A Viewer's Guide to Kung Fu Films

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The Hong Kong martial arts film industry is a cultural and commercial phenomenon which burgeoned in the last twenty-five years and peaked in the 1970s, when hundreds of films a year were produced. Southeast Asia has the highest per capita records of cinema attendance in the world. Some estimates go as high as three or four visits a week per person, though the impact of the increasing ownership of television sets is already lowering these figures. A significant proportion of these movie goers are expatriate Chinese.

Film production is assembly-line style, and the importance of there are no author directives in Kung Fu movies, no Kunstovskis or Sergio Leone. Writers are practically non-existent; most directors either write the script themselves, or work in an improvisatory style from a half-finished storyline. Perhaps the two biggest producers through the 70s were Ron Run Shaw for the Shaw Brothers, and Raymond Chow for Golden Harvest.

The production values of these movies are generally sufficient to all but the lowest budget Hollywood films. The format is traditional, accessible, and box-office: the events unfold in chronological order, and the few backstories are clearly delineated. They are shot in black and white, or are tinted, or are shot at a slower speed. Cinematic artistry is not as much an issue as the conveyance of solid, recognisable signs. These films bear a close relationship to traditional Chinese theatre, ballet, and opera, all of which give them a unique theatrical formalism. Most of the movies are variations on a few basic scenarios: renegade monks fighting oppressive Manchus, rival martial arts schools, or heroes seeking revenge for wrongs done to them or their families. Given the number of films and their formal limitations, it is inevitable that they become at once self-conscious and self-effacing, designed to be judged on their treatment and variation of the basic, easily recognized devices.

Kung Fu is not only of interest to martial artists and members of martial groups; its appeal is far more popularly based. Kung Fu is culturally inscribed with all that is menacingly and indispensably Chinese, and it is difficult to view it outside the context of the long history of foreign imperialism and oppression of the Chinese people. The earliest antecedents of Kung Fu are alleged to be over four thousand years old. The form is popularly believed to have originated in its modern guise at the Shaolin Temple in Henan province of China, a cultural centre where Zen Buddhism and wai kung (martial virtue) were practiced. Kung Fu practitioners believe that all the martial arts began in Shaolin. Kung Fu developed from Shaolin temple boxing, which was originally a “soft” martial art, like Judo and Aikido, with an emphasis on circular, deflective movements. It turned into a “hard” style — meaning an emphasis on attacks and direct force — during the Manchu invasion of the Ming dynasty in 1643.

Facial and national codes are highly determined, particularly in the costume films. The story of the defence of the Shaolin temple, for example, is a mainstay of Kung Fu movies. In order to quell the monks’ opposition to their takeover of the Chinese Ming dynasty, the Manchus attacked the temple and burnt it to the ground. Tradition has it that most of the elder monks chose to die in the temple, but many of the younger ones escaped and continued to offer scattered resistance to the Manchu oppressors and fight for Chinese unity and nationalism. Shaolin is a symbol and is all the more potent to its largely expatriate Chinese audience for its mythical nature: even when the temple is not part of the narrative, Kung Fu itself evokes its significance.

Western audiences are perhaps most familiar with the story of the Shaolin temple from the 70s television show Kung Fu, which continues in late night reruns. David Carradine played a renegade Shaolin monk who wandered through the American west in the 1870s in a New Age–meets–Billy Jack blend of the Kung Fu and Western genres. A symbol of Chinese tradition and nationalism was transformed for Western consumption into an archetypal story of rugged individualism with an exotic twist. Carradine’s enemies were not the enemies of his people: they were his alone. A second level of mythic coding has grown up around the Kung Fu genre itself, most spectacularly in the figure of Bruce Lee. With the exception of some French film critics, Western cultural and academic writers have largely ignored Kung Fu cinema, with the result that much of the peripatetic material in English is generated “for house,” for a martial arts rather than a general film-going audience. In this literature, Lee is often credited with single-handedly popularizing the genre, and the martial arts themselves. In the West, aside from his incredibly successful films, he was an innovator in Kung Fu fighting and one of the first to maintain the need for the martial artist to achieve general health, strength and fitness, when he had lopped all his hair and drilled it into a solid head of hair. In the 1970s, he developed a system of Kung Fu which was based on the Kung Fu of the Shaolin Temple, in which the body and mind are in harmony. He was also a master of the martial arts and was able to perform incredible feats of strength and agility. He was a true icon of the martial arts world, and his influence on the film industry was immense.

