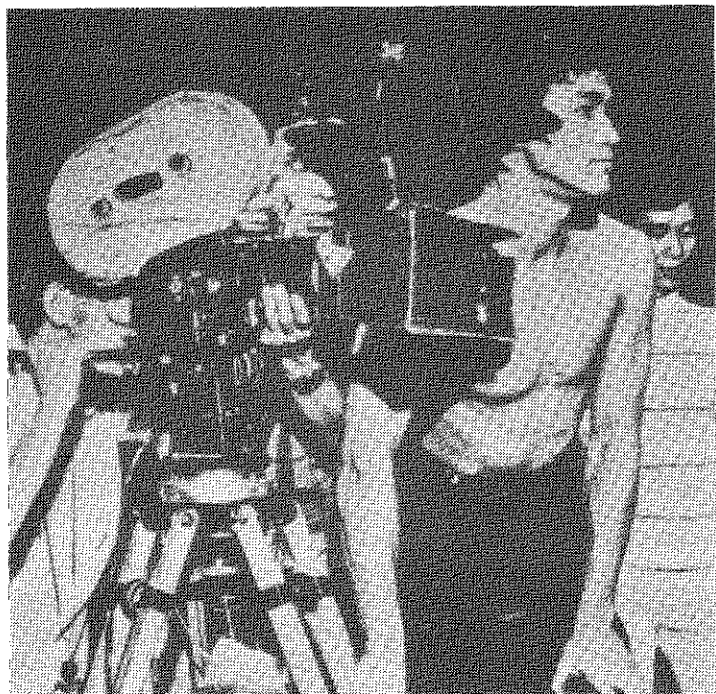


A Viewer's Guide to Kung Fu Films

Miriam Jones



Bruce Lee directing

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 one of 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 the producers is explicit and not obscured, as it can be in the West, by considerations of art and auteurism. There are no auteur directors in Kung Fu movies, no Kurosawas or Sergio Leones. Writers are practically non-existent; most directors either write the script themselves, or work in an impromptu style and a half-finished storyline. Perhaps the two biggest producers through the 70s were Run Run Shaw for the Shaw

Brothers, and Raymond Chow for Golden Harvest.

The production values of these movies are generally inferior to all but the lowest budget Hollywood films. The format is traditional, accessible, and linear; the events unroll in chronological order, and the few flashbacks 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, recognizable 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-reflexive, 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 street gangs; its appeal is far more popularly based. Kung Fu is culturally inscribed with all that is intrinsically and indisputably 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 Hunan province of China, a cultural centre where Zen Buddhism and *wu tai* (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.

Racial 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 as a symbol is all the more potent to its largely expatriate Chinese audience for its mythic nature; even when the 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 pertinent material is generated "in 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 record-breaking 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 s/he had hitherto focused almost exclusively on the development of skill. Most accounts of Bruce Lee are hagiographic, with the requisite inaccuracies and discrepancies. There was considerable controversy over his death. He died of a cerebral edema at the age of thirty-two, perhaps brought on by an allergic reaction to the pain killers he was taking. His death was further complicated by the fact that it occurred in the apartment of a woman other than his wife.

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 a cover-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 particularized, from the prevalence of

the theme of oppression extrapolate about the expectations of the audience.

After Lee's death, C... out his half finished fi... with another actor (w... hair) standing in for b... clips on different colo... in front of frontal shot... istic films were made... star Bruce Lee, but use... precious little of that... death made in the film... denly apparent, and p... every last cent out of f... movie even used foota... Where were you w...

The next importan... films is, in the words... Robert Clouse (*Enter t...*

Angela Mao, a cute... tial artist [who] wa... In one scene, she h... fight where Bob W... pursued and torme... committed suicide... she was paid a gran... two long days' wor... films for Golden H... understood her tru... no one around the... tell her. She was ve... easy to work with... English. This langu... any actor from Asi...

Underated and under... the racism of Hollywo... Hong Kong, Mao has... the flourishing mar... 70s: she is the major... ist. In a world where... idly codified and Nor... usual co-star, exempli... feminine womanhood... Kung Fu and uncompr... are a welcome contras... in costume films. Wh... essentially feminine... the same strong resolv... heroes. If there is a h... remains secondary, an... love interest, in keepi... heroic tradition.

LADY KUNG FU (Gol... This movie is set in th... of the Japanese occup... plays one of three Ku... leave their teacher to... school. They are attac... triumphs, though her... killed. She herself kill... rator. Just as there are... movies between styles... itself, so is there offer... schools of martial arts... tend with Kung Fu ric... judo and karate. Since...

