

THE EVASIVE HERO

Narrative analysis of values in Asia related movies

Stephan Rothlin SJ, Macau Ricci Institute at the University of St. Joseph

FOR: LA CIVILTA CATTOLICA 2021

Movie Forums have proven a fertile ground for analysis and a better grasp of the amazing complexity of the story lines of films. For over 30 years I have had different opportunities to involve people from different walks of life in Asia and in Europe in workshops on Confucian Ethics with a focus on the "Hero" as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as "the main character or the main male character in a book or film, who is usually good". This type of a hero thus sticks to his or her values of respect, loyalty, compassion and wisdom in the middle of adversities and challenges. Within the Chinese tradition of "hero" however we may not always be reassured by a "Hollywood Happy End" as heroes may sometimes face illness and death like any other human being; however, the key highlight for a more systematic narrative analysis of the different dramas of heroes is to recognise in their struggles through a host of obstacles and moral dilemmas, while always facing death and destruction a unique opportunities to reconnect to one's own better self. Rather than consuming new movies without further ado, this approach consists in highlighting some key lines of a movie's basic story while discovering the ethical dilemmas the different heroes are struggling with. It is based on the conceptual framework of a research project by Fr. Mark Bandsuch SJ on "Narrative Analysis of Heroic Characters in Film as a Promising Method for Moral Education in Contemporary China" (Bandsuch 2019). A decisive moment happens when viewers start recognizing their own struggles and dramas within a movie. Far from strategies of indoctrination this method is grounded in personal experiences which let the alert viewer enter at least partially into the complex dilemmas of different characters. By repeatedly watching masterpieces of good quality one may come to realize that martial arts themes go well beyond superficial fights to reveal key values for a fulfilled happy life. In fact,

visual images may in a very special way provide profound insights into the whole range of key Confucian values such as honesty, integrity, modesty, determination, loyalty, and truthfulness, which may resonate deeply in those who can get beyond the surface of visual media. Special attention is paid to the way different heroes face illness and death.

1) Martin Scorsese – Shusako Endo: Silence (2016): How Silence speaks

Silence is a 2016 historical drama directed by Martin Scorsese, based on the 1966 novel of the same name by Shūsaku Endō. Set in Nagasaki, Japan, the film was shot in Taiwan. Two 17th-century Jesuits travel from Portugal to Edo-era Japan via Macau where they meet their superior Alessandro Valignano who commissions them in the College of St. Paul with spreading the Gospel in Japan. The story recalls the fact that it was common for Japanese believers to hide from the persecution that resulted from the suppression of Christianity in Japan during the Shimabara Rebellion (1637–1638) against the Tokugawa shogunate. These are called the "*kakure kirishitan*", or "hidden Christians". *Silence* is the third of Scorsese's three films focused on challenges of faith, following *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and *Kundun* (1997). The opening of the film features the Portuguese Jesuit Cristóvão Ferreira who witnesses the torture of Japanese converts he has been trying to bring to the Christian faith. The priest feels utterly helpless in the presence of Japanese authorities conducting the torture. A few years later the Italian Jesuit Visitor and founder of St. Paul's College, Macau, Alessandro Valignano, receives news that Ferreira has renounced his faith in Japan after being tortured. Valignano thinks that that "Ferreira is lost for us Jesuits" but accepts the desire of Ferreira's Portuguese pupils, the young Jesuits Sebastião Rodrigues and Francisco Garupe, to find him in Japan. Kichijirō, an alcoholic fisherman who fled Japan to Macau to save himself, agrees to guide them on the dangerous journey. In fact, Kichijirō's entire family was killed and he apparently many times renounced his faith.

