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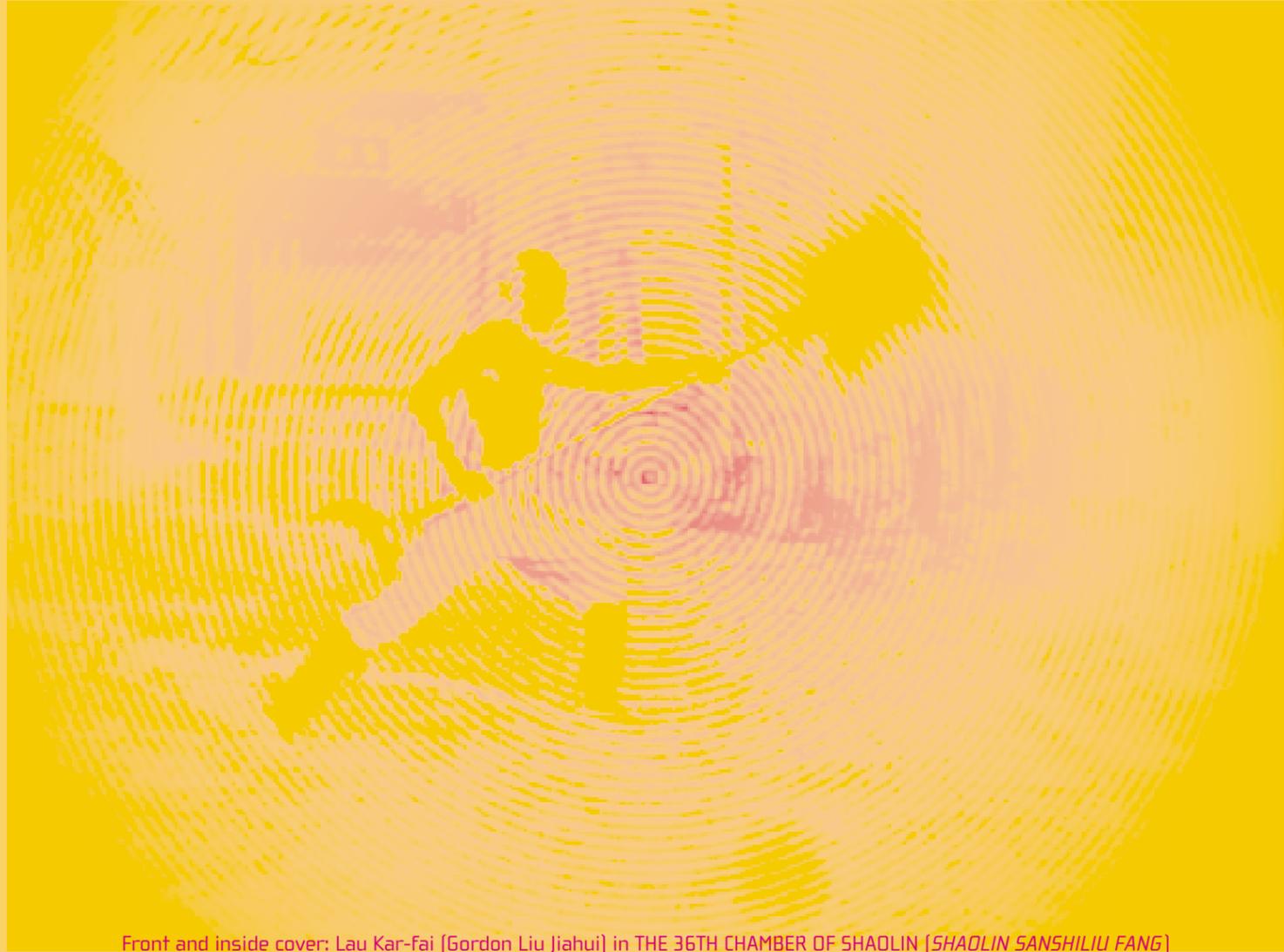
# HEROIC GRACE:

THE CHINESE  
MARTIAL  
ARTS FILM



February 28 - March 16, 2003

Los Angeles



Front and inside cover: Lau Kar-fai (Gordon Liu Jiahui) in THE 36TH CHAMBER OF SHAOLIN (*SHAOLIN SANSHILIU FANG*)



