

Hero

BEFORE VIEWING

It is likely that most members of a UK audience will have only heard of one of these three people: the star, the director and the protagonist of 'Hero'.

- Jet Li
- The King of Qin
- Zhang Yimou

Thanks to such films as 'Romeo Must Die', 'Lethal Weapon 4' and 'The One', Jet Li may be a familiar name to you. The King of Qin is an extremely important character from ancient Chinese history who became China's first emperor and caused the Great Wall of China to be built. Although he is one of China's most accomplished directors, you are less likely to have heard of Zhang Yimou. Until recently, his films have not been on general release in the UK; they have only been shown in 'art house' cinemas or late at night on 'minority interest' TV channels like BBC4 or Channel 4.

Zhang Yimou's reputation has been built on a series of films, admired for their grace, restraint and detailed depiction of character. These earlier films (Red Sorghum [1987] - Zhang's directorial debut - and the trilogy Ju Dou [1990], Raise the Red Lantern [1991], and the Story of Qiu Ju [1992]), set in the first half of the twentieth century, were strongly centred on China, the land and its people viewed from a subtle perspective of gender and generation. In the past, Zhang Yimou had fallen foul of the Chinese authorities, who viewed some of his earlier works as subversive and anti-Chinese. However, with its firm emphasis on individual sacrifice for the greater good 'Hero' proved to be a huge popular and critical success in China.

The film played continuously in most of China's first-run urban theatres. Illicit DVD copies of 'Hero' appeared on the streets almost four weeks after the film's Beijing premiere in the Great Hall of the People. These bootlegs, shot on video from the back of a theatre, were actually released by the official rights holder, who claimed that they couldn't wait until the authorised release date without losing substantial sales.

'Hero' is the second most popular movie release in Chinese history, (after 'Titanic' [1998]). The previous most popular Chinese-language film was the dutiful anti-corruption film 'Fatal Decision' [Zhongda xuanze, 2000], whose figures were artificially inflated by mass ticket purchases by government work units. It has been reported that the traditional Chinese greeting of 'Chibao le ma' (literally: 'Have you eaten?') has recently been superseded by 'Ni youmeiyou kan Yingxiong' ('Have you seen 'Hero' yet?').

FILM SYNOPSIS

In the third century BC, a time before China existed as a country, a lowly prefect, known only as Nameless (Jet Li), has been summoned to appear before the King of Qin (Chen Daoming), because he has – apparently - killed the King's three greatest enemies, the - until now - invincible assassins Sky (Donnie Yen), Broken Sword (Tony Leung) and Flying Snow (Maggie Chueng). Nameless is given a huge reward, but, more importantly, he becomes the first person to be allowed within ten paces of the king for a decade.

In flashbacks, we see how Nameless went about killing the three assassins but the sceptical King suspects that his stories are untrue. The events are examined again, then for a third time, and the King comes to believe that Nameless seeks a greater reward than the King's favour...

HISTORY

We are told at the beginning of 'Hero' that the action takes place in 212BC but it's easy to forget that the film has this firm historical basis. The film has received some adverse criticism for its depiction of Qin Shi Huang, the King of Qin, a person of tremendous importance from China's early history. The closing credits state: 'As China's first Emperor he completed the Great Wall to protect his subjects'.

Qin Shi Huang supposedly relieved the suffering of the peasants and put an end to centuries of bloodshed by establishing dominion over the seven feudal 'Warring States', effectively creating 'modern' unified China. He also standardised China's coinage, measurement and language ('How can people communicate when they don't understand each other?' muses the King). The Qin dynasty did not last for very long and, in order to justify their right to 'The Throne of Heaven', the succeeding Han dynasty depicted the King of Qin as a vicious, ruthless and paranoid megalomaniac. This is often the way he has subsequently been depicted; for example, he is shown in Chen Kaige's 1998 film, 'The Emperor and The Assassin' in a decidedly negative fashion.

