’m ok/you’re ok” veneer -- a pose that could not be more alien to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, where we are in the presence of two who strive for grace in the profoundest sense, yet accept tragedy as they accept sunlight: as a natural building-block of existence.

Shu Lien’s expression, upon hearing Li Mu Bai’s name, is a complex portrait of unadorned love. As is his, when he sees her. Their feelings for each other are so strong and evident that it’s almost shocking. Thus this film begins where most films promise to end (and usually fail or dodge the promise): with two people whose love, understanding, and acceptance of each other know no bounds. It is subtly disturbing to see such communion between two people in the first moments of a film, because it means that their deep relationship, of itself, will not be the answer to the dilemmas of the story (as it is in virtually all Hollywood tales). Rather, their communion is merely one element of their dilemma. So from the film’s first moments our usual cultural assumptions begin to work against us.

Their first conversation is as challenging to a New Age sensibility as it is to the aesthetic (or lack of it) that created The Great American Mall. Their relationship is such that without any preambles they immediately speak of spiritual states. Li Mu Bai tells Shu Lien that he has broken off his meditation in the mountains. “I came to a place of deep silence. I was surrounded by light. Time and space disappeared. I had reached a place my master never told me about.” “You were enlightened?” she asks tentatively. “I didn’t feel the bliss of enlightenment. I was surrounded by endless sorrow.” Which isn’t what any of us want to hear. If “a place of deep silence, surrounded by light,” cannot bring satisfaction, what can? He tells her: “I could not go on. I broke off my meditation.” “What was it?” she asks, fearfully. “Something I can’t let go of.” His eyes tell what that “something” is: it is her. Her eyes, in turn, express gratification and uncertainty: while

she seems thankful that he can't let go of her, one premise of their life (that "enlightenment" is more important than anything else) has been invalidated. What now?

Already both Western and Eastern ideals (romantic communion and spiritual enlightenment) have been found insufficient, as far as this tale is concerned. Every premise has been undercut. Every assumption has been discarded. And we are only about five minutes into the film.

Li Mu Bai is a warrior monk. Shu Lien is also a warrior; while not a monk, she clearly has shared his spiritual training and disciplines. They are both on what is known, in Eastern traditions, as a Path: that is, their spiritual quest is not merely a kind of leisure activity with no real bearing on how they live their days, earn their living, conduct their business and relationships; their Path is, in part, a rigorous moral code that demands one forsake security and even practicality, when necessary, to serve one's ideals; and their particular Path requires that Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien serve the greater community through their warrior arts. It is in the context of this moral vision that Li Mu Bai now makes the tragic mistake that sets the story in motion: he tells Shu Lien that, because of his meditation experience, he is giving up his sword. Shu Lien is alarmed, and she's right to be.

The sword Li Mu Bai carries is 400 years old, the finest in existence, and it is called "The Green Destiny." As another character, Master Te, soon says: "A great hero's weapon. He [Master Li] is the only one worthy of carrying it." For Li Mu Bai, to give up The Green Destiny is to give up *his* destiny. But you can't give up, or walk away from, a destiny. This, too, is not an American idea. Americans tend to be besotted with the notion that anyone can be and do anything -- which is antithetical to the concept of destiny. But first we mustn't confuse having a destiny with having a predetermined fate; rather, to have a destiny is to have a fate which it is one's duty to *fulfill*. To feel you have a destiny is to feel that you must grow into the dimensions required by that destiny. Thus a sense of destiny draws you forward in life, to do more, to be more, in order that this particular destiny may manifest in the world. One may fail one's destiny (it's *not* predetermined); but that means that one has failed one's role and place in the world, so that the world, the community, is then weaker than it might have been. (By contrast, to fail at a career is only to fail yourself.)

Put in other terms: Westerners tend to treat spiritual paths as a kind of conceptual buffet, choosing a little of this and a little of that as suits them for self-fulfillment. But the ancient sages would say that you are there to fulfill the Path, the Path isn't there to fulfill you. Once you choose a Path, you can't just get off it. That's the price of taking it. The Path is itself not a passive thing; it, too, has a will. If you try to get off it, the Path will *make* you take it -- dragging you along in ways that you're no longer in charge of. Li Mu Bai was entrusted by his Master with the great sword, The Green Destiny, after he'd become worthy of it and grown into its requirements. To simply lay it aside before instructing someone else to be equally worthy of it, is to fail one of The Green Destiny's demands. It is, in modern usage, to leave a vacuum of power. So now, since he won't take his Path, his Path is going to take him. Li Mu Bai's decision sets in motion the events that will destroy him.

