

GENDER, IDENTITY AND INFLUENCE: HONG KONG MARTIAL ARTS FILMS

Gilbert Gerard Castillo, B.A.

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Approved:

Donald E. Staples, Major Professor  
Harry Benshoff, Committee Member  
Harold Tanner, Committee Member  
Ben Levin, Graduate Coordinator of the  
Department of Radio, TV and Film  
Alan B. Albarran, Chair of the Department of  
Radio, TV and Film  
C. Neal Tate, Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse  
School of Graduate Studies

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This project is an examination of the Hong Kong film industry, focusing on the years leading up to the handover of Hong Kong to communist China. The influence of classical Chinese culture on gender representation in martial arts films is examined in order to formulate an understanding of how these films use gender issues to negotiate a sense of cultural identity in the face of unprecedented political change. In particular, the films of Hong Kong action stars Michelle Yeoh and Brigitte Lin are studied within a feminist and cultural studies framework for indications of identity formation through the highlighting of gender issues.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In the late eighties, Hong Kong emerged as the world's most vital - and eventually influential- cinematic alternative to Hollywood. "Among film scholars and critics, it is generally agreed that for brief periods, certain countries made seminal contributions to the development of film form and content" (Ellis, 1995, p.vii). Ellis (1995) refers to this as the "moving spotlight" (p.vii) view of film history pointing to examples of cinematic movements and moments such as German Expressionism, the French New Wave and Italian Neorealism. Although it is always difficult to pinpoint a precise end to something as vague as a "cinematic era," it is quite tempting to use the Chinese takeover of Hong Kong in 1997 as the marker for the end of what has been Hong Kong cinema's moment in the spotlight.

The emergence of Hong Kong cinema was an event, a convergence of social, economic and most importantly, political pressures that along with the creative talents of producers, writers, actors and directors, forged a national cinema that captured the attention of the worldwide cinematic consciousness. Anxiety concerning the imminent takeover helped draw attention to and ignite a film industry that had been prolific and economically successful if not particularly profound. Since the signing in late 1984 of the agreement between China and Great Britain to return the territory to China's rule, Hong Kong had been living under a very clearly defined deadline. Unlike the rather amorphous conglomeration of concerns posited under the "pre-millennial crisis" rubric,

Hong Kong's crisis was unavoidable and imminent. Time was bearing down on Hong Kong and such a weight could not help but find expression in the collective culture of the territory's film industry. Hong Kong director Chung Yung Ting succinctly expressed the singular position of the Hong Kong film industry with regard to the handover, "We are the only people in the world who are changing from capitalism to communism. So, that makes us a very unique people and we might have something very different to tell to the rest of the world" (Accomondo, 1997). With the passing of the deadline, and with it the sense of foreboding and uncertainty the deadline imposed, it is probably safe to say that the peculiar vitality that characterized Hong Kong cinema of the pre-takeover period is gone for good. As Hampton (1996) puts it: "A great tumultuous movie era has passed. Whatever the future holds under the new regime of corporate communism, its gloriously disreputable, shoot-from-the-hip days are likely behind it" (p.42).

### A Western Approach to an Eastern Cinema

As the deadline approached, a number of action films were produced starring women in the principal roles. Hong Kong cinema has a long tradition of women warriors fighting side by side, and sometimes in front of, their male counterparts. Action films, especially with women in the lead, tend to challenge patriarchal assumptions about the roles of men and women and the challenges presented to gender hierarchies is especially relevant given the covert politicization of Hong Kong films during this period. The appearance of action films which focus on gender are part of a general trend in Hong Kong society which has drawn more attention to feminist and homosexual issues. They are part of a, "new way of thinking which takes into account the growing role women

play in Hong Kong affairs, not least in the film industry” (Teo, 1997, p.202). This willingness to explore the position of feminized identities also reflects upon Hong Kong’s political situation. With announcement of the handover, Hong Kong residents found themselves in the politically passive or feminized role of being acted upon rather than acting. Colonial holdings, such as Hong Kong, have been characterized as feminine. As Anne McClintock (1995) writes, gender is not merely, “a question of sexuality but also a question of subdued labor and imperial plunder” (p.5). As Hong Kong returned to Chinese control, it found itself, at least politically, in the feminized role.

But to fully characterize Hong Kong and its film industry as a colonized - as politically gendered in the feminine and passive role - is to oversimplify Hong Kong’s role. The Hong Kong film industry remained preeminent for several decades. It was one of the worlds most widely distributed film industries, second only to Hollywood. Hong Kong films dominated the Pacific Rim, from Mainland China to Japan. Hong Kong was in effect, a media imperialist. For years Hong Kong has been in the contrary position of being a colonized land with a culturally imperialistic film industry. The contradictions with Hong Kong’s relation to China do not end there. One of the cultural conventions that Hong Kong comedies utilize is that of the Chinese Mainlander as a country bumpkin. This speaks to the latent prejudices against Mainlanders with regards to degrees of sophistication and development. Comedies that rely upon these prejudices, “reflect Hong Kong’s Chinese migrants as emerging from the pre-modern agrarian society of China into (pre/post) modern Hong Kong” (Teo, 1997, p. 246). While Hong Kong is in the position of the feminized object with regard to her political relationship with China,

Hong Kong is in the somewhat contradictory – as far as colonial relationships go – position of being the more modernized culture.

The intention of this paper is to examine in depth these contradictions and the dynamics of the Hong Kong film industry in the years leading up to the summer of 1997. It will examine the implications and effects that the political situation had on Hong Kong's staunchly commercial film industry. Specifically, I will explore the way issues of identity and gender became prominent in Hong Kong cinema during this time. Issues of identity, gender and colonialism will be examined within a (Western) feminist theoretical framework while attempting to address the specific nature of the Hong Kong film industries interaction with these principles. I will also explore the differences in formations of masculinity between Hong Kong films and Hollywood films of the same period which were heavily involved in the ideal of "muscular masculinity" (Tasker, 1993, p.1). The re-working (from a Western perspective) of masculinity - in terms and signifiers which are closer to those found in Hollywood musicals than typical Hollywood actions films - will be investigated as a means of facilitating the use of gender ambiguity in Hong Kong films. This in turn will lead into an analysis of Hong Kong cinema's pervasive influence in Hollywood.

Using a framework of Western critical theory to analyze films that were produced outside of the cultures where these theories were created raises a number of interesting questions. First and foremost, it must be asked whether these theories are even applicable to foreign cultures. Do the central tenets of film theory apply universally or are they culturally specific and applicable only to the cultural environment which gave birth to them? If the latter is true, it casts serious doubts upon the validity of these theories even



as they apply to cultural products of their own countries. If these theories are not able to cross national cultural boundaries it does not seem likely that they could account for differences in cultures even among ethnic cultures within the same country. The credibility of a major portion of Western film theory is instantly cast in serious doubt.

As unlikely (unlikely perhaps only to Western eyes) as this seems, the extreme opposing view seems just as dubious. To assert that Western theoretical frameworks can just as easily account for cultural products produced in substantially different cultural environments as they do for cultural products produced within their own culture seems an untenable argument especially given the constant questioning and revising that these theories are subject to domestically. Furthermore, it has been argued that Western film critics are simply asserting a kind of cultural imperialism by imposing their own perspectives on non-western films (Kaplan, 1997, p.42).

The correct approach here, as it is in most cases, seems to be to avoid either extreme. To deny the relevance of Western theoretical constructs to films produced in Hong Kong is to deny the commonalities that exist between the two cultures. For example, much of the theory used in this project springs from the feminist movement of the sixties and seventies when film critics turned their attention to the ways film perpetuated the patriarchal repression of women. Historically, Chinese culture has been as patriarchal as any other in the history of the world. Under Confucianism, a doctrine of moral ideals that has permeated Chinese culture for more than 2,000 years, women are completely subordinate to men. Hong Kong films have been as guilty as Western films in endorsing patriarchal subordination of women and using frameworks created by Western theorist such as Mulvey can help to enlighten the repressive functions of

patriarchy at work within Hong Kong's cinema. The resistance of some Chinese scholars to Western readings of Chinese films seems to mirror the resistance that alternative readings face even within the same culture. A Chinese scholar may react to an American critique of a Hong Kong film by saying, "this is not the Chinese way of thinking" (Kaplan, 1997, p.142), but is such a statement any more valid than an American fan of, say, wrestling disavowing the homo-erotic nature of two, partially undressed, highly muscular men groping at each other? As Kaplan (1997) points out, "Theorists outside the producing culture might uncover different strands of the multiple meanings than critics of the originating culture just because they bring different frameworks/theories/ideologies to the texts" (p.142). Cross-cultural readings of film can potentially be as productive and insightful as any alternative reading of a cultural text.

At the same time that cross-cultural analysis should be encouraged, certain considerations and precautions should be kept in mind. While the differences between cultures do not present insurmountable barriers to cross-cultural analysis, these differences cannot be ignored. Western critics, as much as they are in a position to do so, should take care to allow in their readings of non-western films for room to negotiate a balance between the general framework of theory and the specific artifacts of a cultural environment. The issue of gender bending, for instance, has a special relevance and history within Chinese culture. From the basic Daoist ideas about the interaction between yin and yang (the passive/female and active/male elements of nature), to the traditions of cross-dressing in Chinese opera and the historical and cultural place of the eunuch in Chinese history, gender ambiguity has played an ongoing role in the formation of Chinese culture. To ignore these specific manifestations and meanings of gender in the

formation of contemporary uses of gender-bending in Hong Kong films would result in readings of the films that would indeed embody a short-sighted form of cultural imperialism. There is the rather delicate balance that must be struck between understanding elements in these films that are culturally specific and understanding how these elements work in the broader context of world cinema especially since Hong Kong cinema is so aggressively exportable and eclectic in formation and practice.

### Hong Kong Cinema Beyond its Own Borders

Western interest in pre-handover Hong Kong films follows and is built upon perceptions of Hong Kong films stemming from the kung fu craze of the 70s. Fifteen years after the initial wave of Western interest in Hong Kong films wore off, a second wave of films coming out of Hong Kong began gaining the attention of western cinematic audiences in the mid-eighties. “The first wave was in the early 70s, when Bruce Lee and Angela Mao films, and scintillating titles like *Master Of The Flying Guillotine* (Wang, 1975) and *Lightning Swords of Death* (Misumi, 1972), galvanized urban grind house audiences” (Morris, 1994, p.5). Interest in Hong Kong cinema the second time around was spurred by the critical and commercial success of a new wave of Hong Kong directors such as John Woo and Tsui Hark. Films from Hong Kong, as well as Mainland China and Taiwan, became the darlings of film festival organizers.

Prior to this reemergence of Western interest in Hong Kong cinema, the main outlet for Hong Kong films in America had been theatres based in Chinese communities or midnight screenings in mainstream theatres. My first exposure to the visceral, comic-

book sensibilities of Hong Kong fantasy films came in the early eighties. At midnight screenings in a dilapidated South Austin theatre, my friends and I were one of a few small pockets of occidentals in a theatre filled to capacity. Occasionally the mostly ethnic Chinese audience would roar with laughter at something a character had said while my friends and I would helplessly wait for the inevitably inadequate subtitles to bring us in on the joke. This lapse speaks to the difficulty for Westerners in fully appreciating the intricacies of meaning and expression that domestic audiences take for granted. Despite these difficulties, my friends and I diligently sat up every Saturday night for the chance to experience a cinematic expression that could be found nowhere else on American movie screens.

Although Hong Kong films had virtually disappeared from American screens by the time John Woo began directing his seminal gangster films, the Hong Kong film industry had continued a history of dynamic and pervasive influence in the Far East.

Hong Kong has been one of the most productive film centers on earth – alongside Japan, India, and the U.S. – without subsidy. In 1954 for example, with a population then of around three million, HK produced more than 200 features...annual production peaked at just over 300 in the early Sixties (Bren, 1997, p.41).

The Hong Kong film industry was able to achieve a “competitive preeminence in the East Asian and Southeast Asian markets...Hong Kong movies have over a long period dominated all those markets in which overseas Chinese are active” (Kei, 1994, p.8). Jackie Chan, Hong Kong’s biggest star for over a decade, may be the world’s most popular movie star. “In sheer numbers, Jackie Chan is surely the most recognized movie star on the planet. A personal appearance by Chan in Seoul or Taipei or Tokyo can cause a riot” (Dannen & Long, 1997, p.3).

## Anxiety Ignites a Movie Industry

The announcement in 1984 of England's intention to return Hong Kong to Chinese rule set off a feeding frenzy in Hong Kong's film industry. Suddenly the most capitalistic city in the world had a deadline, a pre-determined and precisely defined mini-end of history. The feeling of urgency, of having only a limited time permeated the culture and resonated in the vibrancy and helter-skelter energy of film industry desperate to make as much money as quickly as possible. Even the local organized crime, the Triads, began trying their hands and film production seeing it as way to make a quick fortune (Dannen & Long, 1997, p.24).