Hong Kong Economic & Trade Office  
*San Francisco*

present

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## CONTENTS

From the Presenter	Tim Kittleson	iv
From the Presenting Sponsor	Annie Tang	v
From the Chairman	John Woo	vi
Acknowledgments		vii
Leaping into the <i>Jiang Hu</i>	Cheng-Sim Lim	1
A Note on the Romanization of Chinese		3
ESSAYS		
Introduction	David Chute	5
How to Watch a Martial Arts Movie	David Bordwell	9
From Page to Screen: A Brief History of <i>Wuxia</i> Fiction	Sam Ho	13
The Book, the Goddess and the Hero: Sexual Aesthetics in the Chinese Martial Arts Film	B�erence Reynaud	18
Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon—Passing Fad or Global Phenomenon?	Stephen Teo	23
Selected Bibliography		27
FILM NOTES		31-49
PROGRAM INFORMATION		
Screening Schedule		51
Print & Tape Sources		52
UCLA Staff		53

## FROM THE PRESENTER

*Heroic Grace: The Chinese Martial Arts Film* ranks among the most ambitious programs mounted by the UCLA Film and Television Archive, taking five years to organize by our dedicated and intrepid Public Programming staff. A number of the films included in the series have never been seen in the United States and some have not been seen in their country of origin for decades. They are truly rare gems that have been unearthed by mining film archives and libraries throughout Asia. They are also the films that have influenced the current work of many contemporary Chinese and American directors.

None of it would be possible without the generous support of our Presenting Sponsor, the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in San Francisco. Their financial commitment to the series from the very beginning has allowed us to present these amazing films in Los Angeles, as well as a selection culled from the Los Angeles program in additional cities. Their largesse has also made it possible to publish this program catalog—with a specially commissioned suite of critical essays on the martial arts film, and information on the featured films and filmmakers.

We are grateful to Cathay Pacific Airways and the Edna and Yu-Shan Han Foundation for their additional sponsorship of the series. We must also thank those archives and companies that have shared their expertise and/or loaned us their prints: most notably the Hong Kong Film Archive, Celestial Pictures Ltd., the China Film Archive, and the Chinese Taipei Film Archive.

On behalf of the UCLA Film and Television Archive, I hope you enjoy *Heroic Grace*. It is a shining example of our mission to rediscover the past by celebrating historic filmmakers and significant cinematic achievement.

**Tim Kittleson**

*Director, UCLA Film and Television Archive*

The UCLA Film and Television Archive is internationally renowned for its pioneering efforts to rescue, preserve and showcase film and television, and is dedicated to ensuring that the collective visual memory of our time is studied and enjoyed for generations to come. The Archive holds one of the largest collections of moving image media in the US—second only to the Library of Congress in Washington, DC—and the largest of any university in the world. For more than 20 years, the Archive has been at the forefront of introducing US audiences to important, new filmmakers and movements worldwide.



Hong Kong Economic & Trade Office

*San Francisco*

## FROM THE PRESENTING SPONSOR

As Director of the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office, it is my pleasure to sponsor this special retrospective presentation of classic kung fu films from Hong Kong, *Heroic Grace: The Chinese Martial Arts Film*. While Hong Kong cinema is today as diverse as any in the world, our films come from a heritage in which kung fu productions have played a major role. These films often made the most of limited budgets, taxing the creative powers of directors, cinematographers and actors alike. The best of them are truly windows into the very soul of Hong Kong; their influence has been felt in Hollywood and all over the world.

Our office promotes Hong Kong not only as Asia's world city, but as a cultural interface between East and West. We are therefore delighted to work with the UCLA Film and Television Archive to bring this series to fruition. As the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government strives to support the long-term development of a healthy local film industry, it is indebted to the efforts of artists like those whose work you will see in this special presentation. These are the roots of Hong Kong film; they have made it all possible.

**Annie Tang**

*Director, Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in San Francisco*

The Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in San Francisco is the representative office of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government for the 19 western states of the US. It looks after the economic and trade interests of Hong Kong on the West Coast and promotes US investment in Hong Kong.

# FROM THE CHAIRMAN

When the UCLA Film and Television Archive asked me to be the Chairman for this retrospective of the Chinese martial arts film, I eagerly accepted because it was an opportunity to support the first serious, well-researched exhibition in the West to trace the history of the genre. This unprecedented event has the potential to strengthen and deepen the understanding that American audiences have of a crucial but little understood genre of Chinese cinema.