1. Robert Clouse, *The M... Dragon* (Burbank, Califo... Publications) 1987, 116-

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

After Lee's death, Golden Harvest put out his half finished film, *Game of Death*, with another actor (with slightly longer hair) 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 precious 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 where Bob Wall and his bullies pursued and tormented 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...¹

Underated and underpaid, 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 she rarely has a love interest, in keeping with the chaste heroic tradition.

LADY KUNG FU (Golden Harvest, 1971) – This movie is set in the 1930s 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 killed. 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 rival 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

Japanese, the whole history of Japanese imperialism against China is evoked. The Japanese are invariably portrayed as villains who attempt to conquer and diminish the Chinese, and these dynamics are played out through rivalry between schools. The lone Kung Fu artist who faces and vanquishes an entire school of karatekas (practitioners of karate) is a familiar set piece. So common is this theme that some Hong Kong actors have made a career of playing evil Japanese stock characters. Individual actors become identified with certain types of roles, and once established, rarely shift direction. The collaborator, either with the Manchus, or later with the Japanese, is also a stock figure.

Some other important films are:

RETURN OF THE DRAGON (Golden Harvest/Concorde, 1972) – Bruce Lee goes to Rome to help the owner of a Chinese restaurant who is beset by gangs. Chuck Norris got his big break in this film by playing a mercenary who is brought in to fight Lee. When he steps off the plane in his bell bottoms, tight polyester shirt open to the waist and aviator sunglasses, the audience knows who he is. Although he and Lee are enemies, they recognize each others' prowess, and manage to male-bond before Norris is offed in the climactic duel in the Roman Colloseum.

THE CHINESE CONNECTION (Golden Harvest, 1972) – Bruce Lee is reported to have gone to screenings of his own movies in disguise. He described to Robert Clouse a screening of *The Chinese Connection*, another film which features individual resistance to the Japanese occupation. A rival Japanese martial arts school challenges the Chinese Kung Fu school by taunting the Chinese as "the sick men of Asia." Lee reported that the audience was silent at this point, as the insult hit too close to home. Later, when the Lee character goes to the Karate dojo and singlehandedly defeats all the karateka, then declares to the scattered bodies, "The Chinese are *not* the sick men of Asia!" the Hong Kong audience apparently burst into pandemonium. In a famous scene at the end of the film, Lee's character chooses death rather than submission to the authorities, and is shot in a freeze frame in midair as he leaps at a group of armed soldiers. In another iconic image from the film, Lee kicks to pieces a sign barring "dogs and Chinese" from a public park. Lee is partially reconstituting his own myth in *The Chinese Connection*, but he is also tapping into a rich cultural wellspring.

CHINESE HERCULES (Kai Fa Film Company, 1973) – This is another film about exploited workers. The muscular "Chinese Hercules," played by Yeung Sze, is hired by the foreman of a small shipping dock to keep the workers in line. After injuring many of the workers and killing one of them, he is finally defeated by one martial artist.

Yeung Sze was also the villain in *Enter the Dragon*. The coding of hired talent in Kung Fu movies betrays a structure based on race and nationality. Russians are only

hired by the villains. Black Americans are exotic, and can be either good (Jim Kelly in *Enter the Dragon*) or bad (Kareem Jabbar in *Game of Death*). Either way, they are expendable. White Americans are often hired mercenaries. Common also are white heroes in Hong Kong, to the extent that the Chinese hero is displaced, as in the recently released American *Bloodsport*, an ultimately racist film about two Ameri-



David Carradine in the west

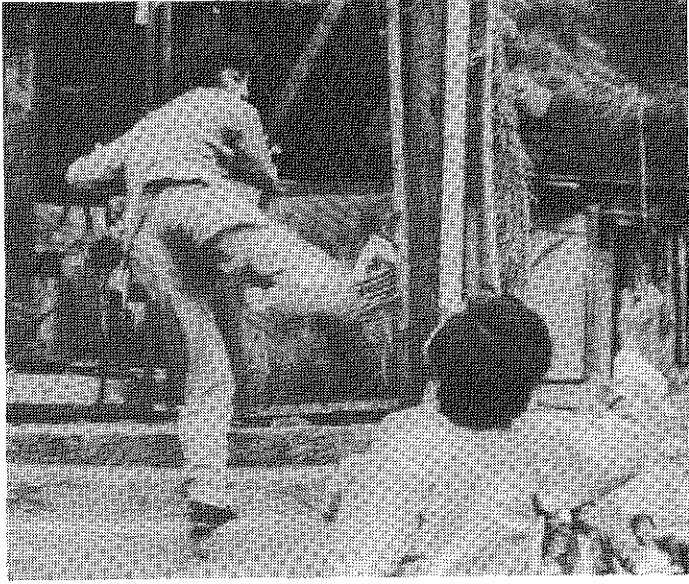
can martial artists, one a gymnast and the other a biker. These two male-bond in a way unheard of outside the family in Hong Kong films and defeat the psychopathic Chinese fighter who is again portrayed by Yeung Sze.