The economic energy and urgency became focused in the film industry and led Hong Kong to play to the existing perception of its strength as a producer of action films. Hong Kong could never compete with Hollywood in terms of big budgets or special effects, but it excelled in the area of stunt choreography and the staging of hand-to-hand combat scenes. The sheer physicality of stunt work in Hong Kong is unmatched. Jackie Chan's mystique as a superstar had been to a large extent based upon the fact that he performed his own stunts. This premium on stunt work could only find its most comfortable expression in action films. Additionally, Hong Kong films, especially action films, "suit the image of the city, with its frenetic pace, crazy traffic and art of the deal agenda" (Corliss, 1997, p.88). These strengths, the kinetic nature of films (and life) in Hong Kong, coupled with urgency propelled by anxiety and proficiency in a specific kind of product (the action movie) all point to an emphasis, both domestically and

internationally, on the action film. In the feeding-frenzy, bottom line atmosphere of the Hong Kong film industry, action films were positioned as the most viable genre.

While it elevated the position of the action film in Hong Kong, the fixation of the bottom line assured the mitigation of the art film as well as any openly political films. During the eighties and into the nineties, art film was practically non-existent in Hong Kong. Wong Kar Wai, the director of *Ashes of Time* (Wai, 1994) and *Chung King Express* (Wai, 1994), stands as vivid example of the exception that proves the rule. One of the few directors even attempting to make art films in Hong Kong during the years leading up to the takeover, Wong Kar Wai found it necessary to find funding for his films from foreign concerns. As Wong Kar Wai put it, “The only censorship in Hong Kong is do your films sell?”(Accomondo, 1997)

If the art film was a rare breed in Hong Kong the overt political film was virtually extinct. While the presence of a very efficient colonial administration that provided no outlet for political idealism (Abbas, 1997, p.5) tended to curb political fervor in the territory, certain events could spark spontaneous demonstrations and outpouring of political sentiment from Hong Kong residents. In 1989, thousands of Hong Kong residents took to the streets to protest the Tiananmen Massacre. Coming so soon after the initial announcement of the hand-over, Tiananmen Square fanned the flames of concern, providing a specific example of what Hong Kong residents feared would represent China’s handling of the soon to be re-acquired territory. As important an event as the massacre was in regards to Hong Kong’s outlook on relations with Communist China, references to Tiananmen Square were noticeably absent in Hong Kong films. The fact that Hong Kong filmmakers expected after 1997 to face an intolerant regime which did

not allow for dissident voices was somewhat mitigated by the fact that the filmmakers had already labored under a system which was just as adverse to personal expressions of political outrage as China's was likely to be. "There is no censorship here because there are no political films here", said head of production company Golden Harvest Raymond Chow, "Hong Kong businessmen are far worse censors than the Chinese" (Corliss, 1997, p.88).

Although economic concerns tended to override other considerations, the production of a cultural product within a culture experiencing tremendous anxiety is bound to reflect those anxieties. If direct expression of those concerns is prohibited, by whatever mechanism, then indirect expressions are inevitable. Siegfried Kracauer, in exploring Germany's cinematic movement prior to World War II, wrote that films tended to reflect, "those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness" (Kracauer, 1959, p.6). Even if the Hong Kong industry was consciously dedicated to maximizing profitability, the prevalent concerns of living in a culture which had reveled in capitalistic excess and which was now on the verge of takeover by Communist China could not help but seep into the collective dream of cinema. The fascination of Hong Kong films to emerge from this cultural environment lies in "the way film is being used to explore and negotiate a problematic and paradoxical cultural space, without abandoning its role as popular entertainment" (Abbas, 1997, p.26). This dynamic, the pressure cooker of intense cultural anxiety and an industry determined to avoid any overt political references which could diminish its' products exportability, produced, "the most vibrant, hectic, money-mad, in-spite-of-itself-artistic cinema around" (Corliss, 1997, p.88).

In attempting to come to terms with the grim realities of their political situation, Hong Kong filmmakers adopted a variety of strategies. The films of John Woo, for instance, have been interpreted as “spectacularly choreographed bloodbaths which represent intensive survival test anticipating 1997” (Williams, 1997, p.68). The popularity of the gangster film, with its emphasis on loyalty and the survival of a heroic individual through times of lawlessness, served as vivid examples of the Hong Kong individual’s ability to withstand foreboding circumstances. “These heroes from the lawless days show that people can survive and even succeed in a bad situation.” (Williams, 1997, p.68)

### The Decline of a National Cinema

As popular as Hong Kong films have been over the last few decades in the Far East, and more recently the West, the halcyon days of the Hong Kong film industry appear to be over. In the time leading up to the communist takeover, the Hong Kong film industry was energized to get as much out of cinema as possible in the face of an uncertain future. With the passing of the deadline, it has been as if the air has gone out of the balloon. According to one report, “The once-vibrant industry is in a desperate state. The studios are reporting record losses. The number of movies in production has dropped dramatically” (“Kung Fu Crisis”, 1999, p.32). In the years leading up to the handover, Hollywood films such as *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1993) and *Speed* (Bont, 1994) began outdrawing domestic Hong Kong releases. This in a country where “for 25



years, Hong Kong was the one free movie market whose local product consistently outgrossed the big Hollywood imports” (“Kung Fu Crisis, 1999, p.32).

The economic crisis in Japan and the rest of the Far East accelerated what was already a trend of decline. The Hong Kong economic structure as a whole is uniquely susceptible to an economic crisis. “As the biggest and most liquid stock market in that part of the world, Hong Kong is simply the easiest place for frightened investors to cash in their chips and run” (Weyer, 1997, p.29). The long-running economic crisis in Asia devastated Far East film companies. In the past, Hong Kong producers could often count on covering the entire expense of a film simply by selling foreign rights. “Back then, we could cover our entire budget by selling the film in just Southeast Asia and the rest of the international market would be like candy.” explained one Hong Kong producer at a recent film festival (Resner, 1998, p.54).

The economic hardships suffered by the current Hong Kong film industry have been exacerbated by rampant piracy of movies in the Far East. In Hong Kong in particular, the introduction of cheap VCD players, which are present in as much as a third of Hong Kong households (“Chinese Cinema”, 1999, p.67) have facilitated the distribution of illegal copies of theatrical releases. The VCD players play standard cd-rom discs, which can be easily duplicated on home computers, allowing cheap and convenient pirating of movies almost as soon as they are released in theatres. The cheap pirate CDs which will play on a VCD player “can be bought for as little as \$2 each, a quarter of the price of a cinema ticket”(“Chinese Cinema”, 1999, p.67). Piracy has become such a deep concern that the Hong Kong industry observed a voluntary blackout to protest the government’s inadequate response to the problem. “While cinemas closed,

radio station had music black outs and some of Hong Kong's most famous entertainers, including action film star Jackie Chan, took to the streets at the head of a 2,000 strong demonstration" (Vines, 1999, p.19). The problem of pirating extends to mainland China, which has been notorious for lax copyright laws. In China, "2,000 cable-television and broadcast stations pump out an endless stream of free films. Few bother to pay royalties" ("Chinese Cinema", 1999, p.67 ).

Changes in the infrastructure of the Hong Kong film industry have also had unexpectedly negative consequences. As cinemas upgraded their facilities and transformed into multiplexes, admission prices consequently rose. "Higher prices and more sophisticated, albeit smaller, auditoriums raised the level of expectations for quality products which were met by imported Hollywood films" (Teo, 1997, p.253). Producers of Hong Kong films, including Jackie Chan, have suggested that people have simply grown tired of Hong Kong's films. The contention is that once Hong Kong audiences had gotten a taste for Hollywood's high production values, the local product simply could not compete.

### The Influx of Hong Kong Influence in Hollywood

If the economic pressures being exerted from the rival Hollywood product were not enough, Hollywood has also been systematically siphoning talent away from Hong Kong for several years. An irony in the decline of the Hong Kong film industry is that its very success during the eighties and early nineties has helped precipitate its apparent fall. The critical and box-office success of Hong Kong films attracted the attention of

Hollywood, and as had happened during earlier moments of cinematic history, Hollywood simply absorbed the talents and techniques of the rival industry. Writing of the mass emigration of German filmmakers and stars during the twenties, Ellis (1995) points out that this emigration would go on to “impoverish their native industry and further enrich the dominant American one” (p.72). This pattern has repeated itself in Hong Kong. Hollywood has been as eager to soak up Hong Kong’s film talent as Hong Kong’s film talent has been eager to escape the uncertain situation presented by the combination of the communist takeover and the Hong Kong film industries commercial malaise.

Jackie Chan has become the most visible and successful personality to emerge out of the Hong Kong scene. After failing to gain popular American recognition in the eighties with an appearance in *Cannonball Run II* (Needham, 1984) and starring roles in *The Protector* (Glickenhau, 1985) and *The Big Brawl* (Clouse, 1980), Chan found success in the West during the nineties. The 1995 re-release of *Rumble in the Bronx* (Tong, 1995) hit number one in North America. Although the subsequent North American releases of *First Strike* (Tong, 1996), *Mr. Nice Guy* (Hung, 1997), and *Who Am I?* (Chan, 1998) did not fare nearly as well, they did pave the way for Chan’s breakthrough American produced feature *Rush Hour* (Ratner, 1998). *Rush Hour*, which saw Chan paired with American comedian Chris Tucker, went on to make over 140 million at the U.S box office.

Although Chan has continued to split time between Hollywood and Hong Kong, others, including and most significantly, John Woo are now working exclusively in Hollywood. Woo’s *Face/Off* (Woo, 1997) broke the \$120 million dollar mark making it

one of 1997's most successful films. The success of *Face/Off* cemented his future in Hollywood after the moderate successes of his previous Hollywood films *Hard Target* (Woo, 1993) and *Broken Arrow* (Woo, 1996). Woo's next feature, *Mission Impossible II* (2000), signaled his arrival among the A-list of Hollywood directors.

While Chan and Woo are the two most obvious examples of talent that has been drained from Hong Kong, the list is surprisingly long. Woo's longtime onscreen alter-ego, Chow Yun Fat brought his onscreen charisma to American theatres in *The Replacement Killers* (Fuqua, 1998) and has continued to work in Hollywood. With the release of *Tomorrow Never Dies* (Spottiswoode, 1997), James Bond fans were introduced to the talents of *Crouching Tiger, Rising Dragon* (Lee, 2001) star Michelle Yeoh. Kung fu superstar Jet Li helped to invigorate the last incarnation of the failing *Lethal Weapon* series of films and has gone on to become almost as big a star in the West as Jackie Chan. Sammo Hung, a classmate of Jackie Chan, starred in the television series *Martial Law* (Cuse, 1998). Ronnie Yu, director of the Hong Kong hit *Bride With White Hair* (1993), was recruited to direct *Warriors of Virtue* (1997) and *Bride of Chucky* (1998). The success of Jackie Chan and John Woo opened the doors for Hong Kong talent to work in Hollywood, leaving the cupboard somewhat bare in Hong Kong whose, "best talent has gone overseas" (Cornwell, 1997, p.15).

Even beyond the talents of individual filmmakers and actors, Hong Kong Cinema has had a pervasive influence on any number of aspects of American popular culture. The term "kung fu" is probably in higher use now than at anytime since the demise of Bruce Lee. *The Matrix* (Wachowski, 1999), which employed the services of veteran Hong Kong director Woo-ping Yuen for the martial arts sequences, aspired to the sort of

high-energy collision between fantasy and reality that Hong Kong films take for granted. *The Matrix*, as well as many other recent action films, borrowed heavily from the John Woo lexicon of action films. Renditions of the “ballistic ballet” that punctuated Woo’s triumphs have become a part of the cinematic language of Hollywood.

The highly popular syndicated television series *Hercules* (Raimi, 1995) and *Xena* (Raimi, 1995) borrowed liberally from Hong Kong films, lifting plot devices, stunt choreography and sometimes whole scenes shot-by-shot from Hong Kong films (Irvine). Sam Rami, who executive produced *Hercules* and *Xena*, and directed his own Hong Kong influenced *Evil Dead* series of films, is a reportedly a huge fan of Hong Kong films. “The producers and writers of *Xena* readily admit that HK-style action is an important element of the show. In fact, the show was apparently originally conceived as “Xena does Hong Kong action”(Irvine, ¶ 2).

At the outset of the Hong Kong cinematic craze, director Quentin Tarantino had done as much as any other individual in championing Hong Kong. Tarantino is the author of the best one-liners regarding the directing talents of John Woo. When hearing that a Hollywood producer had grudgingly paid John Woo a compliment by saying Woo could direct an action scene, Tarantino is said to have replied with, “Yeah, (John Woo) can direct an action scene. And Michelangelo could paint a ceiling.” Tarantino presented Jackie Chan with a lifetime achievement award on MTV, preparing a prospective audience in 1995 the year before Chan’s *Rumble In The Bronx* was released in America.