TASK

Imagine that you know nothing about the King of Qin's subsequent achievements. Write about how the King of Qin is depicted in 'Hero'. You should pay particular attention to

- What he says
 - What he does – in particular his treatment of Nameless
 - How he is dressed
 - Where we see him
 - The attitude of other characters to him
 - How he is filmed
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- Can you think of a character from English history who could be compared to the King of Qin?

GENRE AND MARKETING

Visit www.filmeducation.org/secondary/concept/filmandgenre/docs/frameset.html to learn about genre and marketing.

TASK

'Hero' has proved as popular across America as Quentin Tarantino's martial arts 'Kill Bill' films. On the DVD cover it says 'Quentin Tarantino presents 'Hero' (although Tarantino did not direct, produce or finance 'Hero') and the 'extras' on the DVD feature a 'conversation' between Quentin Tarantino and Jet Li.

Write about the ways in which a 'Tarantino connection' would assist in marketing 'Hero'.

WUXIA

Zhang Yimou refers to 'Hero' as a 'wuxia' (WuXia) film – 'martial chivalry genre', a swordsman or swordplay film. Wuxia pian is an established genre in Chinese cinema. These films exist in an idealised realm in which legendary heroes live on the edges of everyday society and wield swords, spears or daggers, with fantastical skill. It is not considered unbelievable that these zen warriors float through the air, skim the water and battle in trees and on rooftops and succeed against astounding odds. A typical wuxia pian draws a hero, who obeys a strong moral code, into the everyday world in order to fight, reluctantly, to defend the weak against corrupt officials or leaders.

In between battles, the heroes of wuxia films often indulge in enigmatic philosophical and mystical contemplation: 'Martial arts and music have much in common: both wrestle with complex chords of rare melodies,' says Nameless, before – apparently – killing Sky. He later informs the King that 'Swordsmanship and calligraphy are much alike; they link wrist and heart' before driving a wedge between Flying Snow and her lover, Broken Sword, a stock wuxia character – the warrior has moved beyond his skill: 'The final act of the warrior is to lay down his sword'.

This mix of intense action followed by philosophical musings is typical of wuxia films and proved a great influence on 'The Matrix', which, despite its science fiction trappings, draws heavily on wuxia. Indeed, it was the enormous success of 'The Matrix' that helped to create a wider audience for Ang Lee's 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon'. 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon' was a 'breakthrough' movie, since it attracted both fans of martial arts films and an 'art house' audience, who expected more than high kicks and extravagant action sequences. It also created an audience for films like 'The Last Samurai' and 'Memoirs Of A Geisha' with their emphasis on the exotic aspects of Eastern history and culture.

Extract from an interview with Zhang Yimou: 'The problem is that Hollywood is competition for Chinese art films. So I thought I should make a film with box-office promise, that refers to Chinese culture, but also contains an art element. That's why everything is in one film. I have

to thank 'Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon,' because Ang Lee did something new for martial arts. To shoot 'Hero' we needed a lot of money. Ang Lee created some space [for other filmmakers] to experiment. Both Ang Lee and I used an art film style in a martial arts movie'.

TASK

- To what extent is 'Hero' a 'wuxia' film? Refer in detail to the film in your response.
Can you detect any wuxia elements in any recent commercial releases?

The wuxia genre has been a regular part of Chinese cinema since the 1920s; its style, recurring themes and conventions would be largely unfamiliar to a western audience. And it is clear that Zhang Yimou has brought his own 'art house' sensibilities to bear on the making of the film, as well as adjusting the conventions of the wuxia genre to suit the western audience that flocked to 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon'.

TASK

- Martial arts? Historical drama? Swashbuckler? Romantic adventure?
Discuss with a partner which genres 'Hero' fits into.
- Can you identify any generic conventions/elements that would assist in identifying this film?
- Why is it useful – particularly when marketing a film - to be able to identify the genre(s) a film fits into?

