



JANUS FILMS *presents*

DRAGON INN A FILM BY KING HU



SÉLECTION OFFICIELLE
CANNES CLASSICS
FESTIVAL DE CANNES



The Chinese *wuxia* (martial arts) picture was never the same after King Hu's legendary *Dragon Inn*. During the Ming Dynasty, the emperor's minister of defense is framed by a powerful court eunuch and then executed; his children are pursued by secret police. In the ensuing chase, a mysterious group of strangers begin to gather at the remote Dragon Gate Inn, where paths (and swords) will cross. This thrilling milestone of film history returns to the screen in a new, beautifully restored 4K digital transfer, created from the original camera negative.

“Officially the best action movie of the summer.”

—Peter Labuza

“King Hu was to martial arts what John Ford was to the western.”

—TwitchFilm

Taiwan • 1967 • 111 minutes • Color • Monaural
In Mandarin with English subtitles • 2.35:1 aspect ratio
Screening format: 4K DCP

CREDITS

Director/Scriptwriter: King Hu
Producer: Sha Jung-feng
Cinematographer: Hua Huiying
Editor: Chan Hung-man
Music: Chow Lan-ping
Martial arts choreographer:
Han Yingjie

Starring:
Shang Kuan Ling-Feng
as Miss Chu
Shi Jun as Xiao Shaozi
Bai Ying as Cao

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WUXIA: A PRIMER

ALTHOUGH IN THE WEST most often applied to film, the term *wuxia*—literally “martial [*wu*] hero [*xia*]”—in fact refers to a genre of Chinese fiction that is represented in every medium, from literature to opera to, of course, movies. Dating back to 300 BCE in its protean form, the *wuxia* narrative traditionally follows a hero from the lower class without official affiliation who pursues righteousness and/or revenge while adhering to a code of chivalrous behavior. Brought to mass popularity in the early part of the twentieth century via a series of post-Confucian novels, *wuxia* soon spread to film with the appearance of *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple*, a now lost serial adapted from the novel *The Tale of the Extraordinary Swordsman* that was released between 1928 and 1931. Banned by the government in the thirties due to their subversive and supernatural elements, *wuxia* films returned to the screen in the fifties, taking the traditional narrative form while also borrowing elements—such as careful choreography—from Chinese opera. Following a strict formula, *wuxia* films—though always period pieces—can be said to have become fully modern in the 1960s, with the formation of the Shaw Brothers studio and the advanced direction of filmmakers such as King Hu. The commercial success of Hu’s *Come Drink with Me* (produced for Shaw) and *Dragon Inn* (produced independently) kicked off a wave of *wuxia* titles, which were frequently exported to the U.S. as reedited, dubbed action films during the martial arts craze of the first half of the seventies. Though the genre wavered in popularity in the succeeding decades, it returned to international prominence in 2000 with Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which is heavily indebted to Hu’s classics of the sixties and seventies.

ABOUT THE RESTORATION

KING HU’S *Dragon Inn* was restored in 4K by the Chinese Taipei Film Archive and L’Imagine Ritrovata from the 35 mm original camera negative, which, fortunately, was still in relatively good condition. The primary focus of the restoration was correcting the main issues affecting the negative: flicker, dirt, scratches, splice marks, and a generally unstable image. As there was no vintage print available to be used as a color reference, notes on color timing held by the Film Archive proved to be key. The monaural soundtrack was likewise restored from the original sound negative, with distortion and cross modulation corrected using digital tools.

KING HU BIOGRAPHY

BORN IN BEIJING in 1932, King Hu moved to Hong Kong at the age of eighteen and started work as an illustrator for film advertisements. In 1954, he made his acting debut in the film *Humiliation for Sale*, and in 1958, through director Li Han-hsiang, he joined the Shaw Brothers studio as an actor, screenwriter, and assistant director. In 1963, Hu was first assistant director for Li on the film *The Love Eterne*, and the following year he made his directorial debut with *The Story of Sue San*. In 1966, Hu released his first wuxia film, *Come Drink with Me*, which was a major factor in the rise of the genre.

Dragon Inn (1967) was a blockbuster, setting box-office records in Taiwan, Korea, and the Philippines, and proved to have a broad and lasting influence. Its follow-up would not hit screens until 1971, after three years of filming. *A Touch of Zen* took the Technical Grand Prize award at the Cannes Film Festival in 1975, propelling Hu onto the world stage, and its bamboo forest duel became a classic scene and an indelible contribution to cinema.