If the lines of influence that can be traced from the Hong Kong film industry have a common factor, it is that the individuals and techniques which have had the profoundest impact on Western culture were all closely associated with Hong Kong’s action genres.

First and foremost, the Hong Kong film industry is known for its various permutations of the action film. From Jackie Chan's kung fu high jinks to John Woo's ballistic ballets of destruction, Hong Kong cinema has often been characterized as a cinema of pure action. One writer even went so far to say that, "Without guns, without fighting, without gallons of blood and multiple deaths, there would be no Hong Kong cinema" (Desson, 1995, p.N32).

Although this characterization is not without some merit, it fails to fully account for the richness and diversity of Hong Kong films. Even before the "discovery" by Western critics and audiences of John Woo and Jackie Chan, the initial attention garnered by films coming out of Hong Kong was directed towards the so-called New-Wave directors whose films were geared towards social, realist melodramas. Representative films include Ann Hui's *Boat People* (1982) and Patrick Tam's *Nomad* (1982). Another virtually ignored (by the West) staple of the Hong Kong film industry was the comedy. The fact that Hong Kong comedies have been overlooked by the West is not surprising given the social, political and dialect specific nature of most comedies.

While the perception that the Hong Kong film culture was exclusively action orientated is certainly not accurate, it is somewhat understandable. Hong Kong films are aggressively exportable. They dominated the Asian markets for years and part of the strategy to broaden the international appeal of these films was to remain a steadfastly populist cinema, an anti-art/anti-political cinema. Hong Kong films were made to be exported in a region with a variety of political, religious and cultural systems. "Hong Kong films are forced to entertain on the most immediate level or perish" (Desson, 1995, p.N32).

## CHAPTER 2 : DISCUSSION

### Crouching Tiger and Martial Arts Genres

The discussion of Hong Kong cinema begins with an examination of the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Lee, 2000), its unprecedented success in the United States and its relation to other martial arts films. Except perhaps for Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* (Clouse, 1973), *Crouching Tiger* is the most successful Hong Kong-style film of all time. While both of these films are steeped in the tradition of Hong Kong action cinema, neither is wholly of Hong Kong origin. Both are products of transnational ventures built to take advantage of a wave of interest in martial art cinema.

In the early seventies, Warner Brothers had been rescued from the brink of bankruptcy by their success in blaxploitation films like *Super Fly* (Parks, 1972). They also found success producing the television series *Kung Fu* (Thorpe, 1972) as well as re-distributing the Hong Kong kung fu film, *The Five Fingers Of Death* (Cheng, 1973) which stayed on the box office charts for three months through the summer of 1973 (Desser, 2000, p.20). Recognizing the star potential of Bruce Lee, whose Hong Kong films *Fist of Fury* (Lo, 1972) and *The Chinese Connection* (Lo, 1973) had also become import hits, Warner Brothers provided financial backing for *Enter the Dragon*. Not entirely convinced that an Asian actor could carry a Hollywood film, Warner Brothers hedged their bets by surrounding Lee with American stars John Saxon and Jim Kelly. The inclusion of Jim Kelly, a young black action star, was a particularly savvy move

since “Warner Brothers realized with particular clarity that the blaxploitation audience and the emerging martial arts audience were rather consonant” (Desser, 2000, p.24). The resulting film was a tremendous box office success and although not the purest form of a kung fu movie, it had – for Western audiences - remained the most famous martial arts movie ever made.

It would be almost thirty years before another Hong Kong style movie would have a similar impact in the West, even surpassing *Enter the Dragon* in terms of critical response. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* received twelve Oscar nominations (winning four) including a nomination for best film of the year. The film met with both popular and critical success. Despite concerns by the film’s producers that the American public would never respond to a dubbed kung fu movie, the film grossed over \$125 million dollars at the United States box office, making it to the most successful foreign film of all time. Critics responded no less enthusiastically than the public. *Time* critic Richard Corliss (2001) wrote, “High art meets high spirits on the trampoline of an elaborate plot. *Crouching Tiger* is contemplative, and it kicks ass.” (p.96) Roger Ebert (2000) thought the film was able to overcome its humble martial arts origins “and become one of a kind. It's glorious, unashamed escapism and surprisingly touching at the same time.”

The success of the film would not have been possible without the saturation of Western media by Hong Kong action film culture. By the time of *Crouching Tiger's* premiere, the emigration of talent from Hong Kong to Hollywood had been going on for several years and the trace of Hong Kong culture could be found in American media products as disparate as television series like *Xena, Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (Fury, 1997), and films such as *The Matrix* and *Mission Impossible II*. Western audiences had



been primed for several years to allow for the success of *Crouching Tiger*. But once again, it was not the pure product of Hong Kong that met with the most widespread recognition but a Hong Kong style movie filtered through production methods and values of the West.

While the American success of *Enter The Dragon* was built upon the unlikely combination of Hong Kong style martial arts and urban “grind-house” audiences, *Crouching Tiger* is built upon the just as unlikely combination of martial arts and art house. *Crouching Tiger* is a film, which from conception through production and marketing, was constructed to overcome the lowbrow stigmas of the action genre. Director Ang Lee’s stated intention was to make *Crouching Tiger*, “like a summer blockbuster in Asia but an art house film in the rest of the world.” (Rose, 2001) Ang Lee, a Taiwanese director, had previously been known for domestic comedies such as *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) and *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) as well as his Jane Austen adaptation *Sense and Sensibility* (1995).

*Crouching Tiger*’s narrative relies heavily on character development and psychological motivation rather than the simple cause and effect sequence of events favored by Hong Kong films. In Hong Kong films, the script and dialogue often seem to be afterthoughts, necessary to tie together the action set pieces. As Jackie Chan explained it,

When the audience see my movie [sic], they are more interested in action than story, so a lot of time [sic], my story is very simple. First thing, how many fight scene[sic]? Of course, there is a big fight scene at the end, a middle one, a light fight scene, a little big scene-maybe five fighting [scenes] in the whole movie.... Then how many comedy [sic] I put inside... Then we start the story (Dannen & Long, 1997, p.60).

For *Crouching Tiger*, thirteen Asian and US writers were brought in to work on

and tighten the script. Even details such as the soundtrack were handled in a manner distinct from the typical Hong Kong martial arts film. In a typical Hong Kong film, "such niceties as an original film score are often dispensed with" (Dannen & Long, 1997, p.7). In contrast, Lee recruited renowned violinist Yo Yo Ma to write and perform for the film's score, a choice no doubt designed to garner further art house credibility for the project.

The final product is something reminiscent of recent Hong Kong martial arts films yet more reserved. It is as if the production values somehow managed to dampen the energy of the genre rather than enhance it. In making a martial arts film for the West, Lee's film seems to lack that desperation to please which imbued Hong Kong's best work. Perhaps not surprisingly, the film fell flat at the Hong Kong and Chinese box offices. The tweaking of the martial arts formula to make it more acceptable to the West seemed to alienate it from the genre's natural audiences in the East. For audiences, which had become used to the hyper-kinetic, frenzied action films of Jet Li and Jackie Chan, the staid pacing of *Crouching Tiger* simply did not meet with their expectations of the genre. One critic pointed to the "long dialogue sequences between the set pieces – shot in an immobile, very Western style" (Elley, 2000, p.85) as an example of the incongruity. "There's not enough action in it –it's boring...Seeing people run across roofs and trees might be novel for Americans, but we've seen it all before," said one Hong Kong movie fan (Landler, 2000, p.E1).

But for everything that sets the film apart from other kung fu movies, *Crouching Tiger* is a film that stands very much in the tradition of recent Hong Kong films. It is a fitting homage to Hong Kong cinema's recent glory days. The film stars two of the

biggest names from Hong Kong action films, Michelle Yeoh and Chow Yun Fat, both of whom have made the transition to working in Hollywood films. Although this was Chow Yun Fat's first martial arts film, he had become a star in John Woo's seminal gangster epics and had, prior to the production of *Crouching Tiger*, starred in the Hollywood features *The Replacements Killers* (1998), *The Corruptor* (Chen, 1999), and *Anna and the King* (Mongkut, 1999). Michelle Yeoh, whose Hong Kong career will be reviewed in detail, came to the project as a martial arts film veteran and had starred in the James Bond film *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997). For the vital martial arts sequences, Ang Lee recruited action choreographer Woo Yeun Ping. Ping had become known in the West for choreographing the fight scenes in *The Matrix*. Prior to *The Matrix*, Ping was a prolific director in Hong Kong. Ping's directing credits include some of the best of Hong Kong's recent martial arts films such as *Iron Monkey* (1993) and *The Last Hero in China* (1993).

Lee's relative success in being able to combine the two cinematic traditions of Hollywood and Hong Kong stems in part from the close relationship that has always existed between the two. In fact, Hong Kong has been called "Dongfang Haolaiwu", the Hollywood of the East (Dannen & Long, 1997, p.5). Now, with the amount of talent that has migrated to Hollywood from Hong Kong, Hollywood might well be called Hong Kong West. Like Hollywood, the vast majority of Hong Kong movies are genre movies whose conventions are immediately recognized by audience members. In Hong Kong, the reliance on genre formulas was due in part to the speed of production as well as the lack of time to refine original scripts and ideas. During the eighties and nineties "film companies were able to produce movies from start to finish in the span of seven to eight weeks, sometimes less" (Dannen & Long, 1997, p.7).

As in recent Hollywood history, Hong Kong producers reliance on repeating past successes also took form in a copious amount of sequels. For example, the hit horror-comedy *Mr. Vampire* (Lau, 1985) was released in 1985; by 1987, there was already *a Mr. Vampire IV* (Lau, 1987), followed by *New Mr. Vampire* (Chan, 1987), *New Mr. Vampire II* (Lam, 1989) and *a Mr. Vampire 1992* (Lau, 1992) (Dannen & Long, 1997, p.9). A film and its sequel might even be shot concurrently as was the case with *The Heroic Trio* (Ching, 1992) and its follow up *The Executioners* (Ching, 1993). A successful gangster film, such as *A Better Tomorrow* (Woo, 1986) would not only spawn direct sequels (three in this case), but a legion of similarly themed films. *A Better Tomorrow* kicked off an entire cycle of gangster films. These cycles would usually have very short shelf lives as the current cycle would quickly be supplanted by the next cycle of films based on the next successful genre film (Bordwell, 2000, p.152).

Action films, because of their popularity with local audiences in Hong Kong as well as their exportability, have historically been Hong Kong cinema's signature specialty. More specifically, Hong Kong is known for martial arts movies. Hong Kong martial arts films are usually separated into two closely related, often inter-changeable genres: kung fu and *wuxia*. The basic distinction between the two is that the former features bare hand fighting and the later features swordplay. Classic examples of kung fu film include the entire body of Bruce Lee film's as well as the countless Shaw Brothers productions that routinely appeared on USA Network's Kung Fu Theatre.

The name *wuxia* is of Mandarin origin with "wu" referring to the martial arts and "xia" meaning heroes. The genre emerged from historical novels about knight-errant swordsmen, "but the times and places they deal with come from real, instantly

recognizable eras in Chinese history” (Carter, 1995, p.16). Besides the basic distinction between armed and unarmed combat, the *wuxia* genre is also distinguished from the kung fu movie in that the *wuxia* genre is more reliant upon fantastic elements. The constraints of everyday reality nature do not apply in *wuxia* films. Warriors in *wuxia* films are able to fly through the air, run up walls, shoot bolts of mystical energy and generally violate the laws of physics whenever the script and budget allow for it. While a Bruce Lee kung fu film might feature a few trampoline aided flying sidekicks (usually at the climatic moment in the final battle) *wuxia* films operate in a more wide-open narrative space.

*Crouching Tiger*, even with its Western trappings, is classical *wuxia*. Lee’s film pays special homage to *wuxia* director King Hu, who had previously taken “the sword fighting movie into the realm of art-house respectability in the West”( Teo, 1997, p.99). Bordwell regards Hu as “Hong Kong’s finest director of the 1960s and 1970s” (Bordwell, 2000, p.255). Ang Lee, apparently, holds Hu in similar regard. *Crouching Tiger* quotes fight scenes from two of Hu films. In *Come Drink with Me* (Hu, 1965), a young female warrior challenges and defeats an inn full of martial arts fighters, a scene that is repeated in *Crouching Tiger*. In Hu’s 1969 film, *A Touch of Zen*, two *wuxia* knights battle in a grove of bamboo trees, a scene that *Crouching Tiger* reinterprets, moving the action above the grove of bamboo trees. Hu initiated many of the conventions, which would come to define the genre “Hu’s style was imitated and sword fighting knight-ladies and all-powerful eunuchs became stereotypes in the genre” (Teo, 1997, p91).