FISTS OF FURY (Golden Harvest, 1971) — This is one of Bruce Lee’s first movies. He plays a young man from the country who begins work at a small factory, only to discover that the workers are mistreated and the bosses corrupt. Violence erupts after the bosses have one of the workers killed and attempt to cover it up. Fists of Fury is a good example of the perennial Kung Fu theme of the individual battling a corrupt power structure. Although the plots are similar, the film is distinctive in its use of unique fighting styles.

The next important films are in the western of Bobert Clouse (Enter the Dragon). Angela Mao, a cute Asian starlet, played in one scene, but she fought with the Westerners in an exciting way. She was a good actress, and her performance was very effective. She was very easy to work with, and her English was excellent. She was able to work with any actor from Asia.

Undoubtedly, under the direction of Hollywood, the Hong Kong, Mao has the flourishing martial arts, especially the films of Golden Harvest. She is the major star in the Western world, and she is one of the most famous actresses of the Chinese film industry. She has been a dominant figure in the film industry, and she has been a source of inspiration to many other actresses.

LADY KUNG FU (Golden Harvest, 1972) — This movie is set in the 19th century, and it follows a young woman who is forced to leave school and become a singer. She is a part of a travelling troupe, and she becomes a star in the industry. She is also a martial artist, and she is able to fight with great skill.

The story is based on the true story of a Chinese woman who was a martial artist and singer. She was known for her agility and skill, and she was able to fight with great style. The movie was a great success, and it was able to showcase the skills of the star actresses.

the theme of oppressed workers, we can extrapolate about the working class interest of the audience.

After Lee's death, Golden Harvest put out his final finished film, Game of Death, with another actor playing a slightly longer part (standing in for back shots) and old clips on different coloured film stock cut in for frontal shots. Several other cannibalistic films were made which claimed to star Bruce Lee, but used old footage, and possessed little of that. The hole that Lee's death made in the film industry was suddenly apparent, and promoters squeezed every last cent out of his name. One movie even used footage from his funeral.

Where were you when Bruce Lee died?

The next important figure in Kung Fu films is, in the words of American director Robert Clouse (Enter the Dragon),

Angela Mao, a cute little Chinese martial artist who was a joy to work with. In one scene, she had a memorable fight with Bob Wall and his bullies pursued and threatened her until she committed suicide. For all her talent, she was paid a grand total of $100 for two long days' work. She made many films for Golden Harvest and never understood her true worth. Of course, no one around the studio was about to tell her. She was very unassuming and easy to work with, though she spoke no English. This language barrier hampers any actor from Asia.

Underrated and underappreciated, the victim of the racism of Hollywood and the sexism of Hong Kong, Mao has a unique position in the flourishing martial arts cinema of the 70s: she is the major woman martial artist. In a world where gender roles are rigidly codified and Nora Miao, Bruce Lee's usual co-star, exemplifies the ideal of shy, feminine womanhood, Mao's acrobatic Kung Fu and uncompromising characters are a welcome contrast. She usually stars in costume films. While appearing quintessentially feminine, her characters have the same strong resolve as the Kung Fu heroes. If there is a hero in her films, he remains secondary, and the rarely has a love interest, in keeping with the chaste heroic tradition.

LADY KUNG FU (Golden Harvest, 1971) – This movie is set in the 1950s at the time of the Japanese occupation. Angela Mao plays one of three Kung Fu students who leave their teacher to set up their own school. They are attacked by the members of a karate school in the same town. Mao triumphs, though her fellow teachers are slain. She herself kills a Chinese collaborator. Just as there are distinctions in the movies between styles within Kung Fu itself, so is there often a focus on rural schools of martial arts. Teachers and students in a Kung Fu school must often contend with bullying rivals from schools of judo and karate. Since the latter arts are based by the villagers. Black Americans are exotic, and can be either good (film Kelly in Enter the Dragon) or bad (Kaneem Jabbar in Game of Death). Either way, they are expendable. White Americans are often hired as supernumeraries. Common also are white heroes in Hong Kong, to the extent that the Chinese hero is displaced, as in the recently released American biopict, an ultimately racist film about two American martial artists, one a gymnast and the other a biker. These two male-bond in a way unheard of outside the family in Hong Kong films and defeat the psycho-pathic Chinese fighter who is again portrayed by Yuen Se.