Shu Lien takes the Green Destiny, as Li Mu Bai has asked, to their benefactor in Peking, Master Te, an aristocrat high in government circles. Visiting Master Te is Governor Tu and his family, including his 18-year-old daughter Jen [Zhang Ziyi].

Unbeknownst to any of them, Jen's governess is the bandit-warrior Jade Fox, the woman who long ago poisoned Li Mu Bai's master. She's been hiding out as a servant in Governor Tu's court, and has secretly been instructing Jen in martial arts and banditry. Jen is about to be married into another noble family, but that's not what she wants; her dream is to be a warrior-bandit. As soon as Shu Lien sets eyes on Jen, her face registers that Jen will be someone important in her life. It is a subtle, swift, but splendid moment: Shu Lien's spiritual disciplines have attuned her to the undercurrents of fate, and her eyes intensify at the sight of Jen, giving her the alert attention one would give a possibly dangerous animal suddenly come upon in the forest.

With Jen's entrance into the saga, another of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon's* themes begins to unfold. Jen is the wild, brilliant, undisciplined energy of youth, utterly willful and just as utterly blind to consequences -- that period of selfish youthful energy in which nothing is real but one's desires, when other people are seen as merely factors in getting or being denied those desires. The mature spirituality of Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai will prove no match for the ravenous energy of Jen. As spiritual masters and initiates, Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai are dedicated servants of the inevitable -- or at least they were, until Li Mu Bai's attempt to give up his destiny; as wild youth, Jen embodies the principle of the unpredictable. She will leap into the power vacuum that Li Mu Bai has created; she will literally steal his destiny, that is, she will steal the sword Green Destiny. And so will commence the dance of the inevitable with the unpredictable.

At night, her sex and identity concealed in the garb of a ninja, Jen steals the sword. An alarm is raised. Shu Lien pursues the thief. And suddenly, unexpectedly, fabulously, the story turns from classical tale to mythological fable -- for these fighters can fly!

They run straight up walls, they bound over rooftops, they spin into the air, they are utterly free to disrespect the laws of gravity. Two points, the first technical, the second conceptual. First: these actresses, Michelle Yeoh and Zhang Ziyi, are such consummate martial arts dancers that they give the most stunning and liberating display of cinematic physicality since Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers (in a very different mode) first swirled across the screen; in terms of special effects, they may be "flying" by means of cleverly hidden wires, but this doesn't lessen the astounding skill required, nor the physical danger of being propelled so fast by the wires -- and, because neither the risk nor the grace is faked, the thrill communicated to the viewer is visceral. Second: to watch these highly complex characters fly is to experience a rare direct connection between waking reality (their complexity) and the dream (their flying). This connection allows the film, from this point on, to operate on the two levels, waking and dreaming, at the same time, with equal power and conviction. One can count on one's fingers the modern works of art that achieve this.

The first battle between Shu Lien and Jen ends inconclusively (and Jen escapes with the sword) because in spite of Jen's disguise Shu Lien senses whom she's fighting. She can not kill the youth, though several times during their fight she has the opportunity. Shu Lien, like Li Mu Bai, has learned the art of martial flying from the secret disciplines of the Wudan monastery; she is baffled at how this girl could have learned these arts so well and so young on her own. We will learn soon that Jade Fox stole the manual of secrets from Wudan when she poisoned Li Mu Bai's master, and that the girl has learned from the manual, surpassing Jade Fox. Shu Lien is so impressed with the girl's prowess that she is loathe to kill her. Shu Lien knows that it takes a profound depth of spirit to

learn these arts so well, and she clearly feels a sense of responsibility to that depth in this girl -- even though the girl herself takes her gifts for granted and does not want to accept responsibility for her own depth of soul. And so they reveal their souls to each other in a flying dance of battle, though the girl is so self-involved at the time that only in memory will she ever be able to savor and truly live this experience.