Arriving in Japan the priests find local Christian communities driven underground living under constant fear while enduring deep divisions and violent

fight among themselves. The priests witness as officials searching for suspected Christians strap some of the villagers to wooden crosses by the ocean shore literally thus crucifying them, where the tide eventually drowns them. The bodies are then cremated on a funeral pyre which is done to prevent a Christian burial. Garupe leaves for Hirado Island where Saint Francis Xavier first arrived in Japan around 1550. Rodrigues goes to Gotō Island, the last place Ferreira worked as a missionary where he eventually reunites with Kichijirō, who betrays him into the hands of the samurai. An older samurai tells Rodrigues that other Christians will suffer unless he renounces his faith. Rodrigues is then taken to Nagasaki, where he is imprisoned with many Japanese converts. At a tribunal, he is told Christian doctrine is hostile to Japan. Rodrigues demands to see the Inquisitor, the governor Inoue Masashige. Rodrigues is returned to prison, and Kichijirō is imprisoned as well. He explains to Rodrigues that court officials threatened him so that he would betray Rodrigues. Despite his previous apostasies, Kichijirō insists he himself is a Christian and asks to be absolved of his betrayal through confession, which Rodrigues reluctantly grants him. He later is released after being told to step on a *fumi-e* (a likeness of Christian figures), an act symbolizing rejection of the faith. Later, Rodrigues is brought under guard to the shoreline to await someone. In the far distance, he witnesses Garupe and four other prisoners approaching on the shoreline under separate guard. The four other prisoners are taken offshore on a small boat and are dropped from the boat one-by-one in order to force Garupe to renounce his faith. However, Garupe staunchly refuses to apostatize and jumps. He then sees the desperate Garupe attempt to swim offshore to rescue the last prisoner, where he drowns with the other four prisoners.

After some time, Rodrigues is eventually taken to meet an older Ferreira. Ferreira says he committed apostasy while being tortured, and states that after 15 years in the country and a year in the temple, he believes Christianity is futile in Japan. Rodrigues repudiates him, but Ferreira is implacable. That night in his prison cell, Rodrigues hears five Christians being tortured. Ferreira tells him that they have already apostatized; it is his apostasy the Japanese demand, if they are to relent.

Rodrigues struggles over whether it is self-centered to refuse to recant when doing so will end others' suffering. As Rodrigues looks upon a *fumi-e* he hears the voice of Jesus, giving him permission to step on it, and he does.

Rodrigues, like Ferreira before him, is allowed to live in the country with an adopted Japanese name and takes a wife, their expertise on Christianity being used occasionally to prevent Dutch Dejima traders from bringing Christian influences into Japan. Years later, after Ferreira has died, Kichijirō asks Rodrigues to absolve him again, but Rodrigues refuses, saying he is no longer a priest. Rodrigues hears God's voice and is assured that rather than remaining silent, he also suffered alongside those who were tortured and killed. Only by letting go of what he held on to himself could Rodrigues humble himself before Kichijirō - someone he previously looked down on. In the process of sacrificing his title and faith, he draws a parallel to Jesus' sacrifice of life; a parallel he was unaware of until comforted by God. Kichijirō later is caught with a pouch he claims to have won while gambling, containing a religious amulet which he claims is not his own. He is taken away and never heard from again. Many years later, Rodrigues dies. He is placed in a large round wooden casket, and his body is cremated according to traditional Japanese rites: moments before his cremation, his wife is allowed to place an offering in his hand to ward off evil spirits — this turns out to be the tiny crudely-made crucifix that was given to him when he first came to Japan, indicating perhaps that Rodrigues had remained a Christian, hidden from outside view.

In analysing the movie, it may be difficult to identify the authentic hero. At first sight the miserable figure of Kichijirō, could be dismissed as an "anti-hero", a "traitor," because he keeps betraying and apostatizing, whenever forced to do so; yet despite the devastating loss of his whole family he still seems to be coming back until the very end of the story. A key scene in the movie concerns a voice over during the episodes of torture when missionaries and lay people are forced to step on the *fumi-e*: "Go ahead. Let them trample on me. This is why I came." The voice over could be understood as a deceptive justification from a coward in the face of torture; however, it could also be understood as the voice of Jesus the Redeemer who reassures his

followers in the moment of an extreme test that he, Jesus, did the work of redemption, paying so to speak with his blood for the ransom of all people tied down by violence and sin. The sequence of confessions by Kichijirō can be dismissed as an unavoidable repetition of lapses. However, from another point of view the journey of the Jesuits, guided by the “traitor” Kichijirō, who end up being forced to renounce their faith and religious vows, could easily be dismissed as the ultimate failure of their mission. However, *Silence* presents an ambiguity reminiscent of the Japanese classic movie *Rashomon* by Akira Kurosawa, where the same story of a rape is told in completely different versions, each depending on one of the four actors in the drama. The writer Shusako Endo in his struggles and apparent failures as a Catholic identified himself most strongly with Kichijirō.