ENTER THE DRAGON (Warner Bros./Golden Harvest, 1973) – In this first Hong Kong/Hollywood co-production, Bruce Lee is sent to expose a drug lord who, not incidentally, is responsible for the suicide of Lee's sister. Even though this film had a relatively high budget, the fight scenes take place in open spaces or courtyards and involve minimal damage to props. This is usually the case in Kung Fu films because the materials, which are usually hand-me-down and very flimsy, are used over and over again. There is no knockdown furniture or sugallasses: In Enter the Dragon, Bruce Lee cut his hand in a fight scene and required twelve stitches, because dousing was more expensive than labour. Extras were hired for a few dollars a day, and often slept on the set, and the stage manager complained because they were eating the props for the banquet scene. Many of these extras were on trips (gangs), and when the scene called for large numbers of extras and they couldn't all be recruited from one Trip, the line between cinema and reality blurred as the extras continued to fight after the director yelled "cut." The extras in the prison scene were street people, and were paid less than the fight scene extras. Director Robert Clouse had trouble hiring women for the film, as the Hong Kong actresses would apparently not play prostitutes, and so he had to hire real prostitutes for HK$150 a day, more than Angela Mao got paid to play Lee's sister. So even

though the plot of the film is escapist and mythic, and even though the production was criticized by purists because of its Western elements, it does reflect the experienced reality of Hong Kong in a very immediate way.

THE FIVE DEADLY VENOMS (Shaw Brothers, 1979) - There are many schools and styles of Kung Fu, some very positi-

not necessarily historically accurate, but are recognizable as being somehow traditionally “Chinese.”

STREET GANGS OF HONG KONG (Shaw Brothers, 1979) - This is the story of a young working class man who is tempted by the world of organized crime. It is intriguing in its authentic street locations and depictions of restaurant work. The Kung Fu hero is usually more contextualized than the hero of the Western, while the latter lives in splendid isolation in the open frontier society. The Kung Fu hero lives in overcrowded Hong Kong, or in a close-knit village or monastic community, and so is part of a complex and inescapable social order which he must interact with while remaining true to his personal code. He is generally working class, as is his audience, and is instantly perceived to be so through shared codes of meaning.

In Hong Kong gangster films the characters face a more complex, Westernized world, and heroism is more difficult. The themes of nationalism and imperialism of the historical films are sublimated into a background of sex, drugs and disco: gangster films are the stories of individuals caught up in the insatiable machinery of organized crime. They retain certain similarities to the costume films, however: martial arts are used instead of guns, and the world is still divided between heroes and villains.

DIRTY HO (Hong Kong, 1979) - This is a very bizarre film about a mei dei do who becomes the disciple of the Emperor’s boat. A comedy with insistently theatrical elements and considerable slapstick, it is so stylized that it is almost inaccessible to a Western audience. The dubbing, which always serves to scuttle the remaining shreds of our suspension of disbelief, is here even more stilted than usual. The fight scenes are so tightly choreographed that the perfunctory element becomes part of the text of the film. The slowed action, the build-up of the traditional late music counterpointed to the ironic rhythm between the characters, and the syncronized balletic quality of the movements, all indicate the evolution of a highly parodic, culturally circumscribed genre form.

At this point, you are now ready to watch some Kung Fu movies. Start with Bruce Lee’s films, for they are more commercial, and thus more culturally accessible to the West. Check the television guide: martial arts are usually on very late at night. Don’t be sidetracked by films starring Charlie Bronson or things with titles like American Ninja. Hold off for the genuine article. At first sight, Kung Fu movies may seem cloaked to Western viewers: they are repetitive and stiff, they have no plot, are low budget, etc. etc. Upon further viewing, however, these simple narrative codes offer endless permutations and nuances, complicated by the tension between the cultural significance and the extremely commercial nature of the films. In fact, it is the interplay between the B-grade elements of these films and their cultural coding which provides for much of the fascination for Kung Fu cultists.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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