*“Entrust yourself to the windblown clouds and do not wish to live forever.”* That is the line this film’s flying invokes, for me. The words are Ikkyu’s, as translated by John Stevens. “A pretty sentiment,” most would agree, adding (usually silently), “but in terms of daily life, simply not applicable.” Well, of course Ikkyu’s words are applicable, if you’re willing to risk enough to make them applicable. The central factor is risk: what one is willing to dare, and when, and how, and to what end. Also: what are the inevitabilities and the unpredictable elements, beyond our control, that govern the terms of our risk? How do you “entrust yourself to the windblown clouds”? Realistic art has a difficult time with such issues, because it almost helplessly falls back on the sociological and the psychological to interpret human motivation and behavior. But in mythological art (the Arthurian tales, for instance) the socio-logical and the psycho-logical are too *logical* to describe the seething, depthless source of human behavior for which all cultures have been forced to use the word *soul*. *Soul* is a terrifying, enchanting word -- we all pretty much know what we mean by it, yet none of us can adequately define it. Which is precisely the reason for the word’s existence, and why we need it so much. There is something at the quick of human life that does not submit to analysis of any kind -- and *that* is the realm of the soul, *that* is the source of the word, *that* is the root of why we say and define ourselves by the word. The greatness of mythological art (and I would include Shakespeare and the Greek tragedies in that realm) is that it spurns logical analysis of any kind while creating a sort of labyrinth-of-event in which we experience the soul’s raw energies. The experience itself is the only explanation, the only analysis, such art offers -- an art not interpretive but transportive.

And there is one thing common to all tales of the mythological realm, a quality paramount in this film: *Everything* is at stake, *all* the time.

## **Part Two**

The powerful bureaucrat, Master Te, tells Shu Lien: “You and he [Li Mu Bai] are not brave enough to admit your feelings for each other... When it comes to emotions, even heroes can be idiots.” Later Shu Lien explains to young Jen her relationship with Li Mu Bai: that she was promised to his “brother by oath” Meng; Meng was killed in a battle with Li Mu Bai’s enemies; afterwards, she and Li Mu Bai shared many adventures, but they could not consummate their love and have a life together “because how could we dishonor Meng’s memory?”

Honor is the only “law of gravity” that binds Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai (who also can fly) to earth. Without their honor, they cannot be who they are; yet the honor which binds them to reality and to each other also keeps them separate from each other. Fidelity to their honor will rob Li Mu Bai of life, and rob Shu Lien of any hope of earthly happiness. In high school lit courses this used to be called a “tragic flaw.” But “tragic flaw” is a modern, Western idea; it means, essentially, that what you are prevents you from getting what you want -- and, in modern Western thought, not getting what one wants is deemed

a tragedy. But this is not how tragedy was first conceived by the Greeks; for them, tragedy was the inevitable outcome of the collision, and the intercourse, of the human with the divine or archetypal. Tragedy is what happens when a fragile human vessel gets what it most longs for: to be filled to bursting with divine or archetypal energies. If you go all the way with love, or hate, or any other primal energy, it's likely to tear you apart; but if you don't, you cannot claim to have fully lived. There is no winning and losing; there is only having fully lived, or not. In mainstream America, where all things are seen in terms of winning and losing, this again is an alien thought. But in the mythological realm it is, in a way, the *only* thought: to have lived or not lived, and damn the consequences, damn the pain. In this vision, the purpose of love is not romantic satisfaction; rather love's purpose, as Kahil Gibran said, is to laugh all one's laughter and to cry all one's tears. It is to be able to say, in the words of the 20th Century Greek poet George Seferis, "I watched you with all the light and darkness I have."

The eloquent looks between Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai employ all the light and darkness they have. By contrast, *Crouching Tigers, Hidden Dragon's* young lovers, Jen and Lo, love by virtue of a glorious youthful lust that blinds them to all other considerations. The mature master warriors always show a delicate, intense concern for others -- even when it's against their best interests. The youths are concerned only for what they desire. Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai feel their desire just as intensely, but feel it in a context that is larger than their personal needs -- the context of their Path. But the tale itself -- the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* -- doesn't take sides. The loves of both couples are portrayed as wonderful; but the energies they represent are so powerful and antithetical that each couple is destroyed by the other. Even so, their tale is not depressing but exhilarating, because the expression of these energies is presented as *an end in itself*. "Pleasure and pain are equal in a clear heart." And this tale clears the heart.

Li Mu Bai meets Jen in the midst of the film's next battle. Jade Fox is fighting three people who've come to apprehend her. The three are hopelessly outmatched by Jade Fox until Li Mu Bai suddenly appears. Li Mu Bai has sworn to avenge his Master's death; the implication is that his Master can not rest in peace until Jade Fox is brought to justice. As they fight, Jade Fox says: "Your master underestimated us women. He'd sleep with me, but he wouldn't teach me. He deserved to die by a woman's hand." (She may have a point.) But now, just as Li Mu Bai is about to best and kill Jade Fox, Jen appears wielding the stolen Green Destiny sword. In other words, the sword that Li Mu Bai has given up returns to him at precisely the moment where he could fulfill his duty to his master -- but returns in a hand that is turned against him. You cannot get off your Path, you cannot rid yourself of a destiny when it is truly yours -- it will find you, and it will exercise its right to test you by turning against you.