Hu's 1981 film *The Juvenizer*—entirely self-funded and self-shot—was his first comedy, and his only work set in the present. After *The Wheel of Life* (1983), Hu stepped out of the limelight until 1990's *The Swordsman*, for which he made a comeback at the request of the younger wuxia director Tsui Hark. Hu was involved in the costuming, styling, and set design for the film, including setting up a massive set in Xitou, Taiwan. In 1992, he received a lifetime achievement award from the Hong Kong Film Directors' Guild. The following year saw the release of what turned out to be his final film, *Painted Skin*. In 1997, while about to begin work on a film about the Chinese immigrant workers who built the transcontinental railroads of America, Hu died while undergoing heart surgery.

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

- 1964 《玉堂春》 *The Story of Sue San*
- 1965 《大地兒女》 *Sons of the Good Earth*
- 1966 《大醉俠》 *Come Drink with Me*
- 1967 《龍門客棧》 *Dragon Inn*
- 1970 《喜怒哀樂》第二段『怒』 *Anger*
(part of the omnibus film *Four Moods*)
- 1971 《俠女》 *A Touch of Zen*
- 1973 《迎春閣之風波》 *The Fate of Lee Khan*
- 1975 《忠烈圖》 *The Valiant Ones*
- 1979 《空山靈雨》 *Raining in the Mountain*
- 1979 《山中傳奇》 *Legend of the Mountain*
- 1981 《終身大事》 *The Juvenizer*
- 1983 《天下第一》 *All the King's Men*
- 1983 《大輪迴》 *The Wheel of Life*
- 1990 《笑傲江湖》 *The Swordsman*
- 1993 《畫皮之陰陽法王》 *Painted Skin*

KING HU: FROM SHAW BROTHERS TO DRAGON INN

THOUGH HE would become the most influential director of wuxia movies in history, King Hu, born Hu Jinquan in Beijing, came to movies accidentally. An aficionado of Peking opera, comic books, and martial arts novels, Hu first became involved in the world of filmmaking when an acquaintance recommended him for a set decorating job at Hong Kong's Great Wall Studio in the early fifties. Soon enough, Hu found himself acting in films as well. In 1958, he joined Shaw Brothers, Hong Kong's premier martial arts film studio; founded in 1924, the studio had by this point become an action film empire, knocking out one fighting film after another with regularity and ease.

Though Hu started out as an actor at Shaw Brothers, his contract gave him the option of becoming a director. After cutting his teeth as an assistant director on such classics as Li Han-hsiang's musical romance *The Love Eterne* (1963), he made his directorial debut in 1965 with the patriotic, anti-Japanese war film *Sons of the Good Earth*, in which he also starred. It was his third directorial effort, *Come Drink with Me* (1966), however, that proved revolutionary. Not only was this Hu's first wuxia film, it was also a newly propulsive and realistically violent example of the genre, and it so captivated audiences that it revitalized the form, giving the generally artificial-looking, candy-colored Shaw Brothers productions an aesthetic shot in the arm.

Hu's style, pioneered in *Come Drink with Me*, wasn't just surface grittiness. He imbued his action with a compositional depth and maturity; focused intently on the physicality of his performers, rather than relying on special effects; used the camera as a balletic partner to the actors; sculpted his fight scenes keenly through editing rather than letting them play out in single takes; cast women in stronger, more central roles than the studio had before; and conveyed a palpable sense of Buddhist precepts.

For all these reasons, *Come Drink with Me* was a revelatory wuxia film, and the foundational work for Hu's subsequent masterpieces *Dragon Inn* (1967) and *A Touch of Zen* (1971). But Shaw Brothers wasn't impressed with this new brand of wuxia, and his relationship with studio head Run Run Shaw became frayed. With his newfound success and artistic confidence, however, Hu could write his own ticket, and after *Come Drink with Me*, the director left Shaw Brothers to make his own films independently in Taiwan, which had a smaller, more flexible and open-minded film industry.

The innovative *Dragon Inn*, produced with Sha Rongfeng for their short-lived partnership in the Union Film Company, set the template for nearly all wuxia films to come. A Ming Dynasty-era tale of political exile and violent intrigue set in wide-open Taiwan exteriors, the film, with its aesthetic control and spiritual core, was evidence that the genre had broken decisively from its pulp past.