My own career as a filmmaker began with working on martial arts films in the early 1970s, during the glory days of Cathay and Shaw Brothers. I was extremely fortunate in having been able to apprentice with one of the masters of the genre, Zhang Che. Not only did his films influence my own filmmaking, but the spirit of youthful romanticism they possess also influenced me as a person. At the time I was a young man looking to make a life and career. These films helped me with both. In a way I envy those of you who will be discovering these films for the first time. I am sure you will find much to inspire you as well.

**John Woo**

*Director*

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Edna and Yu-Shan Han Foundation

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Zhang Daxing

# LEAPING INTO THE *JIANG HU*

The series *Heroic Grace: The Chinese Martial Arts Film* has a straightforward premise. It is an attempt to examine a central and enduring genre of the Chinese cinema in light of that genre's history. But as in the *jiang hu* or underworld, stomping ground of chivalrous warriors from martial arts fiction, even a simple goal like a precision kick to the head belies a prolonged and intense period of training mind and body. Indeed, it has taken five years for the idea of a series that would trace the development of the martial arts film—from its silent-era beginnings in Shanghai in the 1920s through its creative and box-office apogee in the '70s—to become a reality.

Hong Kong film curator Lau Shing-hon has written: "Martial arts films present themselves as the first and obvious starting point for a systematic examination of the various genres in Chinese cinema....[M]artial arts films have been in continuous production since the end of WWII; fashions and styles have changed, of course, but the genre has proved uniquely durable. The martial arts film is by far the most prolific genre in Hong Kong cinema. It occupies a central position in local production, and it is the only genre in Chinese cinema that has had an influence internationally."<sup>1</sup>

Yet today when the reach of the Chinese martial arts film is undeniably international, when moves dreamt up by Hong Kong masters have morphed into the pixelated mainstream of video games and Hollywood action, our knowledge of the genre, its roots and riches, on this side of the Pacific remains woefully sketchy. This is perhaps not surprising

given how little audiences here have actually *seen* of the martial arts cinema. Much of what is known is gleaned from the brief '70s encounter with kung fu (unarmed combat) movies, many of which were poorly dubbed into English, and their pan-and-scan video afterlife; or '80s and '90s historical swordplay or contemporary "gunplay" interpretations of the form. Such limited exposure may explain a common tendency of western reception of the genre to cluster around eager, sometimes hyperbolic, fan embrace and critical scorn.

Nevertheless, limited exposure was quite the opposite of why the *shenguai wuxia pian*—the "supernatural knight-errant" film, the early generic label for the martial arts film; what is often referred to as "sword and sorcery" today—elicited similarly polarized reception in China in the 1920s, resulting in their prohibition in the subsequent decade. Within a few years of its emergence onscreen, "sword and sorcery" had become a favored choice of Shanghai moviegoers. Propelled by the popular thirst for tales extolling romanticism and gallantry, studios like Da Zhonghua-Baihe, Huaju, Tianyi (which produced what is often cited as the earliest martial arts movie, *SWORDSWOMAN LI FEIFEI* [*WUXIA*

<sup>1</sup> Lau, Introd., *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film* (4th Hong Kong International Film Festival/Urban Council, 1980), p. 3.

LI FEIFEI, 1925], and which would later become Hong Kong's Shaw Brothers), Mingxing, Xifan, Youlian (known for its prodigious output of *nǚxia* or "female knight-errant" films), Yueming and others churned out one swordplay fantasy after another.

The frenzy reached a peak in 1927-1931 when over 200 films were produced. Production in those four years alone accounted for about half of the estimated total of 400 martial arts films made in China in all the years prior to the Communist Revolution of 1949.<sup>2</sup> Audiences were apparently enthralled by this newfangled hybrid that could embody modernity (technology and speed, comic books, popular novels and serialized newspaper stories) and folkloric culture (traditional opera and acrobatics).<sup>3</sup> Martial arts movies not only imagined but also shockingly "manifested" gravity-defying warriors in the face of China's occupation by foreign powers.<sup>4</sup> (Exported to Southeast Asia, the martial arts film captured the imagination of the Chinese diasporic communities as well, a condition lasting well into the '80s.)