Li Mu Bai and Jen engage in a marvelous flying fight. Like Shu Lien, Li Mu Bai could kill her several times but he does not. Though he must fight against his own sword, he's delighted at her skills and at the depth they imply. As they fight, he offers to teach her. He tells her he has always wanted a disciple, and implies that she is worthy. She reacts impudently, rebelliously. Still fighting, he gives her a lesson in his Path's principles: "No growth without assistance. No action without a reaction. No desire without restraint." But these principles seem too confining for her. He tells her, "I can teach you to fight with the Green Destiny, but first you must hold it in stillness." Stillness is anathema to her. Yet still he tells her, "Deep down you are good. Even Jade Fox couldn't corrupt you." She

doesn't *want* to be good; she doesn't want to realize, and take responsibility for, her true nature. She says that maybe she'd use his own training to kill him. "I'll take that chance," he smiles. Still in possession of Green Destiny, she disengages and flies off. She is grossly underestimating what he has to offer; but he is just as seriously underestimating the blind power of her youth.

But at least, after this encounter with Master Li, Jen can no longer conceal from herself the evil nature of Jade Fox. She banishes Jade Fox from her father's court. What Jen doesn't know is that by doing this she has made an enemy of her old mentor. Now Jade Fox will live only to kill Jen. In this sense Jen too cannot without cost leave the Path she had chosen, however wrong that Path may be for her. Jade Fox's need for vengeance will ruin all of Jen's aspirations. Thus in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* even evil is a legitimate force of fate -- and yet again, we are far from the ideas of the West and deep into the realm of mythological. Western thought thinks of evil as an aberration to be expunged; mythological thought sees evil, as it sees tragedy, as simply one of the building blocks of existence, a constant, a force that has its place in the play of the inevitable with the unpredictable. Without Jade Fox -- that is, without evil -- there is no story; which is to say, there is no way that all the elements in the story can live themselves out to the fullest. And because living to the fullest (rather than happiness) is the highest value in this moral universe, and because we live to the fullest in part through our struggle with evil, even evil has a positive value.

Li Mu Bai tells Shu Lien of his encounter with Jen. "I knew she would intrigue you," Shu Lien says simply. She senses that, in one way or another, this girl will be their destruction. She argues passionately that the girl's life is none of their business and they should not interfere. But Li Mu Bai tells her that if they don't, Jen will "become a poisoned dragon." Then he pleads to Shu Lien: "Be patient with me." Shu Lien senses the price they will pay, but she can deny him nothing. Now they are both committed to the fate of the girl. Without putting it in so many words, they have assumed a parental relationship to Jen's very soul. I cannot think of an instance in Western art -- certainly not modern Western art -- that even knows of the existence of such a decision, such a relationship.

It is significant that Jen's actual parents (we see them only in two brief scenes) are utterly unaware of who their daughter actually is, what she is made of, what elemental forces are raging in her. They are, therefore, not really her parents. To them, she is merely a role, a function. Actually she has been mothered by Jade Fox, and now is being parented by Master Li and Shu Lien. Her blood parents, as far as the tale is concerned, are merely the means by which she came into the world; they have, in effect, channeled an energy they are incapable of comprehending, much less loving. Psychology, which bases so much on parental bonds, is flatly discounted in the mythological realm of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. In this tale, one's soul is an orphan until it finds its equal in others; and it can find its equal only by expressing its own force, however brutally and blindly; and the expression of that force is likely to estrange it forever from the mere social convention and biological necessity that, in this realm, is family. And once a soul expresses its true nature, it cannot long remain among those who cannot comprehend, relate to, or exchange with it.

Again, in this moral universe everything is at stake, all the time. Nothing can be taken for granted, even the laws of gravity -- still less the conventions of family. The story says

that there is nowhere to go but ever deeper into the story. The Path says that there is nowhere to go but farther along the Path. Everything else, somehow or other and sooner or later, must be left behind.

It ain't exactly a house in the suburbs.

### Part Three

Jens has had a romantic adventure with the young charismatic desert bandit Lo. There is a long amusing flashback about it. At one point Lo tells Jen, looking at a mountain at the far edge of the desert: "We have a legend. Anyone who dares to jump from that mountain, God will grant his wish." Lo tells of a youth whose parents were ill. He wished for them to recover. He went to the mountain, and jumped off, and, because he did not so much fall as float away, "never to return," he knew his wish had come true.