Like all genres, *wuxia* is a flexible beast and its important thematic and iconic elements have been incorporated in genres as disparate as science fiction, horror and

modern day gangster films. Flying swordsmen battling aliens and demons among skyscrapers are featured in films such as *The Heroic Trio*, *Wicked City* (Mak, 1992) and *Saviour of the Soul* (Lai, 1992). John Woo's breakthrough film *A Better Tomorrow* was complimented by local critics "not so much for its blood and fists but for its revival of the spirit of Wu-Xia, its transformation (or weaponization, a term used by local critics) of Wu-Xia action into gunfights, and its modernization of a romantic Wu-Xia hero" (Kwok, 1998, p.21). This crucial connection between *wuxia* and Woo's gangster epics has been often over-looked by Western critics. His gangster films owe a great deal not only thematically but formally, to the *wuxia* genre. The elaborately staged gunfights in *A Better Tomorrow* or *The Killer* (Woo, 1989), for instance, are easily recognized by Hong Kong movie fans as extensions of the fight scenes from martial arts movies; the only difference is that the swords have been replaced with guns. Previous to invigorating his career in the gangster genre, Woo had actually been a somewhat pedestrian director of martial arts films. While his martial arts films like *The Ninja Kids* (Woo, 1975), *Shaolin Men* (Woo, 1975) and *The Last Hurrah for Chivalry* (Woo, 1978) are not particularly good, they are interesting to view in light of how he incorporates elements from those films into his later work. *The Last Hurrah For Chivalry*, for instance, is very conventional *wuxia* genre piece about a swordsman seeking revenge for his murdered family and deals with the themes of chivalry and loyalty, themes that Woo would return to in his later years in Hong Kong. Woo, in fact, calls *The Last Hurrah for Chivalry* a prequel to *A Better Tomorrow*. (Teo, 1997, p.175)

The *wuxia* genre fell out of favor with Hong Kong audiences and movie producers during the seventies and through the early eighties and kung fu movies

dominated the martial arts cinema. As the deadline for Hong Kong's reunification with China drew closer, *wuxia* re-emerged, becoming one of the period's prominent genres. In a time of extraordinary circumstances, almost unbelievable reassessments and reassignments of loyalty and identity, the cinema of Hong Kong had to kick into creative overdrive to keep up with the fantastic and quick changing nature of a reality where formations of national identity and political orientation, cornerstones of the national psyche, were fluid. The fantastic elements of the *wuxia* genre were especially fit to channel the industry attempts to keep pace with the unbelievable nature of reality. As Teo puts it, "The figure of the acrobatic and levitating hero personified the energy of the rising martial arts genre." (Teo, 1997, p.97) The acrobatic and levitating hero also personified the reckless and desperate energy of the Hong Kong film industry itself as it fell towards communist suppression.

This move towards the fantastic had actually begun a few years before the announcement of Hong Kong's return to China's control. Tsui Hark's 1983 film, *Zu Warriors Of Magic Mountain* (Hark, 1983), merged Hollywood style special effects with Hong Kong stunt and fight choreography in a way that had been previously unseen. Drawing upon a rich and long tradition of fantasy films such as *The Burning of the Red Lotus Monastery* (Shichuan, 1928), characters in Hark's film shot bolts of energy from their hands and flew through the air. As much as any other formal device, the extensive use of wire-work came to characterize the action cinema of pre-takeover Hong Kong. Suspended from (mostly) invisible wires, the heroes of the new *wuxia*, slipped the shackles of gravity and perhaps, however temporarily, the cultural anxieties of the looming crisis.

The political pressures faced by Hong Kong's "China syndrome" (Teo, 1997, p. 207) gave rise to films which sought to establish Hong Kong's sense of identity both as a singular political entity as well as in relation to mainland China. Somewhat paradoxically, this quest for a sense of identity becomes a focus of inquiry at precisely the same moment that whatever identity had been created was in the process of being reconstructed. Abbas (1997) refers to this appearance of a cultural identity on the verge of its own extinction as a "culture of disappearance" (p.5). As Leung (2000) points out, the very existence of a Hong Kong cultural identity distinct from other Chinese communities has been called into question:

Whereas some insist that Hong Kong has developed a unique form of culture that is different from Chinese culture, others deny the existence of separate identity and merely recognize it as one part of Chinese clutter not unlike other regional cultures, all sharing the overall national characteristics (p.227).

This seems to be due in part to the elusive nature of Hong Kong's cultural identity and perhaps the elusive nature of cultural identities in general.

Most discussions regarding Hong Kong's identity have focused on the dual aspects of its ties to China and its status as British colony. Hong Kong had been a British colony for over one hundred and fifty years is "deeply rooted capitalist economy...fully aware of its complicity with the colonial era and contemporary western capitalism" (Williams, 1997, p.70). While Hong Kong residents have been complicit in western capitalism the question of national and cultural affiliation remained vague "for they have lived a life without a proper nationality, being neither Chinese nor British" (Lu, 2000, p. 275).



Hong Kong's complicity with the colonial era is problematic because it touches on the thorny issue of China's embarrassments during that era. While the loss of Hong Kong's status as a British colony prompted concern among Hong Kong residents, Hong Kong's colonial status was for mainland Chinese a "reminder of the past indignities China suffered at the hands of foreign powers" (Pruitt, 1997, pp.1A). In China the reversion of Hong Kong to Chinese control was commemorated with the release of a film which explores and exploits the feelings of outrage over the events which lead to Hong Kong becoming a colonial holding. "The lavish, expensive epic film *The Opium War* (Xie, 1997) recounts the events causing the Opium war in the mid-nineteenth century and the subsequent ceding of Hong Kong to Britain by the Qing Empire" (Lu, 2000, p.273). The film "offers revealing glimpses into the Chinese psyche on the eve of the historic handover" (Pruitt, 1997, pp.1A). Although the film has been criticized for being "anti-British/pro-Communist/Chinese chauvinist propaganda" (Marchetti, 2000, p.295), it was something of a phenomenon in China and seemed to strike a chord with its audience. According to Cui Tiankai, spokesman for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "No Chinese can forget the Opium War...It was the beginning of more than 100 years of humiliation for China." (Pruitt, 1997, p.1A) The impact of colonial intrusions by western powers was an especially disruptive force. As Tu (1991) puts it: "In the Chinese historical imagination, the coming of the West, however, could be seen as more "decentering" [then previous invasions of China]; it was as if the Buddhist conquest and the Mongol invasion had been combined and compressed into one generation" (p.4).

With regards to the handover, Hong Kong remained something of a powerless object with no say in its eventual fate. The fact that Hong Kong representatives had no

part in the diplomatic discussions that lead to takeover was a source of fear and anxiety for Hong Kong residents (Stokes, 1990, p.14). Even the release of *The Opium War* seemed to be another reminder of the continuing powerlessness of Hong Kong political powers. Marchetti (2000) sees the making of the film as “another episode in the saga of the Opium war, with Hong Kong still serving as booty to be lost or won, a token of China’s lost national integrity” (p.297). Discussions of Hong Kong’s lack of a role in deciding its own fate, its use as a signifier of national integrity calls to mind Mulvey’s discussions of the way images of women are shaped by the patriarchal gaze: “The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (p.20).

While Hong Kong may be a product of 19<sup>th</sup> century western imperialism, it is also distinctly Chinese. Hong Kong has been the site of waves of immigration from China over the last century and a half and the population of Hong Kong is 98 percent Chinese (Stokes, 1990, p.9). The handover threatened Hong Kong’s identity as a capitalist center, it tended to highlight the aspects of its cultural identity that had their basis in its close ties to China. This appeal to Hong Kong’s identity as Chinese has its roots in historical/cultural China and looks past the political instability of the last century that saw the rise of the socialist People’s Republic of China and nationalist government in Taiwan. “The fluctuating Chinese political landscape since the mid-nineteenth century, precipitated by external events unprecedented in Chinese history, has become so restless in the last decades that not only the players but the rules of the game have constantly changed” (Tu, 1991, p.1). The instability of Chinese political landscape, including the handover of Hong Kong to the People’s Republic of China, led to the use of nostalgia as

a way to cope with the uncertainties of the present and future by finding refuge in more comforting ideal of the past. In Hong Kong cinema nostalgia “has initiated a significant trend in which the social feelings of discontent, depression and yearning for the past has been found” (Hung, 2000, p.252). Nor is the use of nostalgia to connect with China’s historic/cultural past confined to Hong Kong. Similar calls are prevalent in Chinese communities including Mainland China and Taiwan.

Nostalgia links the otherwise diverse intellectual and artistic undertaking of the mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.... Nostalgia often takes the form of a contemplative inquiry into China’s rural, mythic origins, as well as a renewed interest in the China of pre-Communist days (Rey Chow, p. 224).

This renewed interest in the cultural past of China is especially problematic for mainland Chinese since “the modern Chinese nationalism articulated since the beginning of this century by China’s new elite has involved a forceful and near total rejection of the earlier traditional and culturally elaborated sense of nationhood” (Cohen, 1991, p.89).

Hong Kong films use nostalgia to negotiate a sense of identity which draws upon the vast resource of cultural history that Hong Kong shares with China. In historic nostalgia films, the sense of history “refers not to the genuineness of what exactly happened in the past, but to the imagination of human history” (Hung, p.256). Films that employ this strategy take place in various dynastic periods of China’s historical past. These historical periods are transformed into mythical ages embodying not so much historical specificity as they embody a cultural moral history. These films function for Hong Kong in similar ways that the films set in the Old West functioned for America. They are used to explore issues of relevance and interest to contemporary culture through the prism of a mythical version of a real historical past. The nationalism expressed in the films of pre-takeover Hong Kong is not based on political identities. It must be

understood “as an abstract kind of cultural nationalism, manifesting itself as an emotional wish among Chinese people living outside China to identify with China and things Chinese” (Teo, 1997, p.111).

The historical martial arts film has been an integral part of the Hong Kong film industry almost since its inception. These films draw heavy inspiration from the tradition of Chinese opera with its emphasis on “extravagant costumes, bright full-face make-up, Olympic-class gymnastics and both weapon and empty-handed combat, as well as a rich tradition of character, music and drama”(Logan, 1995, p.9). Many of the most influential members of the Hong Kong film industry come directly from the training and tradition of Chinese opera including Jackie Chan and Sammo Hung. Kwan Tak Hing, a former opera performer, helped introduce and made a career of these kinds of films by playing the Cantonese martial arts expert and folk-hero Wong Fei Hung. In a series of movies spanning five decades, Kwan helped to mold the genre’s characteristics, “a hybrid of Confucian values, nationalist feeling and defensive martial arts” (Teo, 1997, p.51). As Hong Kong faced the reality of reunification with China, the character of Wong Fei Hung was revived in the 90s with Tsui Hark’s *Once Upon a Time in China* series. The figure of Wong Fei Hung as played by Kwan was a “patriarchal icon, a benevolent autocrat with smattering of do-good liberalism” (Teo, 1997,170). In contrast, the contemporary Wong Fei Hung, portrayed by the much younger Jet Li, is a somewhat less established character who is seeking to negotiate an identity for Hong Kong between traditional Chinese values and the influence of Western imperial powers. Li played Wong Fei Hong as "young and innocent, and daring to do things that are impulsive" (Dannen & Long, 1997, p. 117).

*The Once Upon a Time in China* series caught the tail end of a revival of period martial arts films during the eighties and nineties. While Hong Kong had been producing films set in the Chinese dynastic past, the films gained a special profundity, as the takeover loomed. In these films, Hong Kong filmmakers were reaching back to before the time that the current identity of Hong Kong as a capitalist center existed, to before the time that there was a split between the people of Hong Kong and People's Republic of China. They were returning to the common moral history between themselves and China while mitigating the current circumstances of opposition between communist China and capitalist Hong Kong. Wong Fei Hung laments the passing of traditional values but realizes that if China is to survive and progress, it must adapt. Wong Fei Hung “not only celebrates Chinese cultural identity...he also denounces imperialism and considers loaded issues of modernization, progress, and the future” (Stokes, 1999, p.94). Hark’s hopeful incarnation of Wong Fei Hung personifies a flexible form of Confucian traditionalism which is adaptable enough to survive in the modern age. He represents the morality and ethical strength of classical China that will allow it to adapt to a changing world.

Another set of films, with a unique address to the shared cultural history of Hong and China, was Tsui Hark’s *Chinese Ghost Story* series of films. These films wildly combined *wuxia* swordsmanship, slapstick comedy and horror movie conventions in a winning combination of Hong Kong genre excess. The films center around a poor Daoist priest who falls in love with a ghost with whom he can only be with if she is freed from her demonic lord to reincarnate. The notion of reincarnation plays an important role in the series. It reinforces the dual notions of Hong Kong’s differentiation from and attachment

to Mainland China. Reincarnation in these films address, “the fundamental hybridity of Hong Kong’s situation, caught between the modern worlds of both Western capitalism and Chinese ‘communism’ on the other hand, and the abstract nationalism invoking an older, vaguer notions of Chinese on the other” (Teo, 1997, p.225). This crisis of identity is also addressed in the *Chinese Ghost Story* films through the frequent use of confusion in identification between humans and ghosts, “contradictions between the nether and real worlds bring up the theme of the identity crisis” (Kei, 1994, p.8).