CAST BIOS

Shang Kuan Ling-Feng joined the Union Film Company in 1966, and the following year landed a lead role in King Hu's *Dragon Inn*. The success of the film propelled Shang Kuan to stardom, as she and her *Dragon Inn* costar Hsu Feng became Union's preeminent women of wuxia. In addition to appearing in movies, Shang Kuan studied martial arts, earning second-degree black belts in both karate and tae kwon do, which made her a perfect fit for the wuxia films that would account for so much of her career.

In 1973, she appeared in Lo Wei's *Back Alley Princess*, which earned her the best leading actress award at the eleventh Golden Horse Awards. Shang Kuan was at her most prolific between 1975 and 1978, the period of her career during which she made the popular *18 Bronzemen* series with director Joseph Kuo. Later, she traveled to the United States to study communications. On her return to Taiwan, she made a brief comeback in film and television before retiring from the entertainment world in 1981. Today, Shang Kuan is a tae kwon do teacher in the United States.

Shi Jun was a leading man from his first film appearance. His role in King Hu's *Dragon Inn* (1967) made him a bona fide celebrity and the new rising star of wuxia films. With his role in *A Touch of Zen*, Shi cemented his place as part of Hu's regular company. He specialized in cool, calm, rational characters. In 1978, he traveled to South Korea with Hu to appear in *Raining in the Mountain* and *Legend of the Mountains*, and in 1983 his role in Hu's *The Wheel of Life* earned him the best actor award at the Asia-Pacific Film Festival.

Shi was known to be very selective about scripts without Hu's name attached. As a result, his filmography is smaller than those of many of his contemporaries. He has served as director of the Taipei Show

Business Union, continues to make occasional appearances on television, and is currently chairman of the King Hu Foundation. In 2003, Shih made a cameo in a film by renowned director Tsai Ming-liang entitled *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*. He also made a guest appearance in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's wuxia epic *The Assassin* (2015).

Bai Ying joined the Union Film Company in 1966, and during his five-year tenure there took part in five movies, including King Hu's *A Touch of Zen* as well as *Black Invitation* and *The Grand Passion*. His debut film performance in *Dragon Inn* immediately made him a star, and he was always a standout performer, whether on the side of good or evil. His role in *Dragon Inn* as the formidable martial artist, court eunuch, and antagonist Cao Shaoqin, with his unique combination of a youthful face and white hair, spawned many imitators.

In *A Touch of Zen*, he played the flip side of Cao, the upright Ming Dynasty general Shih Wen-chiao, who helps the Donglin movement in their resistance against the court eunuchs.

From 1966 through 1977, Bai acted in over twenty titles, most of them wuxia films, with the more well-known including Hu's *The Fate of Lee Khan* (1973) and *The Valiant Ones* (1975). In 1971, he joined Hong Kong's Shaw Brothers, traveling there to star in *The Eunuch* for the studio. This marked the start of frequent trips between Taiwan and Hong Kong for the actor. In 1977, Bai's turn as a villain in the 3D wuxia film *Dynasty* earned him the best supporting actor award at the Golden Horse Awards. Bai became one of the preeminent actors of the Hong Kong/Taiwan film world, known for his ability to play hero or villain, his agility, and his stern appearance.

TRIVIA

- During the Ming Dynasty, there were many eunuchs in the emperor's court. They were considered reliable officials and nonthreatening to the royal bloodlines, as they could not marry and start dynasties of their own. They often gained large swaths of political and military power as a result.
- Director King Hu was a talented calligrapher, and he painted *Dragon Inn*'s opening credits himself.
- Many filmmakers have paid tribute, directly or indirectly, to *Dragon Inn*. In Tsai Ming-liang's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, Hu's film is playing as the last feature to ever screen at the historic Taipei Cinema. *Dragon Inn* actors Shi Jun and Miao Tien both appear in the audience. The camera work, choreography, and special effects of *Dragon Inn* have had a clear aesthetic influence on such modern-day entries in the martial arts genre as Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and Zhang Yimou's *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*. Quentin Tarantino's *The Hateful Eight* has many plot similarities with *Dragon Inn*.
- Bai Ying, who memorably plays the eunuch in the film, would go on to play the eunuch in Teddy Yip's entertaining Shaw Brothers film *The Eunuch*.
- Hu encouraged his martial arts choreographers to draw from the alternately fluid and rhythmic movements of Chinese opera. Rather than resorting to fast or slow motion, footage printed backward, animation, or other early special-effects techniques, the filmmaker relied as much as possible on the actual skills of his performers and on the magic of editing.