"A faithful heart makes a wish come true," Lo tells Jen.

This, of course, is nonsense. Or, at best, an illusion that serves as a plaything for children. At least, according to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. For there could be no more faithful hearts than Li Mu Bai's and Shu Lien's, but none of their wishes come true. And yet... and yet... the story, which in the mythological realm is the only arbiter, more so than heroes or even God, will let us hope. Is it a trick? Is it a means merely to start another story, our own story? Or is it (mythologically at least) "real"? The story doesn't let us know. We have to proceed on faith, says the Path. (Though that may be a trick too.) The only question the story asks is: Are you *really* living? And if not, why not? (For in a moral universe that discards psychology as a motive or a refuge, you can't blame it on your parents.)

In any case:

Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien have finally spoken openly of their feelings. Jen and Shu Lien have had another monumental battle in which, again, Shu Lien could have killed the girl and didn't. When an old woman, dressing Shu Lien's wounds, says, "That girl's crazy. You should have killed her," Shu Lien can only reply, "I didn't have the heart." Then Li Mu Bai and Jen battle, and at the very point when Jen might open her eyes to the truths of Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai, Jade Fox kidnaps her. Jade Fox uses Jen as bait to draw Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai into her trap. She wants to kill all of them, but especially Jen. She fails to kill Jen, and Li Mu Bai gives the deathblow to Jade Fox, but not before she has infected him with a poison dart. Confronted with the dying Master Li, Jen finally, in an instant, grows up: that is, she sees that other people are as real and substantial as she. She knows the antidote to the poison, and goes off to concoct it. Shu Lien stays with the dying Li Mu Bai, and here we have the greatest romantic scene in modern cinema:

Shu Lien, absolutely stricken with grief, tells him to conserve his breath, and, if he is to die, use his Wodun meditations to leave this plane and escape to eternity. But he's no longer interested in such things. "I've wasted my whole life. I have always loved you," he says as he collapses. Finally, they kiss. The one kiss of their lives. He is dying now. And he rejects enlightenment entirely: "I would rather be a ghost drifting by your side as a condemned soul than to enter paradise without you. Because of your love I will never be a lonely spirit."

They cannot be happy. But with a love stronger than separation or even death, they can still experience love. And if that means living forever in sorrow, then so be it. They

would not want to be “cured” of such a sorrow, since sorrow is now the element in which their love can live on.

And so he dies. Jen returns with the antidote, but it’s too late. When Jen sees the dead Master Li, she kneels and bares her neck. She is willing to die for her sins. Shu Lien picks up the sword called Green Destiny, walks to the kneeling Jen, swings the sword a hair’s breadth from the girl’s neck, and stops. Shu Lien tells Jen: “Promise me one thing. Whatever path you take in this life, be true to yourself.”

Those are the last words of Shu Lien’s in the story. She will live out her life with Li Bu Mai’s ghost at her side. One day she will die, and they will be ghosts together. Neither one of them will ever enter paradise. Their love will haunt the world. All they leave are those last four words, by which they lived: “Be true to yourself.”

Lo, Jen’s lover, has been hiding on the mountain at Wudan monastery. Jen goes to him. She has finally grown up. Her blind desires are blind no more; she can see all the heartbreak she’s caused, all the levels, all the consequences. As she and Lo make love, for what will be the last time, she weeps. He wakes alone. He runs to the Wudan bridge, over the chasm of an endless drop. Jen is there. She: “Do you remember the legend of a true heart?” “A faithful heart makes a wish come true.” “Make a wish, Lo.” “To be back in the desert, together again.” And she leaps off the bridge into the chasm. His face is utterly desolate -- and it would not be, if he believed in his own wish. And she... she wafts upon the breezes like a hawk, ever down and down and down, flying as she has flown before yet never as she has flown before, and disappearing into the mists.

We do not know if Lo’s wish comes true. We do not know if Jen wished for something else -- perhaps for her mistakes to be rectified, and for Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai to live happily ever after. All we see is a legend disappearing on the wind. And all we know is that the story is over, and that these people have lived to the fullest. That, and only that, is the justification of the story and of their lives. No, it ain’t a house in the suburbs. It is neither winning nor losing. It can’t be explained by what your parents did or even by what you did. The story (and this is why it is exhilarating) asks: Have you expressed every last ounce of yourself? You ask: How can I? The story says:

*Entrust yourself to the windblown clouds and do not wish to live forever.*

***Copyright by Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.***