Although politically at odds, ruling Nationalists on the right and May Fourth intellectuals on the left united in their disapproval of the genre's alleged vulgarity and sensorial assaults. Martial arts films were thought capable of unleashing anarchy and uncontrollable passions among the masses.<sup>5</sup> In 1931 government censors banned a number of martial arts titles. Successive bans in the early '30s and the ascendancy of May Fourth-influenced social melodrama ensured the genre's decline.<sup>6</sup> By 1937 China was at war with Japan, and the genre's Shanghai epoch was effectively over. After the Revolution, martial arts films were again deemed ideologically suspect and destroyed. Of the few titles that have survived, *Heroic Grace* will present two: RED HEROINE (*HONG XIA*, 1929) and SWORDSWOMAN OF HUANGJIANG (*HUANGJIANG NǚXIA*, 1930), silents that prove that woman warriors were battling from the early days of the cinematic *jiang hu*.

From the war-torn period of the late '30s through World War II and the Revolution and its aftermath, Hong Kong became the principal beneficiary of film talent and capital fleeing Shanghai. The then-British colony had a local film industry, which had produced its first Cantonese martial arts film, THE ADORNED PAVILION (*FAN TSONG LAU/FENZHUANG LO*), in 1938.<sup>7</sup> It would be this Cantonese cinema that would keep the arsenal of supra-normal prowess, the mystical realms, the strange and uncanny habitues of the silent *shenguai wuxia pian* alive.<sup>8</sup> From the 1950s onwards, "sword and sorcery" took flight in such Cantonese serials as THE SIX-FINGERED LORD OF THE LUTE (*LOKE CHI KAM MOH/LIU ZHI QIN MO*, 1965) and SACRED FIRE, HEROIC WIND (*SING FENG HUNG FONG/SHENGHUO XIONGFENG*, 1966), connoting magic via hand-drawn special effects and animation (another echo of their silent antecedents).

While the "sorcery" would become less pronounced in the Mandarin "new school" *wuxia pian*—literally the "martial chivalry" film, commonly known as the swordplay film whose ascendancy in the mid-'60s was signaled by, among others, King Hu—Cantonese cinema was nurturing another more earth-bound strain of martial arts in the long-running WONG FEI-HUNG series. In about 80 episodes spanning 1949 to the early '70s, actor Kwan Tak-hing, an opera-trained martial arts exponent, came to personify the folk-hero apothecary who lived in Guangdong during the late 19th and early 20th century. The series itself subsumed supernatural valor to (relative) realism and a Confucianist ethos of social propriety and clan identity. Hong Kong film critic Sek Kei has noted how the close-quarter combat style deployed in WONG FEI-HUNG anticipated the kung fu fighting of the '70s.<sup>9</sup>

But perhaps most significantly, the series helped reshape the postwar cinematic landscape of the *jiang hu*. Martial arts director Han Yingjie honed his craft on it and other shows before originating the vaunted "new school" somersaulting of King Hu's COME DRINK WITH ME (*DAI ZUI XIA*, 1966) and DRAGON INN (*LONGMEN KEZHAN*, 1968). The series also served as a crucible for a new generation of martial arts directors led by Lau Kar-leung (Liu Jialiang), Tong Kai (Tang Jia) and Yuen Wo-ping (Yuan Heping). First in tandem with directors Zhang Che (Chang Cheh) and Chu Yuan (Chor Yuen), then as directors themselves, Lau et al. brought kinesinetic eloquence and force to the dance of combat. Whether with clawed "tiger" fists or limber "crane" legs, thwacking poles or clanging swords, in rhythmic *pas de deux* or soaring flight, sleight of editing or camera moves, the Hong Kong martial arts cinema of the '60s and '70s turned fighting—and all that implies about what is being fought over—into virtuosic expression. (For fuller discussions of the films from this period, please see the essays and program notes elsewhere in this catalog.) The celebrated "balletics" of such "action auteurs" today as Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung, Tsui Hark and John Woo can be seen as more recent inspirations radiating from that fount.

Each cycle wanes and another is ushered in. Kung fu usurped the dominance of swordplay in the '70s only to be supplanted itself by the "sword and sorcery" revival in the '80s and '90s. Cantonese gave way to Mandarin in the mid-'60s which in turn gave way to Cantonese in the late '70s.<sup>10</sup> In the mythic world of the *jiang hu*, the wheels of time have a way of revivifying what's past. The martial arts film had a momentary rekindling in Mainland China in the early '80s. Might legendary heroes and heroines awaken again with a vengeance in the place of their birth?

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### Cheng-Sim Lim

Curator, *Heroic Grace: The Chinese Martial Arts Film*

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<sup>2</sup> Estimates provided by the China Film Archive, Beijing. See also Zhang Zhen, "Bodies in the Air: The Magic of Science and the Fate of the Early 'Martial Arts' Film in China," *Postscript*, 20, Nos. 2-3 (Winter/Spring-Fall 2001), 44.