### Masculinity and the Action Film

Action films in general tend to foreground issues of gender. The crisis cinema of Hong Kong used this a springboard for films which not only foreground issues of gender but also blurred the supposedly fixed lines of gender separation. Chinese film culture has always been more receptive to the idea of female characters in what Westerners would consider exclusively male roles such as the action hero. While the arrival of action heroines in the West, such as Sigourney Weaver’s character in the *Alien* series or Linda Hamilton’s character in *The Terminator* series, are widely remarked upon because they are so out of the ordinary, action heroines are more easily accepted in Hong Kong. In the star driven Hong Kong film industry, several actresses have even established their entire reputations as action stars. Michelle Yeoh, Brigitte Lin and Cynthia Rothrock all gained notoriety as action heroines. Part of this openness to the idea of the action heroine stems from the influence of Chinese opera. “Drawing on the rich tradition of Chinese folklore,

the opera featured many white clad fighting females” (Logan, 1995, p.153). Action films with female protagonist run the gamut from period films to modern day crime thrillers.

The casual acceptance of women in the central role of action stands in stark contrast to action films produced in Hollywood during the same period. From the 80s and into the 90s, Hollywood action films seemed preoccupied with exhibitions of masculinity. “The films that US movie going audiences chose to see in large numbers during this period were largely and consistently concerned with portrayals of white male action heroes” (Tasker, 1998, p.12). These action heroes were held up as the ideal of masculinity with all of its inherent characteristics of control, privilege and agency. “Western archetypes of the male action hero emphasize connotations of physical presence; prominent body musculature; Nordic or Greco-Roman features, meant to indicate nobility; and a bearing that suggest self-confidence” (Gallagher, 1997, p 27). This emphasis on the muscular male body as the nexus for patriarchal authority carried within it certain contradictions not the least of which was the subordination of the male body for erotic display, a position usually occupied by the female body. Hollywood action films of this period rely upon static imagery, frozen moments when the physiques of Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jean-Claude Van Damme or Sylvester Stallone are held up for erotic display. The paradox, as Gallagher points out, is that, “the male protagonist, who functions as the active component of mainstream narrative, asserts his control over narrative events through physical stasis.” (1997, p. 27)

Hong Kong action heroes, by contrast, are anything but static. The trope of heavily muscled masculinity simply found no place in Hong Kong action cinema of the pre-takeover period. Although the kung fu films of the early 70s were heavily invested in

the display of bare-chested male bodies, Bruce Lee's included, contemporary martial arts film stars like Jackie Chan and Jet Li tended to keep their shirts on. A curious exception to this principle came in the form of *The Blade* (Hark, 1995), a film directed by Tsui Hark (the creative principle behind so much of Hong Kong's action cinema). Where previous pictures were reticent and focused upon the act of performing kung fu's stylized movements rather than narcissistic displays of muscular hardness (Tasker, 1998, p77), *The Blade* revels in it. Naked muscular torsos are the basic backdrop of the drama that has a griminess and grimness and feels very much like what it is, an end of cycle film.

As Aaron Anderson (1998) points out the critical language used to describe the "muscular" action cinema of Hollywood does not seem to fully account for the explosive moments of movement that punctuate Hong Kong action films (p.1). The muscular body suggest hardness and rigidity. The fluid cinematic presence of the martial arts hero, on the other hand, is limber and adaptable. That rigidity should be viewed as a less desirable trait than flexibility as way to survive trials is apparent given Hong Kong's political crisis, its helplessness to effect its political future and therefore its need to adapt to unprecedented circumstances. According to the Chinese classic *Dao De Jing*, "the hard and brittle will surely fall, and the soft and supple will overcome." Suppleness is a prerequisite for proficiency in the martial arts and displays of suppleness, kicks above the head and leg splits that stretch all the way to the ground, are frequent in martial arts films.

The cinema of Hong Kong is punctuated by amazing action scenes. Unlike the most memorable moments from Hollywood action films which rely upon explosions and special effects, the spectacle of Hong Kong film generally tends to rely on its world renowned martial arts choreography or death defying stunt work. As one critic put it,



"there is nothing more perfect than the fight choreography in a good *wuxia* film; bodies swoop and tumble, flying through the air encircled by swirling colors and the whirling blades of enigmas...Even at its cheesiest, there's something breathtaking at work here" (Carter, 1995, p.16).

The care, imagination and effort that Hollywood funnels into scripts and special effects is redirected in Hong Kong martial arts films. Jackie Chan explained the extreme emphasis on action scenes, "We do the acting scene one and a half day, but when we do action scene, like the scene (at the end of) *Drunken Master II*, we take four months" (Dannen & Long, 1997, p.60). A good portion of Jackie Chan's cinematic persona, his legitimacy as an action star, is based upon the fact that he often does his own, often very dangerous stunt work. Chan has dangled off of moving helicopters, slid down the face of buildings, jumped over moving vehicles and roller-skated under a moving eighteen-wheeler. Jackie Chan films often end with out-takes from his stunts gone wrong. Jackie Chan, of course, is an accomplished martial artist. His rigorous training as a youth in the arduous atmosphere of a Peking opera school served him well in his film career. Like Jackie Chan, kung fu star Jet Li is an accomplished martial artist having being a five time martial arts champion in mainland China. However, many of martial art movie stars, such as Brigitte Lynn or Anita Muai, have no background in the martial arts at all. The fighting prowess of the characters they play is maintained through the skillful use of body doubles and editing. Michele Yeoh, for instance, while she did not come into the genre as a martial artist per se did have a background in dance and ballet which lent itself well to the dance-like fight scenes in Hong Kong fantasy films.

Yeoh's easy transition from ballet to making martial arts films speaks to the close relationship between on-screen martial arts and dance. While the use of actors who are proficient in the martial arts might raise questions about the authenticity of a film's fight scenes, directors often downplay any similarities between actual fighting and movie fighting. As one director put it, "I've always taken the action part of my films as dancing rather than fighting...A lot of people have misunderstood me, and have remarked that my action scenes are sometimes authentic sometime not. In point of fact, they're always keyed to the notion of dance" (Stokes, 1999, p.91). The connection between fighting in martial arts film and dancing is one that is understood and utilized by Hong Kong directors influencing everything from editing to camerawork. In a conversation with Valerie Gladstone (2000) of the *New York Times*, director Tsui Hark explained the connection:

To create flow in a fistfight or during swordplay, we use long takes and a panning camera. The point is to be very clear and precise in order to capture the movements and gestures that best tell the story. The pauses between bursts of action are as important as the action. They increase the intensity -- just like a dancer pausing before a leap or fast turn. A good fight should be like a good dance work (p.2.6).

Very often, fight scenes occur in burst and pauses of movement creating a natural rhythmic flow. "The short pauses articulate stages of action them giving them staccato efficiency. The static instants also make the movements seem more rapid by contrast" (Bordwell, 2000, p.221). Like dance numbers, fight scenes are, of course, highly choreographed but must give the impression of spontaneity. Both genres rely on bricolage, integrating the use of naturally occurring environmental elements into the dance/fight to give "an impression of spontaneous combustion" (Feuer,1982, p.5). From

benches and table to sewing needles and thread, martial arts heroes in Hong Kong films have a wonderful facility for turning everyday objects in deadly weapons.

The connection between dancing and the martial arts is important because it registers the difference between Western and Eastern (cinematic) notions of narrative agency. In Hollywood's action films, the symbolic locus of authority is the muscular male body, in martial arts films the execution of (highly stylized) movement is the signifier of narrative agency. Or to put it another way, in Hollywood action films one comes away admiring the hero's muscularity, in the Hong Kong film we come away appreciating the physical virtuosity of the performers, even if that virtuosity is often an illusion achieved through inventive camera angles and editing. In martial arts films, agency is achieved through training that is available to anyone that is dedicated enough to undergo the discipline.

While membership in the ranks of the heavily muscled, white, male bodies is severely limited, the martial arts hero is more wide-open source of identification. The martial arts are available to everyone, even to people who does not necessarily live up to western ideals of the chiseled white hero. Men of small stature, like Jackie Chan, heavy-set men, like Sammo Hung, or even women who apply themselves are able to achieve mastery of their personal, cultural and historical space. A convention of the martial arts film is that it is sometimes difficult to tell which character will be an accomplished martial artist. The best fighter in the film might be the old harmless looking drunk, as in *Drunken Master* (Yuen, 1998), or the defenseless looking young girl, as in *Crouching Tiger*.

## Martial Arts and Femininity

The literal definition of the term “kung fu” is “difficult effort” or “hard work.” It is a very democratic activity. In the martial arts film, “a character’s social class or wealth does not matter, but rather simply how well he/she performs in physical confrontations, from which viewers distinguish the characters relative power” (Anderson, 1998, p.6). Martial arts is a “symbolic capital” through investment of time and skill (Anderson, 1998, p.6). The idea of personal empowerment over difficult circumstances has always been a central tenet of the martial art film and explains the crossover appeal of blaxploitation films and martial arts films during the early 70s. The rise of the action hero in the seventies “may well be a cultural registration of an increasing sense of self-confidence expressed in mythical and narrative forms” (Teo, 1997, p97). The resurgence of martial arts films in the decade leading up to the takeover is fitting given the uncertain political circumstances. The training and practice of martial arts implies a certain level of readiness for physical confrontation and thus results in the fighter’s empowerment through increased movement potential (Anderson, 1998, p. 42).

As well as being personally empowering, the stylized and formal movements of the martial arts are culturally encoded and significant. When a Hong Kong actor enacts a martial arts movement he is invoking the history of China by means of an aesthetic movement. This can “take the form of an idealized longing for the past. Or we may see evidence of it in the longing for individual power through physical potential” (Anderson, 1998, p.6). Once again, the ideological and political distance between Hong Kong and

China is being mediated by a cultural signifier, which is based upon the shared cultural history between the two separate political entities.

While proficiency in the martial arts is earned through discipline and practice, a student of the martial arts must rely upon an outside agent to impart the specific knowledge of how to perform the martial art's stylized movements. In *wuxia* films, this knowledge can be transferred through a number of narrative devices such as a scroll containing the knowledge of powerful kung fu secrets, as in *The Swordsman* (Ching, 1990), or through the transfer of mystical energies from one person to another as in *Warriors of Zu Mountain*. The usual method of instruction, however, is a master/pupil relationship. Often, a student has to prove himself to be of worthy moral character in order to receive instruction. In *Death Chambers* (Chang, 1976), for instance, prospective students must prove their strength of will by kneeling for days without food and water outside the gates of the Shaolin Temple before being allowed in to begin training. The idea being expressed is that the martial arts are a valuable commodity, a symbolic capital that cannot be entrusted to unscrupulous hands. The connections between the martial arts master/pupil and China/Hong Kong are easy to make although more complicated than might seem at first glance. While recent political circumstances placed China in the dominant role, the role of the master to Hong Kong's supplicated student, the appeals inherent in the privileged passing on of cultural authority, are not addressed to present political situations but to the shared cultural history between Hong Kong and China. China may be the repository of ancient symbolic capital but it is the China of historical times not communist China. The China that the nostalgic impulse in these films appeals

to is a cultural entity that is a thousands of years old. Communist China is only a recent addendum.

Part of the openness of Chinese martial arts to participation by females is a result of the philosophical precepts upon which the martial arts are based. The Chinese categories of yin and yang find expression in the categorization of soft and hard styles of martial arts. Different martial arts styles are conceptualized as either being hard or soft, yin or yang. Yin is soft and yielding, feminine, while Yang is hard and firm, masculine. Hard styles, such as karate, emphasize powerful kicks and strikes delivered in straight lines. Soft martial arts, such as Tai Chi, make greater use of circular movements in an attempt to redirect force rather than meet it head on. In a television interview, Bruce Lee explained the difference between hard style of martial arts and the soft styles, “Well, a karate punch is like an iron bar -- whack! A Gung Fu [sic] punch is like an iron chain with an iron ball attached to the end and it goes Wang! And it hurts inside (laughs)” (1965).

The distinction between the two styles, however, is not absolute and different forms of the martial arts will alternate between soft and hard. Kung fu:

recommends retreating as a preliminary to attacking and softness in blocking as leading into hardness in striking. Successful practice of kung fu techniques can be conceptualized in terms of knowing when to be yin, when to be yang, and when to shift from one to the other (Ihara).

This is in stark contrast to Western concepts of hand to hand fighting, which seem to focus on brute force to overpower an opponent.

The appreciation of the yin, of softness and yielding (“feminine” principal), is built in the folklore of kung fu. According to legend, the style of kung fu initially practiced by Bruce Lee, Wing Chun, was developed by a Chinese nun after she observed

the movements of a snake and crane. The nun taught her style of fighting to a young woman named Yim Wing Chun who was being forced to marry against her will. Wing Chun beat her groom to be in a fight, effectively ending the wedding.

