

## House of Flying Daggers

### FILM SYNOPSIS

The House of Flying Daggers is set in 859 A.D., in the dying days of the Tang Dynasty. The film begins with two government guards, Jin and Leo investigating a blind dancer, Mei, whom they believe to be a member of the Flying Daggers. The Flying Daggers are a Robin Hood type group who rob from the rich to give to the poor. They are waging a guerrilla insurgency against the corrupt and decadent government. When Jin visits the brothel where Mei works, he happens upon one of its patrons attacking Mei. He saves her from the attack, but arrests her and puts her in jail.

Shortly after her arrest, an unknown assailant, who turns out to be Jin, breaks into the prison, overpowers the guards, frees Mei and the pair escape on horseback into the surrounding countryside. Jin, who is regarded as somewhat of a local playboy, uses his charms in an attempt to convince Mei that he really opposes the corrupt government and only wishes to see Mei to safety. But when Mei sleeps, Jin sneaks off to secretly rendezvous with Leo and report his progress in getting Mei to reveal the secret location of the Flying Daggers. A romance between Jin and Mei develops, and they continue to escape from pursuing government guards across fields of flowers and through forests of whispering bamboo. They are finally rescued by the Flying Daggers, who are revealed to be all women. After they have reached the headquarters of the Flying Daggers, the film takes a number of twists and turns and the end of the film sees a climactic unfolding of jealousy and betrayal culminating in a bloody confrontation between Mei and Leo and a death battle between Jin and Leo.



## DIRECTOR

Director Zhang Yimou was born in China in 1950 and studied cinematography at the Beijing Film Academy. His name is synonymous with beautiful, sensitive portraits of China and *House of Flying Daggers* bears the director's trademark - exquisite visual beauty and incisive storytelling. Following his success with the Academy Award®-nominated *HERO*, Zhang found himself hooked on wuxia (swordplay and chivalry) films. *'I don't want to make an ordinary martial arts film,'* explains Zhang, *'I want to talk about passion, interesting characters... my own style of wuxia film. This is a story about passion and love... it may be a wuxia film, but it is also an evocative and romantic love story.'*

The literal English translation of the Mandarin title of the film is 'Ambushed from Ten Directions' and it's the perfect description of Zhang Yimou's unique combination of vigorous martial arts action.

## WUXIA GENRE

**Definition:** Wǔxiá (also Wu Xia) (pronounced 'woo-shyah'), literally meaning 'martial arts chivalry', is a distinct genre in Chinese literature and cinema. Wuxia figures prominently in the popular culture of all Chinese-speaking areas.

The word *wuxia* is composed of two elements. The first, *wu* is used to describe things having to do with martial arts, war, or the military. The second, *xia* refers to the type of protagonist found in *wuxia*, and is also a synonym for chivalry. Thus, *wuxia* is translated as a martial-chivalric genre. The simplest way to describe this style of film to those who are not familiar with it is to define it as Chinese swords and sorcery.

## Activity

- What are the key characteristics of the wuxia genre? Write a genre description.
- What are the main differences between wuxia and martial arts genre?
- Is there anything in the film that doesn't fit with your wuxia genre description?

*'While Hero was all about a swordsman's righteous cause, House of Flying Daggers is more devoted to emotional tangles, which are well suited to both Eastern and Western audiences,'* Zhang said. People tend to compare this movie with the director's *Hero*, looking for the root of his enthusiasm for martial arts.

- Besides actor Zhang Ziyi (Mei) playing a major part in both films, how else are the two movies similar?

## CHINA'S HISTORY

House of Flying Daggers was one of the most anticipated Chinese films of 2004. It dazzled the audience with exquisite production and breathtaking audio and visual impact. Set in 859AD the film provides a colourful insight into this significant time in China's history and demonstrates how rebel groups were fighting against the state to gain power.

### Activity

- How much do you know about China's history?
- What was the Tang Dynasty?
- Why were the rulers deemed corrupt? And why were the rebel armies fighting against them?
- What are the key differences between the Flying Daggers and the Tang Dynasty?
- What would daily life have been like for members of the Flying Daggers? Write a one act play, a week's diary entries, or create a cartoon strip from the perspective of one of the girls in the house. How do they feel, dancing for the men? What other duties might they have? Is it a hard life?

## CHINESE CINEMA INVADING HOLLYWOOD

Economically China is on course to become the world's next big super-power, surpassing the USA. As his country prospers, so does Zhang's career. The director is now one of China's most high-profile directors thanks to his films Raise the Red Lantern, Hero and House of Flying Daggers. The style of martial arts the filmmaker uses is called wushu, and has appeared in a number of US movies - most notably in Quentin Tarantino's Kill Bill films. This is evidence that China's booming cinema industry is affecting Hollywood.