<sup>3</sup> Zhang, 44-52. For a discussion of modernity, Shanghai urban culture and Chinese cinema of the '20s to '40s, see Leo Lee Ou-fan, *Shanghai Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999), Ch. iii, pp. 82-119. Also, Zhang Yingjin, *Introd., ed., Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943* (Stanford UP, 1999), Ch. i, pp. 3-23.

<sup>4</sup> Zhang, 44-45, 51-52. Reception of martial arts cinema in the prewar republican period (1911-1937) in a sense replicated the popular response to the martial arts fiction that preceded it in the late Qing Dynasty (late 19th century-1911). As Ng Ho writes, "The popularity of the martial arts novels in the late Qing era could probably be attributed to the intense longing for superhuman heroes strong enough to resist foreign aggression and to counter the repression of the Manchu government." Quoted in "Jiang Hu Revisited: Towards a Reconstruction of the Martial Arts World," in *A Study of the Hong Kong Swordplay Film 1945-1980*, ed. Leong Mo-ling, rev. ed. (5th Hong Kong International Film Festival/Urban Council, 1981), p. 84.

<sup>5</sup> Zhang, 44-45, 55-56.

<sup>6</sup> Zhang, 45, 55-56.

<sup>7</sup> Yu Mo-wan, "Swords, Chivalry and Palm Power: A Brief Survey of the Cantonese Martial Arts Cinema, 1938-1970," in *Swordplay Film*, p. 99.

<sup>8</sup> Yu, pp. 99-106.

<sup>9</sup> Sek Kei, "The Development of 'Martial Arts' in Hong Kong Cinema," in *Martial Arts Film*, pp. 30, 32.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* (London: BFI Publishing, 1997), pp. 97-109. See also Lau, p.3; and Yu, pp. 102-106. Sek Kei further argues that as Cantonese movies lost market dominance in Hong Kong to Mandarin movies, female stars and powerful heroines gave way to male stars and martial heroes; see "The War Between the Cantonese and Mandarin Cinemas in the Sixties or How the Beautiful Women Lost to Action Men," in *The Restless Breed: Cantonese Stars of the Sixties*, ed. Stephen Teo (20th Hong Kong International Film Festival/Urban Council, 1996), pp. 30-33.

### A NOTE ON THE ROMANIZATION OF CHINESE

Mandarin names and titles of Mandarin films in this catalog are romanized in the *hanyu pinyin* system. Previous or local romanizations are provided in parenthesis following the first mention of the *pinyin* name in the catalog essays and film notes, if the individual concerned is well-known under that previous or local romanization. For example: Di Long (Ti Lung), Zhang Che (Chang Cheh) and Zheng Peipei (Cheng Pei-pei).

Cantonese names and terms are not romanized in *pinyin*. Instead, this catalog uses Hong Kong romanizations or the most internationally recognizable form of the name or term. An example of the former is Tsui Hark; an example of the latter is Bruce Lee and kung fu. Titles of Cantonese films are listed with their Cantonese romanizations first, followed by their *pinyin* equivalents.

When an individual is primarily known by his/her Cantonese name but is sometimes also known internationally by his/her Mandarin name, for the first citation in an essay or film note, the romanized Cantonese name will precede the *pinyin* equivalent, which will be in parenthesis. For example: Lau Kar-leung (Liu Jialiang). Thereafter, the Cantonese romanization will be used.

Alternatively when an individual is primarily known by his/her Mandarin name but is also sometimes known internationally by his/her dialect name, for the first citation in an essay or film note, the *pinyin* name will precede the romanized dialect equivalent, which will be in parenthesis. For example: Chu Yuan (Chor Yuen). Thereafter, the *pinyin* name will be used.