The importance of the feminine principle in the martial arts is used to comic effect in Jackie Chan's breakout kung fu classic, *Drunken Master*. Jackie Chan's character trains in the use of the 8 Drunken Gods techniques but eschews learning the eighth technique, the Miss Ho technique, since it is based on a woman's movements. In the climactic fight scene Chan's character must make use of all eight Drunken God techniques and is forced to improvise the Miss Ho technique to emerge victorious. Although, the scene is played for comic-effect, with Chan pantomiming exaggerated feminine movements, it does underscore the understanding that "sexuality is an important part of kung fu and its need for a balanced approach. Both strength and weakness, the later being conventionally coded as feminine, must contribute to the implementation of martial artist skills" (Teo, 1997, p.106).

The presence of a female protagonist in an action film calls into question discussions of gender representation in cinema. Laura Mulvey discusses the world of film as being, "ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey, 1989, p.19). The female characters portrayed by Michele Yeoh and Brigitte Linn stand as contrary examples of the typical female in a Hollywood action film whom, "tend to be fought over rather than fighting, avenged rather than avenging. In the role of threatened object they are significant, if passive, narrative figures" (Tasker, 1993, p.17).

While the action heroine is a more common phenomenon in Hong Kong's action cinema than in Hollywood's, the majority of roles requiring "fighting over rather than fighting" are still filled by women. At the same time that Hong Kong films can liberate some female characters from passive roles, they also indulge in the commodification of women as objects for the empowered male gaze (Mulvey, 1989, p.19). While the male action stars of Hong Kong often do not live up to international standards of male desirability (the diminutive Jackie Chan and portly Sammo Hung come to mind) female action stars are invariably beautiful and attractive. Michelle Yeoh, for example, is a former Miss Malaysia. At the same time that they carry the narrative as the lead protagonist, Hong Kong action actresses must also carry the burden of the patriarchal gaze, which codes their onscreen personas, "for strong visual and erotic impact" (Mulvey, 1989, p.19).

Although Hong Kong films have been more open to women in the role of action stars, this liberal attitude does not extend throughout the rest of Hong Kong society. A recent study conducted among Hong Kong university students in estimates of intelligence in relation to gender suggest that men are still regarded as more intelligent than women. (Nicholas, 1995) Women also earn lower incomes than men even when women and men are equally well educated (Leung 1995). Women's positions in Hong Kong's labor market must be explained in light of the patriarchal traditions that narrowly define women's role around child rearing and homemaking (Chan 1986). These attitudes regarding the position of women find legitimization in Confucian precepts of women. According to Confucian doctrine, "A woman's duty is not to control or take charge." And again, "Disorder is not sent down by Heaven, it is produced by women."



## Michelle Yeoh, Female Action Star

The James Bond film *Tomorrow Never Dies* opened Christmas week the winter of 1997 to predictable box office success and surprising reviews. The film as a whole was fairly unremarkable, continuing the line of succession for the always successful spy series by relying upon a set formula, “based on gimmicks, high-tech toys, chases, elaborate stunts, and the battle to foil the madman's evil schemes.” (Ebert, 1997) The most remarkable aspect of the film, the thing that seemed to ignite the curiosity of critics and audiences alike, was Michelle Yeoh’s portrayal of Chinese agent, Colonel Wai Lin. Having a beautiful, exotic woman becoming involved in Bond’s adventures is nothing new. Sultry candidates for Bond’s physical affections are as much a part of the series as improbable weaponry. The treatment of women in the series has ranged from the mildly chauvinistic to almost overt misogyny. The character played by Yeoh was, however, quite different from the standard woman in distress or femme fatale that Bond normally dealt with. Where prior women relied upon Bond to save them, Colonel Wai, was quick to leap into action. Michelle Yeoh's role in *Tomorrow Never Dies* was seen as "the corrective to three decades of Bond damsels in distress and undress...Stunts are the lifeblood of a James Bond film...casting Asia's top female action star as the macho icon's equal partner" being the "most audacious stunt of all"(Covert, 1997, p.E1).

Yeoh gained her reputation as an action star in the eighties in the modern day action films *Yes, Madam* (Yuen, 1985), *Royal Warriors* (Chung, 1986), and *Magnificent Warriors* (Chung, 1987). In the opening scene of *Yes, Madam* she, “clamps a book shut on a flasher’s exposed parts and blows away four would-be robbers with an automatic and a shotgun.” (Dannen & Long, 1997, p.22) Director Oliver Stone called Yeoh, “my

all-time favorite actress” after seeing *Yes, Madam* (Logan, 1995, p.159). Within the span of two years, she (along with *Yes, Madam* co-star Cynthia Rothrock) had become one of Hong Kong’s biggest action stars but upon marrying producer Dickson Poon, Yeoh announced her retirement in 1987.

Several years later, after a divorce from Poon, Yeoh returned to films starring opposite Jackie Chan in *SuperCop* (Tong, 1992), a role that anticipated her turn in *Tomorrow Never Dies*. Like the 007 movies, Jackie Chan films had up to that point used women in the traditional roles of objects of desire in need of rescuing. Yeoh explained that, “Jackie has this thing, women, should not fight...He likes them pretty and decorative” (Dannen & Long, 1997, p.23). Like Chan, Yeoh performed her own stunts for the film, the most audacious being jumping a motorcycle onto the back of a moving train. If her absence from Hong Kong screens during her retirement had eroded her popularity, matching stunts with Jackie Chan quickly propelled her back into the forefront of Hong Kong’s action cinema.

In the same year, Yeoh appeared in the *wuxia* inspired modern day comic-book fantasy, *The Heroic Trio*. Along side Yeoh, who stars as Ching/The Invisible Woman, the film stars pop star Anita Mui as Tung/Wonder Woman and Maggie Cheung as Chat/Thief Catcher. The plot of the film involves an ambiguously gendered “Evil Master” kidnapping Hong Kong’s infants in an effort to find the reincarnated Emperor of China and restore dynastic rule. The Evil Master is played by actor Yee Kwan Yan but his voice is replaced by a dubbed female voice and he is alternately referred to as “he” and “she” throughout the film.

The Evil Master in *The Heroic Trio* is an example of the mysteriously powerful eunuch, a stock character in *wuxia* films. The enhanced blurring of the character's gender seems to indicate that the source of his power comes from his transgression of gender lines. His powerful stature is mirrored by the much more limited transgression of the female heroes that oppose him. The use of the eunuch as a character who personifies power, usually in the service of the Emperor but also clearly out for personal gain, stems from the popular perception of the historical context of the eunuch during dynastic China. For centuries, custom dictated that only eunuchs were allowed within the Forbidden palace, “to serve the Imperial Presence, the ladies of his royal family, and his thousands of concubines, all amassed together in the ‘Great Within’ behind forbidden palace doors” (Anderson, 1990, p.15). The educated elite, who wrote the histories of the great dynasties, distrusted the eunuchs, “because, as personal attendants to the sovereign, the eunuchs always had his ear, and so were in a better position than even the most powerful minister to curry favor, exercise influence, and accumulate wealth.” (Tsai) Although the stereotype of the eunuch as a sycophant treacherously using the privileges of his position for his own gain rather than the good of the country has probably been exaggerated in the Chinese cultural consciousness, according to one Chinese historian:

Imperial eunuchs gained so much influence that they comprised a third branch of government, alongside the scholar-bureaucrats and military commanders. In addition, eunuchs led military and exploratory expeditions, shaped domestic and foreign policy, and designed and built the Forbidden City - the imperial palace in Beijing (Tsai, 2002, ¶ 3).

*The Heroic Trio* may be read as an allegory of the three Chinas. The Master represents the darker, patriarchal and oppressive, side of China's dynastic past, and by extension the oppressive nature of Communist China. In the beginning of the film, Ching

is in the service of The Master, raiding hospitals for infants in search of the once and future Emperor. Ching embodies modern-day China, she is basically a good person by nature but still serves the corrupted wishes of the dominant power structures. Chat, the most out-spoken and glamorous of the three – her costume consists of a provocative mix of leather and lace – represents postmodern Hong Kong. Chat is further linked to Hong Kong by her whistling the tune “London Bridge is Falling Down”, an obvious reference to Hong Kong’s status as a colonial holding of Great Britain. Tung, separated from her sister Chin at a young age and reticent to become involved in other peoples affairs, is linked to Taiwan. With the emphasis on the children of Hong Kong, the allegory plays out as a battle for the future of Hong Kong. *The Heroic Trio* is preoccupied with attempting to save future generations from the worst that the new/old regime of mainland China might have to offer.

The sequel to *The Heroic Trio*, *Executioners*, was filmed back to back with *The Heroic Trio* and released in Hong Kong the following year. The film is set at least seven years after the end of the last film, Tung now has a six-year-old daughter. Opening super-titles explain that the city has been devastated by a nuclear explosion, which has contaminated the water supply. A scarred masked figure, Mr. Kim, has developed a purification system but is leveraging its use to gain political power. The Kim character fills the role of the villainous eunuch, here transformed into a degenerate dandy with homosexual overtones. Kim fawns over the severed head of a rival and dresses in lacey Victorian styled clothing.

With women in the lead roles, it is interesting to note what happens to the male characters in the two films. First of all, both villains are male and their subordinates are

exclusively male. In *The Heroic Trio*, the only significant male character is the husband of Wonder Woman. A police officer, he discourages his wife from using her powers. The situation is analogous to American “magicoms”, such as *I Dream Of Jeanie* (Sheldon, 1965) and *Bewitched* (Ackerman, 1964), in that the husband, the bearer of patriarchal privilege, is attempting to subordinate the wife to his influence even though her abilities and talents outstrip his own. In the second installment of the series, each of the female leads has been paired with a male companion. Tung is accompanied by a hooded, hunchbacked figure who can only communicate in grunts. His appearance and muteness immediately marginalizes him and although he is a powerful character, he is not as capable as the trio and is killed during the course of the film. In fact, all of the major male characters in this film die. Wonder Woman’s husband returns from the first film, ineffectual as ever and this time a pawn of the villains. Cat’s significant male figure is a rogue who matches fighting skills affectionately with Cat but he too fails to survive. Both films make a point of establishing the fact that survival is only possible as a community, the three women must work together to overcome the obstacles they face. Although Yeoh’s character is killed defeating the villain in *Executions*, Wonder Woman’s daughter is ready to take her place. The message of the film seems to be that the three China’s must find a way to reconcile their differences if China as a concept is to withstand the political pressures that has split them apart.

Yeoh continued to work in action films, appearing in the period pieces *Tai-Chi* (Yuen, 1993) and *Holy Weapon* (Wong, 1993) as well as the modern day action film *Supercop 2* (Tong, 1993). In 1994, she appeared in an interpretation of the Wing Chun legend, named appropriately enough, *Wing Chun* (Yuen). The film takes the legend as a

starting point, elaborating it and turning the narrative into a gleeful attack on the conventions of gender roles.

At the beginning of the film Wing Chun's father and sister are leaving town to go to her sister's wedding. Wing Chun and her Aunt, Abacus Fong, are left behind to mind the store, in this case a tofu store that the family runs. At this point in the film Wing Chun dresses in men's clothes. Her reputation as a martial artist has already been established and the townspeople look to her ward off the attacks of the bandits who seem to be constantly raiding the town. Even though she is self-sufficient, she is somewhat marginalized in her patriarchal society that expects women to marry. Wing Chun's clothes and martial arts skills, while saving her from having to go through an unwanted marriage, preclude her from marrying anyone else. Like Wing Chun, Abacus Fong is unmarried and apparently unmarriageable. In her case it is because she is outspoken, a trait also contrary to expectations of Chinese women. The foulness of her speech is made literal in that she has extremely bad breath. Apparently, anything that issues forth from the mouth of an outspoken woman is abhorrent.

During the village's beach festival, a woman appears with her deathly ill husband. Before she is able to come ashore the bandits appear, attempting to kidnapping her. Men (martial artists) from the village, embarrassed by Wing Chun's presence, attempt to rescue the woman but fail miserably at which point Wing Chun summarily defeats the invaders. The woman, Charmy, shows up on the village streets the next day beside the corpse of her husband. Playing the part of the dutiful wife, she attempts to sell herself to the highest bidder in order to pay for his funereal. Wing Chun intervenes before the

voracious village men can complete the bidding and Charmy is brought into the new familial unit of the tofu shop.

The principal use of the Charmy character is as a foil for Wing Chun and Abacus Fong. She is beautiful and obedient, fully co-operative in the gendered hierarchy of the village. Charmy is usefully integrated into the family by teaching her how to use her feminine wiles to sell more tofu to the village men, a position that Wing Chun had apparently filled prior to her transformation into a woman warrior. While the men mass around her, trying to get a peek beneath Charmy's clothing, Wing Chung wistfully watches, seeing her as she used to be and as others would like to see her still. The scene is reminiscent of the nostalgia that permeates Hong Kong film, the longing for a return to a simpler time when questions of identity were not so complicated or pressing. It mirrors Hong Kong's use of the period fantasy film genre as a whole in seeking to somehow remain in touch with the lost set of defining relationships that make up Hong Kong's shared cultural history with Mainland China. At the same time however, Wing Chung is cognizant that she can never fully go back to being the way she was. She has been marked by difference and while some surface reconciliation is possible, that difference will always be present if not readily apparent.