### Activity

- Describe wushu.

During an interview with the BBC, Zhang commented that film-goers can gain cultural and historical information from his work. 'Western audiences can gain an impression of China from my films. This is an excellent channel for promoting China's culture,' he says. 'Many things, feelings especially, are common to all human beings. As long as the film appeals to universal human feelings, all audiences will enjoy it.'

- Why is it a good thing that Chinese cinema is beginning to affect the Western film industry?

- What can the film’s audience learn about Chinese culture and history?
- What did you learn? Discuss this as a group.
- Research and identify six elements of Chinese cinema.

Lavish costumes
Highly stylised and choreographed fight scenes

- Can you identify any other Hollywood or European films, apart from Kill Bill, that have elements taken from Chinese cinema?
- Produce a film fact sheet for Year 7 students introducing them to Chinese cinema. Outline what Chinese Cinema is, maybe include some brief details on its history. Include reviews/details of films they can watch from Hollywood/Europe where they can see Chinese influence. Also suggest some popular Chinese films. Write an introduction to the fact sheet from Zhang Yimou. What do you think he would say to encourage people to watch his and other Chinese directors’ work?

## STRONG PROTAGONISTS

The lead female character of this martial arts adventure is Mei: a strong, feisty female protagonist. When the audience is first introduced to the character she is portrayed as a blind, female victim of the Flying Daggers who is forced to dance erotically for the pleasure of male guests. As the film progresses the audience witness the true strength and depth of the character. During the cleverly choreographed fight scenes Mei demonstrates her power and drive to protect the Flying Daggers. And as the love triangle unfolds Mei falls in love with the two male characters, which is an unusual twist, as it is predominantly the lead male protagonist who enjoys fickle love stories.

The characters of Jin and Leo are both clever, manipulative soldiers, who end up fighting against each other, even though they start the film on the same side. Both male protagonists fall in love with Mei and pay the ultimate price.

### Activity

- Film journalists have criticised House of Flying Daggers saying that the characters lack depth. Do you agree?
- How did your feelings change towards the character of Mei throughout the film?
- Do you think her character is a strong protagonist/role model for the female audience?
- Split into two groups, one of all girls, the other of all boys. Hold a brainstorming session on what everyone in your group thinks makes a strong female protagonist. How do the opinions of the two groups differ? Compile all your notes on the table below.

Male Group's Characteristics	Female Group's Characteristics

- Now identify some other strong female characters from films you have seen. Are there any similarities in their characteristics to those on your list?
- Using the characteristics you have identified, create your own strong female protagonist who might appear alongside Mei in the film. What qualities would she bring to the story? How would she be different to Mei? Will the new character fall in love or refrain from romance? How would the new character change the plot and would it change the outcome of the movie?

## FILM REVIEWS

Below are three examples of comments written about House of Flying Daggers:

*'The most important element of a martial arts movie is imagination. A film can be criticised for 10,000 reasons, but whether it impresses the audience with certain scenes or scenarios counts, and this is what I have pursued. Dozens of years later, when most people have forgotten the exact stories in House of Flying Daggers, they might still remember the classic scene where Zhang Ziyi plays a game with Andy Lau by long-sleeve dancing.'* **Zhang Yimou**

*'An epic love triangle ensues as duty and passion becomes locked in mortal combat.'*  
**BBC**

*'The third-act revelation marathon may challenge attention spans, but that's the only complaint. The visuals are breathtaking the fight scenes are heart-stopping... Hollywood, take note - this is how action movies should be made.'* **Empireonline.com**

Zhang Yimou has been praised further for his unique approach to the heroic swordplay genre and for his manipulation of martial arts to such artistic lengths. Critics have also picked up on his use of the landscape and changing seasons as a mirror of his character's predicaments: a dense forest captures the character's confusion; a snow storm suggests ruthless, icy intentions. The director's clever use of colour has also been applauded, as green bamboo forest, white snowstorms, and golden leaves, suggest different ideas, such as truth and deception.



## Activity

- If you were a film reviewer what would you write about House of Flying Daggers? Choose one of the following magazines or television/radio programmes and write a suitable article, or record a 30 second television or radio report:

Empire Magazine or empireonline.com  
Total Film  
Film 2006 with Jonathan Ross (BBC1)  
Culture Show (BBC 2)  
Front Row (Radio 4)  
Back Row (Radio 4)

- Research your chosen media outlet's target audience; ensure you are using the correct language, style, tone and content.

## Checklist of things to include in your review:

Theme and genre  
Plot  
Characters  
Director  
Is the soundtrack good?  
General review  
Rating

Author: Helen Dugdale

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