Under many aspects *Silence* may also reflect Martin Scorsese’s own struggles over his vocation and faithfulness to Christian values in a context that appears exceedingly violent and prone to corruption. Narrative analysis thus could radically question a superficial dismissal of Kichijiro as a “traitor”. Instead of a “traitor” pure and simple, he could be viewed as another “Judas Iscariot” whose betrayal enabling Jesus to be put on the cross, played a necessary part in the history of the redemption. A theological insight could help overcome short sighted conclusions that despair of finding a true hero in a story, in which the “traitor” nevertheless is the driving force in the drama: The Crucified and Risen Lord, first visually present in a painting, sweetly reminiscent of El Greco, as the narrative unfolds then disappears in the troubled waters along the road, only to be incarnated once more in the Christians nailed on the cross. And there is at least a discrete hint in the final scene focused on the dead body of Rodrigues that the cross which is put in his hand by his wife may be a token for his memory of his ongoing communion with the Risen Lord.

2) Feng Xiaogang – Youth (2017): Going beyond the “Youth Myth”, “Jugendmythos”: Discovering true enthusiasm and self-sacrifice

“*Youth*” (Chinese: 芳华; *pinyin*: *Fānghuá*) is a 2017 Chinese film drama, written by Geling Yan and directed by Feng Xiaogang, whom I consider as one of the

most outstanding living directors of China. The film is focused on the enthusiasm provoked in the lived experiences of a group of adolescents in a military art troupe in the People's Liberation Army during the Cultural Revolution. They felt deeply inspired and uplifted by the supposed Red dream of their Chairman and Supreme Leader Mao Zedong. It is moving to experience within the troupe the genuine feelings of sacrifice and commitment for a common ideal as well as betrayal and sufferings in an era when the personality cult of Chairman Mao as the hero of China was at his peak. Through the narration of Xiao Suizi, the film shares the story of two key characters, Feng Liu and Xiaoping He. Xiaoping He, a naïve and innocent recruit, and Feng Liu a morally impeccable character, whose comrades praise for being a real-life Lei Feng who stands for the exemplary good soldier promoted by the Communist Party as model for everyone. The pair then also participates in the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War and become heroes for their acts of courage. In a dramatic battle scene when Feng Liu is ambushed along with his troops, he tries to drag a companion out of the mud. During this operation he succeeds in saving the comrade's life but his right arm is so badly wounded that he needs to amputate it.

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

After the war, in Reform-era China, Feng Liu and Xiaoping He are honorably discharged from the Army but struggle to survive financially within an environment which no longer recognises their heroic efforts. The film often also contrasts fake attitudes and buildings – say a fake White House – with genuine characters like a warm-hearted Buddhist monk in midst of a society which seems to crave materialistic

wealth and social promotion. However, even without any recognition the exemplary figures of Feng Liu and Xiaoping He continue to display their idealistic care for others. The film also portrays scenes of deep clashes with authorities who seem to lack any appreciation for them.

The amazing span of 50 years covered by the movie starts with the earthly God Mao Zedong who unleashed the Revolution of a "new" culture which would radically break with the "old" ideas, such as religions and a decadent Confucian philosophy that was dismissed as bourgeois. Young people like the members of the military art troupe considered themselves the cutting edge of this supposed revolution. Watching it unfold over half a century enables viewers to experience the leap of a whole country into an "open door policy" under Deng Xiaoping with the rallying cry that getting rich is glorious. While millions had been inspired by the "words of wisdom" contained in Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book*, it was to give way to another national hero namely Deng who would radically question the rationale of the Cultural Revolution. In fact, Deng emerged as paramount leader out of the ashes of the Cultural Revolution and the chaos provoked by the Gang of Four. While it is certainly moving to see throughout these changes that Feng Liu and Xiaoping He remain remarkably consistent in their altruistic care for others, the unfolding of the historic background leaves no doubt how overarching the thirst for materialistic gain and prestige seems to trample down their original values of caring for the vulnerable and disadvantaged. Not only does the behaviour of officials in dealing with a genuine hero, who lost his arm in a courageous attempt to save a fellow soldier from being killed in an ambush, seem ruthless; even more ruthless seems the never ending appetite for material gain for buying cars and houses, the ambition to get promoted at the expense of others. The wonderful surprise of the movie is that as the great heroes and warlords of history like Deng and Mao seem to be completely fading away the witness of ordinary citizens like Xiaoping He and Feng Liu witness to the fact that Confucian values of honesty, integrity, loyalty and truthfulness that the cultural revolution attempted to eradicate did survive in the conscience and actions of genuine, if unspectacular, heroes.