From there the plot of the film launches into a comedy of gender misrecognition and romantic entanglements. Wing Chun is being pursued by Scholar Wong who had wanted to hire her as a bodyguard but decided it would be less expensive to marry her. At the same time, Wing Chun's childhood sweetheart, Leung Pok To, returns to the village to but thinks Wing Chun is a man and Charmy is Wing Chun.

As the romantic entanglements unravel, Wing Chun's battles with the bandits become more difficult and intense. The bandits living on the outskirts of the village are reminiscent of unruly boys. They have a "boys only" hideout on the outskirts of the village and seemed to be entirely pre-occupied with having unruly fun. They are, however, more vibrant and alive in comparison to the civilized men of the village who usually stand around waiting to be saved by Wing Chun. Even when the village men do attempt to take action, they eventually fail and end up having to be saved by Wing Chun anyway. Both sets of men are implicated in misogynistic attitudes, presumably based on tradition.

Wing Chun's first major battle is with Flying Monkey who she eventually defeats by kicking a torch into his groin, castrating him. At this point, Flying Monkey's elder brother Flying Chimpanzee, becomes involved. He initially gets the best of Wing Chun, beating her in a duel and kidnapping Charmy. During their second fight, Flying Chimpanzee uses his signature weapon, an enormous spear which has to be carried in by four men. He kicks the weapon (which he refers to as "my spectacular spear") into a stone wall and challenges Wing Chun to "pull it out" in three tries. The sexual connotations are obvious.

Wing Chun manages to meet the challenge by tricking Flying Chimpanzee into kicking the spear through the wall, but she is injured in the fray and must face Flying Chimpanzee again in three days. She retreats to see her Master, the nun who taught her how to fight. Wing Chun wonders how she will ever manage to defeat Flying Chimpanzee, the nun advises her to "seek harmony" and to get a man. This marks an important turning point in the film because it is here that Wing Chun re-integrates her



feminine self back into her character. She sends for her childhood sweetheart, who has seen beyond the gender confusion and accepted Wing Chun for what she is, and begins dressing in women's clothing.

Before the climactic battle, Flying Chimpanzee tells Wing Chun that when he defeats her this time, she will be his wife. Wing Chun responds that if she defeats him, he will have to call her "mother". "I'm going to be your mother, not your wife" she tells him. Flying Chimpanzee fights with his "spectacular spear" while Wing Chun wields a pair of short swords. As the fight begins, in the courtyard of the bandit's encampment, Flying Chimpanzee uses his spear to great effective, forcing Wing Chun backwards. She backs into a small hut, a domestic space where the newly re-feminized Wing Chun gains the advantage. When fighting outside Flying Chimpanzee is able to swing his phallic weapon with wild abandon, inside, in the cramped quarters of this domestic space, his weapon gets caught up on the walls, table and ceiling.

Like many action films which center around female protagonist, Wing Chun introduces elements of melodrama into the narrative. In melodramas, a community of women is invaded by a male "who identifies the 'problem' (the heroine's single state) and enables its 'solution' (their coupling and the integration of their family unit into the larger community)" (Pribam, 1998, p.116). In Wing Chun, the community of females, which is established in the tofu shop, is actually threatened by a number of males. There is the mob outside of the tofu shop working to get a look at Charmy (as their wives stand back and remark on what a hussy she is), the series of bandits, and finally Wing Chun's two love interests. By the end of the film, Wing Chun has defeated her opponent - the bandits salute her with cheers of "Long live mother!" – has returned to wearing gender

appropriate clothing and married Leung Pok To. Abacus Fong, the other half of the gender-boundary violating pair, has tempered her inappropriate speech and married as well. The integration into the larger community of the two aberrant women has been achieved, the free ranging libido force of the bandit's has been pacified, and normative order seems to have been restored.

Wing Chun, however, is a more progressive text that the narrative flow would seem to indicate. Rather than simply re-affirming patriarchal standards and attitudes, the film challenges them, subverting them and replacing them with something new. As the protagonist, Wing Chun is the center of the film's sympathetic appeal. From her original suitor, who forced her to retreat from her femininity into the martial arts, to the bandits and the men of the village, Wing Chun has been forced to defend herself from the pressures of patriarchal oppression. None of the established societies of men in the film are presented as viable alternatives for the reintegration of Wing Chun and Abacus Fong. The act of integration into the established order would necessitate the sublimation of the very characteristics that have made them sympathetic characters. As this is a martial arts film, this is especially true for Wing Chun. Were she to give up her symbolic capital of proficiency in the martial arts, it would result in a contradiction of the genre's value system.

The problem that the film sets up, of having to integrate a contradictory element into an established regime, echoes Hong Kong's political situation. Although China agreed to allow Hong Kong to function as it had previously, as a "special administrative region", Hong Kong residents were understandably anxious about whether they would have to give up their distinctive character as "the most capitalistic city on earth" once

they were under a communist regime. The hopeful solution that the film offers is to seek balance, or in the advisory words of Wing Chun's master (martial arts instructor), to seek harmony.

Through her marriage ("I thought I would never get rid of her." her father says after the ceremony) Wing Chun has entered the symbolic order but she has maintained her distinctiveness. While she is obliged to play the obedient wife, and gives the part compulsory play, she has the support of an understanding husband (who she had repeatedly beaten in hand to hand combat) and she has integrated her masculine, martial arts warrior self, into her persona as a wife. This is borne out by the final scene of the film when the newly married couple prepares to ride away to their honeymoon. Rather than daintily seeking assistance to mount her horse, as the congratulatory crowd expects her to, Wing Chung acrobatically leaps up to the horse. With this athletic display she reaffirms her strength and independence only afterwards playing to the part of the demure Chinese wife; her hand covers her mouth as she giggles at her own impetuosity. This nicely echoes her integration of her feminine self into her warrior identity in the final battle against Flying Chimpanzee.

### Beyond Gender, Brigitte Lin

This tension between the role of the action heroine as controlled object of patriarchal desire and as independent agent is dealt with in a variety of ways in Hong Kong films. One of the most interesting being cross-dressing. Wing Chun is only one of several films during the early nineties which featured cross-dressing. Indeed, as the

decade began, “diegetic cross-dressing became not merely accepted but seemingly obligatory” (Grossman, 2000, p.160). The very presence of a woman in the role of an action hero is a case of cross-dressing. A female action heroine adapts characteristics, activity and independence, which are defined by patriarchy as distinctly masculine.

In martial arts films, occurrences of men’s cross-dressing were for the most part used for comedic effect. A typical example of male cross-dressing occurs in the period action film *Fong Sai Yuk* (Yuen, 1993). The titular hero played by Jet Li is forced to adopt his mother’s clothes in order to escape capture. These instances are highlighted by gross exaggeration of feminine mannerisms and if other characters within the film are taken in by charade, the audience never is. Enjoyment in these scenes comes from the complete incongruity of the action hero posing as a woman. The intended effect is to highlight difference between the genders and in fact reaffirm the character's masculinity. However, even instances of cross-dressing that are used for comedic value have the effect of foregrounding the socially constructed nature of sexual difference and gender distinctions which appear to be natural are revealed as artifice (Kunn, 1985, p.49).

As 1997 approached, the foregrounding of gender issues with the increasingly fantastic nature of Hong Kong films produced films which continued to push the boundaries presented by cross-dressing even further. Hong Kong fantasy films of the period included a number of characters, mainly villains, who were somewhat ambiguously gendered. Menace and power were continually personified in character that functioned outside of the normal boundaries of gender. In *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1990), the demon who has enslaved the heroine’s ghost is portrayed by a male actor, but the character dresses as a woman and is referred to by other characters as a female. The

villain/villains of *The Bride with White Hair* (1993) are Siamese twins, one male one female. In *Chinese Ghost Story 2* (Ching, 1990), the nemesis is an evil demon masquerading as a Taoist priest who speaks with a woman's voice. As Yin Chek Hsia, one of the characters in *Chinese Ghost Story 2*, puts it, "The world is in chaos," a comment that has extra-diegetic implications.

The actress Brigitte Lynn has made a career of playing characters of ambiguous gender alive in a chaotic world. Brigitte Lin began action in films in 1971 when she was still in high school and appeared in over a hundred films before her retirement in 1994. Lin was among a handful of actresses during the 80s and 90s who helped define the face of Hong Kong films. She appeared in number of seminal films, from *Hark's Zu: Warriors of Magic Mountain* and *Peking Opera Blues* (Hark, 1990) to the *Swordsman* series and Wong Kar Wai's *Ashes of Time*.

Lin's most outrageous and influential role is her interpretation of the gender-bending character, Invincible Asia, in *The Swordsman* series of films. With her portrayal of Invincible Asia, Lin became "almost a one-woman genre." (Hampton, 1996, p.44) Although Invincible Asia is only a minor character (played by a male actor) in the first installment, the focus shifts toward him/her in the second film and by the third installment she has become the center of the series. The original *Swordsman* film was itself "a mad, muddled and marvelous 90s update of *wuxia* films originally intended to be directed by King Hu" (Teo, 1997, p199) but gave no hint of the outlandish direction the series was to take. The plot revolved around a scroll containing secrets of a powerful martial arts technique. Ling Wu Chang, the classical resourceful and practically invincible *wuxia* hero of the film, confronts various parties attempting to take the scroll

from his possession including a sinister eunuch (there is no other kind), dangerous women warriors and finally the head of his own sect. With Ling's betrayal by his master, the film reads as a rather mundane cautionary tale about the moral corruption of absolute power.

As the second installment of the series begins, *Swordsman II* (Ching, 1991), Asia has usurped control of his tribe of Highlanders and begun mastering the kung fu contained in the Sacred Scroll. Attaining its power, however, calls for the scroll's user to castrate himself; apparently the scroll is useless to women. As the film progresses, Asia undergoes a gender transformation in the end fully becoming a woman and eventually even falling in love with Ling who this time is being played by Jet Li.

The first meeting between the two characters occurs in a lake where Li stumbles across Asia as she is practicing her Sacred Scroll powers – punctuated by explosions on the surface of the lake and dead birds falling out of the sky. Although Asia's physical appearance has altered so she now looks like a beautiful woman, her voice has not yet changed so she must remain silent during this initial encounter with Ling. As in any successful first date, the two find they have something in common, a love of wine, and look forward to seeing each other again.

This scene between Ling and Asia, coming as it does so early in the film, can be read in two ways, one extra-diagetically and the other within the context of the film's narrative. The extra-diagetic reading relies upon the star personas of Jet Li as a heterosexual by default, leading man and Brigitte Lin as his beautiful leading lady. Both actors come into the film as easily recognizable stars and any romantic interaction between the two characters they play might very well be expected. The scene can also be

read as a give and take between two powerful (male) figures who enact the frequent male bonding scene from action buddy movies the world over. At this point in the narrative, Asia is still ostensibly male, he only speaks when submerged in the water of the lake where the scene takes place so as not reveal his identity. The scene reinforces the lingering homo-eroticism in the buddy films.

The relationship between the two is further complicated when Ling sneaks into the enemy encampment and stumbles on the fully transformed Asia. Not knowing Asia's identity, he continues their romance and the two sleep together, albeit by proxy as Asia douses the lights and has her faithful prostitute take her place in bed. In the climactic battle, Asia withholds her full power to avoid injuring Ling and is defeated, tumbling off the side of a cliff, never to be seen again (until the sequel).

The sexually ambiguous nature of the relationship between Ling and Asia undermines the authority of the male hero and the nature of Asia's defeat further complicates the picture. While villains who are undone by their own shortcomings are common fodder for all manner of action films, these debilitating shortcomings are always negative characteristics such as greed or arrogance. Asia's shortcomings, on the other hand, are love and compassion. The moral authority that the action hero usually finds through martial action, right making might, is lost here and Asia's fall becomes tragic rather than simply a function of the genre's expectations.

Usually, the transgressive gender of characters such as the male/female Siamese twins from *The Bride with White Hair* and the ambiguously gendered demons in the *Chinese Ghost Story* series, marks them as villains, even monsters. "Gender is what crucially defines us, so that an ungendered subject cannot, in this view, be human. The

human being is in other words, is a gendered subject” (Kunn, 1985, p.53). If gender transgression marks these characters as other, just as in a sense the cross-dressing action heroine is as well, it also imbues upon these characters a transgressive power. In many cultures, people who do not conform to established gender roles, “have been considered to possess numinous powers by virtue of their knowledge of both male and female secrets and have played honored roles. For instance, Native American berdaches- effeminate men and masculine women who chose to live in the opposite gender roles- officiated important tribal rituals” (Levine, p. 43).