TASK

- Design a poster for 'Hero' which would make clear its genre to a potential audience.

Making a wuxia film was a change of pace for the director. He employed a Hong Kong director with a background in martial arts to work on the action sequences and employed two established martial art stars, Jet Li and Donnie Yen, to work alongside celebrated Chinese actors with no martial arts backgrounds. Whilst UK audiences may have seen martial arts movies featuring Jackie Chan or Bruce Lee, they are unlikely to be familiar with the recurring themes and conventions of the Chinese wuxia films.

TASK

In an interview, Zhang Yimou states that he asked himself two key questions when making 'Hero':

'Do the action sequences propel the story?'

'Does the action make an impact on character development?'

Do you believe:

- that the action sequences propel the story?
- that the action makes an impact on character development?
- Support your opinions with specific references to 'Hero'.

Although Jet Li is a highly trained and immensely skilful and acrobatic performer, many of the action sequences make use of 'wire work' to present action beyond the capabilities of even the most highly skilled martial artist. Indeed, some sequences – the Golden Forest and the fight on the lake – are filmed in a stylised fashion to emphasise their fantastic, almost dreamlike beauty, a severe contrast to some of the gritty and often gory 'kung fu' films of the 1970s.

TASK

In pairs, discuss:

- what you know about martial arts films.
- what you would expect to see in a 'martial arts' film.
- your expectations of a film starring Jet Li.
- If a film is described as an 'art' movie or an 'art house' release, what sort of film would you expect to see?

TASK

In pairs, discuss:

- your reactions to the various 'fight sequences' in the film.
- Would you have preferred them to be more 'realistic'?
- How seriously did you take the encounters between the various characters?
- Did you find the action sequences exciting?

NARRATIVE METHOD

The plot of 'Hero' is quite straightforward. An extremely accomplished assassin plots the death of the tyrannous ruler responsible for the death of his family.

However, the film unfolds in a deliberately ambiguous and confusing fashion so that the audience is uncertain at some points in the film as to who is actually dead and - more importantly - from whose viewpoint we are seeing events. At some points in the film, it seems that there is a struggle going on between Nameless and the King for the control of the film's narrative, a struggle in which there can be only one victor – the director.

At the beginning of the film, we hear a voice-over from Nameless who is soon explaining to the King – in a flashback - how he killed Sky. But part of this flashback seems to involve – in black and white – a mental combat between the two men. It subsequently turns out that the whole fight was staged in front of the King's soldiers and – thanks to the surgical sword skills of Nameless – Sky is still alive.

TASK

Look again at the two versions of the 'death' of Flying Snow in 'The Ring of Iron' (circle of soldiers). In the first version, she is depicted as an angry, passionate woman, who has just killed her lover, Broken Sword, in a fit of jealous rage. In the second version she is the willing participant in a staged death which will advance the plot to kill the King.

- Consider how Zhang Yimou uses colour, clothing, camera angles (especially close-ups), etc. to differentiate between the two 'different' Flying Snows.

TASK

Sequences in the film are 'colour coded', enabling Zhang Yimou to offer his audience ravishing and memorable images which enhance his action sequences.

Select one of these sequences:

- the fight in the rain
 - the Golden Forest
 - the attack on the calligraphy school at Zhao
 - the Library
 - the combat at the lake
 - Broken Sword and Flying Snow's attack on the King
- Write about how Zhang Yimou has used colour to emphasise or enhance aspects of the narrative.

TASK

It is not always clear in 'Hero' whose version of the narrative we are seeing. In pairs, discuss the following questions:

- Who sees Broken Sword making love to Moon?
- Do Nameless and Broken Sword really fight one another on the Lake?
- Who tells us about the fight between Broken Sword and Flying Snow in the Library?
- Are there other sections of the film in which it is unclear whose perspective on the narrative the audience is being given?