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

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

However, Ip Man's peaceful existence is threatened by the arrival of Gong Yutian, the Wudang Boxing martial arts grandmaster from northern China. After his retirement Gong had appoint Ma San as his heir in the North and suggested that the South should have its own paramount Master. Various masters attempt to challenge Gong, but they are all barred by Ma San. As the Southern masters are deliberating on a representative, Gong Yutian's daughter Gong Er arrives and she tries to convince her father not to continue the fight. Meanwhile, the Southern masters decide on Ip Man to represent them, and Ip proceeds to be tested by three Southern masters before he challenges Gong Yutian.

The intriguing point is that the apparent fight between Ip and Gong reveals an exchange of philosophical ideas. Gong declares Ip the winner and returns to northern China. Gong Er sets out to regain her family's honour by challenging Ip Man, and they agree that if anything breaks, Ip loses. Since martial arts are about precision and concentration, not violence, the agreed rule is that whoever breaks a piece of furniture during the fight will be the loser. An intense fight breaks out between Ip Man and Gong Er, which concludes with victory for Gong because Ip

broke a step at the very end. Ip and Gong nevertheless part on friendly terms, with Ip saying he wants a rematch. Actually, Ip broke a step in order to save Gong Er. They keep in touch by letters. During the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 Ip Man and his family loses his two daughters due to starvation. In the meantime, in northern China, Ma San becomes a traitor and as a "Father murderer" kills Gong Yutian. When Gong Er returns, she is appalled by the apparently cowardly behaviour of her elders in forsaking her father, but they tell her that her father's final wish was for her to be happy and not to seek vengeance. Gong Er refuses to accept that, and instead, she vows to never teach, marry or have children, and devotes her entire life to seeking vengeance.

Meanwhile Ip Man moves to Hong Kong in the hope of starting a career as a martial arts teacher, but ends up facing all sorts of challenges because there are numerous other martial arts masters in Hong Kong. Despite of his growing reputation it is interesting to note that he does not care about monetary success. He meets Gong Er again on Chinese New Year's Eve 1950 and asks her for a contest one more time while implying that she should start rebuilding her martial arts school. However, Gong Er refuses, stating that many martial arts schools have disappeared. A flashback to ten years earlier shows a confrontation between Gong Er and Ma San at a train station on Chinese New Year's Eve 1940, in which Gong defeats Ma after a brutal and intense fight. Gong herself is shown to have been seriously injured in the fight, and loses her desire to use martial arts. The film then moves on to 1952, when Ip Man and Gong Er meet each other for the last time. Gong confesses to Ip that she has had feelings of love for him right from the beginning. She dies shortly after. Ip explains, in a voice over, that in the fight with Ma San, Gong was injured so badly she turned to opium for the pain and this was her downfall. The final scenes offer a visual montage as Ip Man's school flourishes, including a statement that Ip made Wing Chun popular worldwide and his most famous student was Bruce Lee. Off screen, it is stated that Ip Man died in 1972.

The film takes the insightful viewer beyond the stereotypes of martial arts which tend to reduce the story to an increasingly boring sequence of fights. Far from

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

4) Zhang Yimou – Hero (2002): Giving up killing

"*Hero*" (Chinese: 英雄, *pinyin*: "yíngxióng") is a 2002 Chinese martial arts film directed by Zhang Yimou. The film is based on the story of Jing Ke's assassination attempt on the King of Qin in 227 BC (Zhang 2005). Death appears in this film an almost permanent challenge different key actors constantly face. During the Warring States period, Nameless, a Qin prefect, arrives at the Qin capital city to meet the King of Qin, who had survived an attempt on his life by Long Sky, Flying Snow, and Broken Sword. The king has therefore implemented tight security measures: Nameless claims that he has killed the three assassins and he displays their weapons before the king. Nameless pretends to have first slaughtered Long Sky, before traveling to meet Flying Snow and Broken Sword who had taken refuge at a calligraphy school in the Zhao state. Calligraphy is actually regarded as one of the highest expression of Chinese culture. Indeed as Nameless commissions a