While gender transgression is an acknowledged source of power, its appearance is disruptive to social norms and often disavowed. In the case of the ambiguously gendered villains of Hong Kong fantasy films, the villains are perfunctorily dispatched by the gender specific heroes of the film and society is returned to order. Only in Hong Kong fantasy films could a villain such as Asia emerge as the eventual protagonist of a series of films. “This type of unconventional hybrid hero is made possible in the Hong Kong cinema because of the hybrid nature of Hong Kong culture itself.” (Giukin, 2001, p.68) Once again, direct address to Hong Kong’s crisis of identity is elided in Hong Kong film but the cultural anxiety the crisis elicits keeps finding expression in Hong Kong’s “non-political” action cinema.

In a Hong Kong caught between East and West, capitalist and communist, tradition and post-modernism, Invincible Asia emerged as a signpost of possibilities beyond “this or that”. As a trans-gendered object, Invincible Asia calls into question the simple binary oppositions of male and female. She represents the, “under theorized recognition of the necessary critique of binary thinking, whether particularized as male



and female, black and white, yes and no, Republican and Democrat, self and other, or in any other way”(Brydon, 1994, p.11). Boundaries were becoming blurry and gender ambiguity in Hong Kong films focused attention on the breakdown of easy categorizations and the slippage that was occurring between previously distinct categories.

In the crisis cinema of Hong Kong everything seemed to be breaking down. This breakdown of society’s norms manifested in a variety of forms and genres. From John Woo’s crime thrillers which examined the concepts of loyalty in a corrupt world, to the popular series of youth in rebellion films, characterized by Wong Kar Wai’s *Days of Being Wild* (1991), Hong Kong films focused attention on the nature of cultural breakdowns in Hong Kong society.

Invincible Asia returned in the final installment of the series, *The East is Red* (Ching, 1992) played once again by Brigitte Lin. Rather than perishing in the climatic battle at the end of *Swordsman II*, Asia had gone into hiding. Four months later, Koo, the film’s male *wuxia* hero, coaxes Asia out of hiding. He tells Asia that imposters have sprung up using her name to draw followers and gain power. Incensed, Asia goes out to destroy the imposters. What follows is a surreal adventure, a “melange of Spanish galleons and conquistadors, A Japanese Ninja made up like a butoh dancer, and two Asia the Invincibles spinning marvelous webs of needles and threads around their enemies” (Teo, 1997, p.201). The film is a difficult text to penetrate. “It has no real hero, no real plot and no clearly expressed goals for the characters to achieve” (Morton, 2001, p.98).

If the film does have a theme, it is the penetration of hidden identities. The film centers on Koo’s fascination with Asia. He accompanies Asia as she seeks out her

imposters in an attempt to unravel, for himself and for the audience, the mystery of who or what Asia is. It is interesting to note how marginalized the male hero has become amongst the series gender ambiguities and identity issues. Rather than being the active agent in the narrative, Koo has been reduced to bearing witness to the power of the ambiguously gendered Asia. As in *Swordsman II*, a romance by proxy develops between Asia and the *wuxia* hero. In this case, the hero falls in love with Snow, one of Asia's former concubines who also happens to be one of the Asia imposters.

Invincible Asia seems to occupy a space that is beyond simple definitions of gender even to the point of the "bodily" truth (Chu, 1994, p.30). It calls to mind Sandra Gilbert's (1980) account of modernist women's attempt "to define a gender-free reality behind or beneath myth, an ontological essence so pure, so free that it can "inhabit" any self, any costume ...ultimate reality exist only if one journeys beyond gender" (p.395). *The East Is Red* throws the assumptions of gendered practices into such confusion that the final confrontation between Asia and Koo "can be simultaneously regarded as an epic battle of the sexes and a man taking on an intrinsically male demon" (Thomas, 2000, p.1). As in the case of Wing Chun's gender transgressions, Asia is never either vanquished or re-integrated into traditional gendered hierarchy. At the end of the film, Asia emerges as the only survivor of the film's main characters. The last image of the series is of an unrepentant Asia riding a giant swordfish into Hong Kong's uncertain future.

The imagery of the film's final scene is a good example of just how far the fantasy elements of the genre were taken in films like *The East is Red*. This included a move away from traditional methods of presenting martial conflict between characters. Although kung fu style martial arts still remained an integral part of the *wuxia* genre,

these elaborate fantasy films moved away from staging conflict in the typical hand to hand or swordplay style of martial arts films. Instead of being able to see martial artist/actors, or their stand-ins, perform series of astounding martial arts moves, fight scenes became expressionistic explosions of movement and color. *In The East is Red*, kung fu postures and gestures are followed, not by a lucid string of traditional kung fu forms, but by blurs of movement and color followed by rich spurts of crimson as bodies are torn apart. The closest thing to a weapon that Asia wields are sewing needles and thread which she uses to harpoon and control her victims who dangle like marionettes at the end of her string.

The character of Asia the Invincible had given the Hong Kong film industry a new type of protagonist, “a gender-bending character so malleable that he or she bends not only genders, but all character types; Asia is a villainess, a romantic protagonist, and ultimately a character who wins the sympathy of the hero - and the audience” (Teo, 1997, p.201). The Swordsman films became highly successful and influential, spawning a flood of outrageous, fantasy driven *wuxia* films, which returned time and time again to themes of cross-dressing and gender bending. Brigitte Lin would herself go on to play a number of Invincible Asia inspired gender-bending characters in films like *Deadful Melody* (Ng, 1993), *The Fire Dragon* (Cheung, 1994), *Eagle Shooting Heroes* (Lau, 1993), *The Bride With White Hair* (1993) and Wong Kar Wai’s *wuxia* genre dissection *Ashes Of Time*. *In Ashes of Time*, Wai not only uses Lin’s star persona of gender ambiguity, but even recreates the lake scene from the Swordsman II where Lin’s character practices her supernatural kung fu on the surface of a lake.

Brigitte Lin's screen persona as a gender-bending icon hinges on two contradictory characteristics, her glamorous femininity and her defiance of being reduced to the passive bearer of the filmic look. In one sense Lin is a safe choice to play the parts of transgendered subjects simply because she is classically lovely. There is nothing naturally boyish in her manner and she seems ladylike even when rending bodies into pieces, "exactly nine pieces", as in one example from the *Bride With White Hair*. When she cross-dresses on screen, it is a convention the *wuxia* genre that other characters in the narrative will misrecognize her (or any other cross-dressed female) as male, but the audience, as in the case of *wuxia* males dressing as women for comedic effect, is never involved in the misrecognition. The audience is the privileged possessor of the "view from behind" which mitigates the challenge to established conceptions of the fixidity of gender which cross-dressing might otherwise elicit. "The unchallenged spectator is free, from a secure vantage point, to laugh at the travesty, the comedy of errors attending the ignorance and confusion of the fiction's characters" (Kuhn, 1985, p.62-63).

But if Lin's glamorous star persona renders her an object for erotic display, she also has a tendency to chafe against the role. In film after film, there comes a moment, "when she whirls and unleashes The Look. Suddenly she will return the camera's mesmerized gaze with a blinding, eye-for-an-eye intensity--a blast of Dreyerian silence before the poetry of doom will be writ in blood and severed limbs" (Hampton, 1997, p.42). "The look" momentarily disrupts the dominant mode of representation that reduces women in film to passive erotic objects. In films like *The East and Red* and *The Bride with White Hair*, which center thematically on gender, this look reinforces the narratives challenge to established modes of representation.

The *wuxia* hero emerged in its classical form some time during the mid-60s, a time of confidence and expansion. “When China was asserting its newly acquired superpower status and Hong Kong was becoming ‘an Asian tiger’ while the Japanese economic expansion into East and Southeast Asia was at its most aggressive” (Teo, 1997, p.98). This is somewhat in direct contrast to the cultural environment of doubt and apprehension about the future that spawned a resurgence of the *wuxia* hero in the mid-eighties. In the years leading up to 1997, Hong Kong still had reason to be assured of its own power economically but the confidence spawned from Hong Kong’s success as a capitalist haven is the very thing which was making them nervous as they eyed a takeover by communist China. These tensions helped reshape the hero of the martial arts film into new, almost unrecognizable, forms.

### *Crouching Tiger* and the new Hollywood Action Film

*Crouching Tiger* enjoyed almost unanimous praise from American film critics. A common theme, which seems to run through many of the film’s positive reviews is that the movie is able to transcend its humble genre. The suggestion of course is that kung fu movies are dumbed down cinematic fluff, not worthy of the critical praise lavished upon *Crouching Tiger*. One especially interesting example of the kind of notices the film received comes from the *New York Daily News*. It focuses on the active role of women in the film: “Its everything we go to the movies for. This is also a rare martial arts movie to embrace the female perspective” (Bernard, 2000, p.39). What the reviewer meant by

“female perspective” is open to debate, but I would venture that he had in mind the narrative’s address of constrictive gender roles.

In *Crouching Tiger*, the lives the characters are thrown into disarray when the young (female) aristocrat rebels against her designated place in society. Like the legendary Wing Chun, she refuses to submit to an existence where she is not free to choose her own destiny and her choice to steal the sword named Green Destiny, is especially appropriate. In the end, her resistance to authority takes her too far and she fulfils another character’s prophecy of becoming a dragon, a dangerous villain. In contrast to the progressive challenges to patriarchal paradigms that *Wing Chun* and *The East Is Red* offer, *Crouching Tiger* seems practically reactionary.

Were the reviewer who praised *Crouching Dragon* for its’ “embrace of the female perspective” more familiar with the film’s point of inspiration - recent and classic *wuxia* films – he would have known how integral a part gender issues have played in the genre. Casual observers of the genre miss the “female perspective” of many martial arts films just as casual observers of Hong Kong action cinema’s influence on American culture are likely to miss how it has opened up the narrative space from the restricted space that characterized Hollywood’s action cinema.

The influx of Hong Kong talent and influence came at a time when the Hollywood action film seemed to be losing its spark and the formula of the big budget Hollywood action film seemed to be wearing thin. A 1994 *Newsday* article even went so far as to claim that, “The mega-budgeted, mega-noisy, mega-violent action film is about to meet an ending as tragic and predictable as that of a sidekick cop who loves his family and is mere days from retirement” (Kronke, 1994, p.B4). At that point in time, the Hong

Kong flood was a mere trickle. John Woo had just directed his first American film and Michelle Yeoh was still three years away from making a stir in *Tomorrow Never Dies*. The next year Jackie Chan would become a household name in America when *Rumble in the Bronx* reached the top of the box office. The upswing in the Hollywood careers of Hong Kong luminaries coincides with the decline of the career of American action star Arnold Schwarzenegger. Schwarzenegger was the poster boy for the muscular action cinema of the 80s and 90s and his diminished box office appeal marked the end of that particular trope's hold on Hollywood action films.

Rather than focusing almost exclusively on white males, as they had during the heyday of muscular cinema, recent Hollywood action films that have opened up heroic roles for minorities and women. Comic book adaptations such as *Blade* (Norrington, 1998), *Steel* (Johnson, 1997) and *Spawn* (Dippe, 1997) featured black men in lead roles. Women in action films were no longer confined to modest supporting roles. 1996 saw the release of *Set it Off* (Gray), an action film whose "early success can be attributed to its unique action-movie casting: four black women in the lead" (Dean, 1996).

The ready acceptance of Hong Kong talent into the Hollywood ranks was undoubtedly helped in part thanks to a greater acceptance of non-traditional (i.e.: non-white men) actors as the protagonist in action and science fiction films. "Many new action and fantasy films subtly focus on changing race and gender issues by putting women and minority men in a positive major roles" (Covert, 1997, pp.1F). Given Hong Kong action cinema's easy acceptance of women in active roles, it seems too big a coincidence to ignore the fact that this new openness came at the same time that Hong

Kong began exerting its now pervasive influence in Hollywood. At the very least, the integration of Hong Kong cinema into Hollywood has helped speed the process along.

Whether Hong Kong cinema was the prime motivator or benefactor of this subtle focus on gender in action films, it provided the roadmap for the forms that Hollywood action films would evolve into, especially given Hollywood's current integration of women into action cinema. Even beyond their use of martial arts, film's like *Charlie's Angels* (Nichol, 2000) or television series like *Buffy The Vampire Killer* and *Xena* would not exist in the form that they have, if it all, were it not for the influence of Hong Kong action films. "This popular Hong Kong subgenre features women doing amazing stunts and martial arts feats," Professor Chuck Kleinhans explained in a recent New York Times article. "This has become a very popular device now in current Hollywood action films" (Steinhauer, 2000, p.4.5). From Hollywood's integration of Asian martial arts, everyone indeed seems to be kung fu fighting, to the inclusion of women and minorities in action roles from which they had been excluded, the impact that the Hong Kong film industry has had on Western media is hard to overstate.



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