THE POLITICS OF 'HERO'

'Hero' was a commercial and critical success that has given Zhang Yimou the 'clout' to finance another lavish historical epic, 'House Of Flying Daggers'. Zhang was once banned from making films in China but 'Hero' is an apparently pro-establishment film that suggests that people should put their trust in the authorities and accept the suffering which will – eventually – lead to ultimate peace and order; tyranny is acceptable if a greater good is the result.

One of the new Emperor Qin's first acts was to abolish the 'Hundred Schools of Thought', the diverse schools of philosophy which had existed within the different states, and replace them with an overall 'philosophy' which said, in effect, that the people should do whatever gave the ruler the most power over them. The King observes, 'One person's pain is as nothing compared to the suffering of all.' The underlying theme of 'Hero' seems to be that Chinese unification is worth the sacrifice of individuals.

But there are subversive hints within the film:

- The struggle for narrative control contains an echo of the director's earlier struggles with the Chinese authorities to offer his version of events in China's past.
- The King, eager to establish a new order, is obliged to adhere to the old laws – 'If your majesty is to unite the land, this man has to be made an example of', his advisors remind him. Old men, clad in sinister but slightly ridiculous black outfits clamor for the execution of Nameless, and their will is obeyed. Will old men - and their old laws – always have the last word in a unified China?

- Broken Sword, the philosophical calligrapher, inscribes the pro-unification phrase 'Our Land ('all under heaven'), in the sand; the characters are no sooner written than the wind blows them away.
- The heroism of the title is open to ambiguity; the character for 'hero' in Chinese can be either singular or plural.

TASK

- 'In any war there are heroes on both sides' we are told at the beginning of the film. Who is the hero of 'Hero'? Explain the reasoning behind your choice(s).

The archetypal hero from 'mainstream' cinema would be James Bond. An audience would be shocked and disappointed if a profitable film franchise was terminated by having James Bond killed at the end of the film. In fact, the audience knows that whatever perils Bond endures he will eventually emerge triumphant. But it appears that only the King, Moon and Sky survive at the end of 'Hero'. However – although we're told that Nameless is executed as a criminal but is buried as a hero - we never see his body; we see only an empty space surrounded by arrows.

- Could the resourceful Nameless have escaped?
- Would someone as shrewd as the King really send such a valuable resource to his death?

TASK

- Write a treatment for a sequel to 'Hero' in which Nameless returns to assist the King in his plan to unite the seven 'Warring States'.

FILMOGRAPHY

Essential viewing is Akira Kurosawa's acclaimed masterpiece, 'Rashomon' (1950), one of the first Japanese films to enjoy critical success in the west. Set in medieval Japan, its similarities to 'Hero' are considerable; it involves a sequence of contradictory narratives that question the notion of truth, authenticity and reality within a film. Kurosawa's epics, 'Kagemusha' and 'Ran' are also worth seeing, and the attack on the calligraphy school and the execution of Nameless are almost homages to the conclusion of Kurosawa's 'Throne Of Blood', the definitive samurai version of 'Macbeth'.

'A Touch of Zen' (1969) was one of the first 'philosophical' martial arts films to enjoy a limited amount of success, albeit as an 'art house' release. The basis for 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon'.

'The Butterfly Killers' (1979). Again, an early 'crossover' wuxia success that features a lot of murderous butterflies, much traditional wirework...and an exploding chicken!

'A Chinese Ghost Story' (1987) – an antidote to the high seriousness of Zhang Yimou's films. This bizarre and entertaining film mixes 'The Evil Dead', MTV videos and wuxia – a film that features a battling, rapping Taoist priest deserves a wider audience!

'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon' (2000) – Set in the same time period as 'Hero'. This film introduced multiplex audiences to wuxia films.

'The Emperor and The Assassin' (1999) offers an alternative view of some of the characters and events within 'Hero'.

'House Of Flying Daggers' (2005) Zhang Yimou's follow-up to 'Hero'. If anything, even more extravagant than 'Hero' in its elaborate and heavily stylised action sequences.

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