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 handmade and very flimsy, are used over and over again. There is no breakaway furniture or sugarglass: in *Enter the Dragon*, Bruce Lee cut his hand in a fight scene and required twelve stitches, because a real bottle was used as a weapon. To prepare for the prison scene, carpenters hand-sanded wood to make the bars, because dowling 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 from Triads (gangs), and when the scene called for large numbers of extras and they couldn't all be recruited from one Triad, 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

1. Robert Clouse, *The Making of Enter the Dragon* (Burbank, California: Unique Publications) 1987, 116-117.

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 poeti-



Angela Mao, Bruce Lee's on-camera sister, in *Enter the Dragon*

cally named after particular animals whose movements they evoke. Such distinctions are given full play in the films, where the hero, a practitioner of the Tiger style, for example, might only be able to defeat the villain and his Praying Mantis style once he has also mastered the Crane style (see *Executioners of Death*, 1977). These schools are interesting on two levels: for one, they are part of the esoterica of the Chinese martial arts. And in terms of the narrative of the films, they come to take on symbolic meanings. For example, in *The Five Deadly Venoms*, five students of the "Poison Clan" studied five different "styles": the Toad, the Scorpion, the Snake, the Centipede and the Lizard. Four of these students turned their skills to evil uses, and so the names become part of the coding of the villains, analogous to the proverbial black hat in the Western.

In Westerns, the villains are often loners and mavericks. In Kung Fu movies, such fighters would be strictly seen as employees of the real villain. The hero must fight his way up the social hierarchy of hired thugs and underlings before he has the final, climactic fight with the villain, who is almost invariably a corrupt man of wealth and social consequence. Often the hero is ignorant of the real identity of the villain until the end. Even when the villain is vanquished, the convoluted and oppressive social order remains in place. And often the hero doesn't survive: happy endings are by no means obligatory in this genre.

Although Kung Fu films with historical settings may be set in a particular period, their aesthetic conventions and the repetition of the same stories give them an ahistorical vagueness. The elaborate costumes and settings, used from film to film, are

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 inexorable machinery of organized crime. They retain certain similarities to the arts instead of guns, and the world is still divided into heroes and villains.

DIRTY HO (Hong Kong, 1979) – This is a very bizarre film about a ne'er do well who becomes the disciple of the Emperor's heir. A comedy with intensely 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 performance element becomes part of the text of the film. The slowed action, the build-up of the traditional lute music counterposed to the comic ritual between the characters, and the synchronized balletic quality of the movements, all indicate the evolution of a highly parodic, culturally circumscribed genre form.



Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon*

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 Charles Bronson or things with titles like *American Ninja*; hold out for the genuine article. At first sight Kung Fu movies may seem closed 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

- Anderson, J.L. "Japanese Swordfighters and American Gunfighters." *Cinema Journal*. 12:2 (Spring 73): 1.
- Clouse, Robert. *The Making of Enter the Dragon*. Burbank, California: Unique Publications, 1987.
- Crozier, Ralph C. "Beyond East and West: The American Movie." *Journal of Popular Film*. 1:3 (Summer 72): 229.
- Gourlie, John. "Kung Fu: Inner Space in Western Landscape." *Popular Culture Association Eighteenth Annual Meeting*, New Orleans, March 24, 1988.
- Jameson, Richard T. "Something To Do With Death: A Fistful of Sergio Leone." *Film Comment*. 9:2 (Mar./Apr. 73): 8.
- Kaminsky, Stuart M. "The Samurai Film and the Western." *Journal of Popular Film*. 1:4 (Fall 72): 312.
- Mintz, Marilyn D. *The Martial Arts Films*. Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1983.
- Stuart, Alexander. "Chinese Chequers." *Films and Filming*. 20:1 (Oct. 73): 26.
- Vaughn, Jack, and Mike Lee, Eds. *The Legendary Bruce Lee*. Burbank, California: Ohara Publications, 1986.
- Williams, Bryn, Ed. *Martial Arts of the Orient*. Twickenham, Middlesex: Hamlyn Publishing, 1985.

Miriam Jones is a graduate student at York University.