calligraphy scroll with the character for "Sword" (劍) in order secretly seeking to learn Sword's skill through his calligraphy he becomes witness of the scene that the calligraphy school is being attacked. However, no matter how many deadly arrows are pouring in droves through the roof of the school the Master of the calligraphy continues unharmed with his writing. This indicates a key feature of martial arts movies which go far beyond nonsensical entertainment: the core of the lessons is to attain virtues which can never be destroyed by any deadly weapon. Nameless also learns about "red sand" which indicates in China the complex matter of human relationships that Snow and Sword, who loved each other, have nevertheless gradually grown distant. Once the scroll is complete, Nameless reveals his identity and challenges Snow to a duel the next day. Sword, in anger at Snow's betrayal of him, makes love to his pupil Moon, and is seen by Snow. In revenge, Snow kills Sword, followed by Moon who attempts to seek revenge for her master. The next day, Nameless kills Snow before the Qin army, and claims her sword.

Nameless admits that he does master the special technique to kill. However, he states that the king had underestimated Sword, and says that the special technique which can also be used to cause a blow that nonetheless misses all the victim's vital organs. Another key moment of "Hero" occurs when Sword sends Nameless off to the Qin capital, writing the words 天下 *Tianxia* "Under Heaven" in the sand before leaving. This was his appeal to persuade Nameless to reconsider the assassination. The king is deeply impressed by the tale and by Sword's understanding of his dream to unify China and ceases to fear Nameless. In an act of complete trust the King throws his sword away and renders himself completely exposed and vulnerable to Nameless as he examines the scroll drawn by Sword. The hero thus becomes ready for the key insight that the ultimate goal of swordsmanship and martial arts is to leave the deadly part of the sword away and with a unified heart to contribute to the peace with the entire world. The karmic moment is thus to realize that giving up killing is the key to peace and the hallmark of a true hero. The king understands that it describes the ideal warrior, who, paradoxically, should have no desire to kill. When Nameless realizes the wisdom of these words, he abandons

his mission and spares the king. Nevertheless, urged by his court to follow the law, the king reluctantly orders Nameless to be executed at the Qin palace for his assassination attempt. He understands that in order to unify the nation, he must enforce the law and use Nameless as an example. Nameless receives a hero's funeral and a closing text reveals the identity of the king as Qin Shi Huang, the first Emperor of China.

Transforming Insights

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

During our workshops in China a particularly productive entry point was to ask the participants to put themselves into the shoes of the different characters: In the case of the movie of Zhang Yimou: Which figures resonates more strongly in your life? Whom do you recognize as true heroes? What helps a hero to overcome dilemmas and inner struggles? When the stories of the different struggling heroes start to resonate in our own lives may the compelling complexity of their struggles

come alive so to speak in our own struggles. Only after going through the bumpy road of dilemmas without apparent solutions may we finally stop making all too opinionated judgements, and appreciate the intellectually inspiring dynamic of the different stories. From our film research project in China, my sense is that we have only just started exploring an innovative approach on value creation and education which needs to be further developed for effective teaching of values for a visually oriented generation which is particularly wary of ideological indoctrination and subtle manipulation. Hopefully the research project may also inspire everyone to engage in a fruitful and constructive dialogue with China which seems to become a most endangered species.

REFERENCES

- Bandsuch, M.R. (2019). Narrative Analysis of Heroic Characters in Film as a Promising Method for Moral Education in Contemporary China. *Macau Ricci Institute Journal*, 5:17-28.
- Zhang, J.X. (2005). Hero. *Film Quarterly Summer 2005*, Vol. 58, No. 4, Retrieved on 20 March 2021

ⁱ It would be intriguing to compare this karmic insight of the movie “Hero” with the British-Indian masterpiece “The Warrior” , 2001, starring the megastar Irrfan Khan (1967-2020) as the warrior who also wakens up to the determination to give up killing. The experience of performing in this multifaceted spectacular movie convinced Irrfan Khan not to give up his career as an actor.