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ESSAYS

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曹達華  
關德興  
陳露  
李蘭  
馬笑英  
領銜主演  
全部硬橋硬馬

全部真軍演出

# INTRODUCTION

by DAVID CHUTE

It's pointless to dispute the fact that the Chinese martial arts movie has a chronic image problem in the West. Like every major film genre, this one has its prestige productions and its Z pictures, its classics and its Golden Turkeys. But while great works such as King Hu's *A TOUCH OF ZEN* (*XIA NU*, 1971) have surfaced here occasionally, the form has largely come to be identified in the US with the dregs of its output. The Hong Kong film industry itself was partly to blame, cranking out hundreds of one-week wonders and shipping them directly overseas to opportunistic distributors, during the short-lived "kung fu craze" of the 1970s.<sup>1</sup>

Martial arts movies have outlasted the disreputable B subgenres they shared drive-in triple bills with in the '70s, the spaghetti Western and the blaxploitation picture, to become a familiar feature of American pop culture. Oldies radio stations still occasionally play Carl Douglas' 1975 novelty hit "(Everybody Was) Kung Fu Fighting," and listeners smile knowingly. But in the grindhouse of the mind the films are a distinctly threadbare and frenetic spectacle, with their plastic wigs and poster-paint blood, their posturing machismo, their vertiginous smash-zoom camerawork and sledgehammer sound effects—and above all with their epiglottal dubbed English dialog, so intimately associated with our Kung Fu Theater memories that even hard-core fans enjoy quoting great chunks of it.<sup>2</sup>

There is a great deal more here, however, than meets (or has yet to meet) the western eye. The noble bearing and the altruistic values that American art-house patrons admired in the heroes of *CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON* (*WO HU CANG LONG*, 2000), and mistakenly assumed were unique to the revisionist approach of *auteur* director Ang Lee, are in fact the philosophical wellsprings of an exceedingly ancient and durable genre, the idealistic pursuits that have shaped it from its inception almost two thousand years ago.<sup>3</sup>

The earliest works of published fiction about martial heroes date back to the third century BC, and one of the oldest surviving Chinese feature films, made in 1925, is a silent swordplay saga. Like the Western in the US and the *chanbara* samurai tale in Japan, these stories embody the

central hero myths of an entire culture. These self-help fables of free-lance warriors pursuing justice across an imaginary landscape of heroic fantasy have deep roots in oral legends referenced in some of the earliest records of Chinese history. We have barely scratched the surface of this ancient genre in the States, and the surface we've scratched has been conveniently pre-furnished.

A point that needs to be made at once is that what you're getting here are two genres for the price of one.<sup>4</sup> For most Americans, the history of the Chinese martial arts movie begins with Bruce Lee and ends with *CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON*, and there's some justice in that: Lee remains the most ferociously popular international icon of two-fisted (and two-footed) kung fu prowess, while *CROUCHING TIGER* offered many westerners their first close look at the righteous swordfighters of the older foundational genre known as *wuxia* (pronounced "woo-shia"), or "martial chivalry." With the examples of Bruce Lee and *CROUCHING TIGER*'s Li Mubai in front of us, these two forms of martial adventure seem pretty easy to tell apart, almost at a glance. One flies and the other doesn't; one swings a sword and the other throws a punch. But in practice, as Stephen Teo argues in his essay here, the boundary between the two forms is fairly porous, and these glib distinctions don't stand up to close scrutiny.

The umbrella term *wuxia* simply attributes force or power, *wu*, to a person of righteous principles, the *xia*.<sup>5</sup> So the moral splendor of the

<sup>1</sup> The craze owed a great debt to the enthusiastic response of the African-American audience to martial arts films' non-white heroes, a devotion confirmed by the close relationship that soon developed between the kung fu and blaxploitation genres. See David Desser, "The Kung Fu Craze: Hong Kong Cinema's First American Reception," in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, ed. Poshek Fu and Desser, Cambridge UP, 2000), pp. 19-43.

<sup>2</sup> As illustrated by this chapter title from Stefan Hammond's *Hollywood East: Hong Kong Movies and the People Who Make Them* (New York: Contemporary, 2000): "So. You think your kung fu's pretty good. But still. You're going to die today. Ah ha ha ha. Ah ha ha ha ha ha." Los Angeles journalist Craig D. Reid, who in his college days worked as a kung fu "dubbing artist" in Taiwan, offers this explanation: "In the older Chinese films, Mandarin was spoken in an old-fashioned way, perhaps comparable to Shakespearean English versus American English. The language took on its own cinematic rhythm, wherein certain words were spoken to punctuate breaks in the dialog. One of those words is the Mandarin 'ke shi,' [pronounced 'ker shuh']. The literal translation is 'but.' However, when we dubbed we had to come up with something in two syllables to match the mouth movements of the Chinese actors. And thus 'but still' was born."

<sup>3</sup> Sam Ho offers a complete family history in "From Page to Screen: A Brief History of *Wuxia* Fiction," beginning on page 13.

<sup>4</sup> By some counts there are even more. Craig D. Reid, who writes regularly about martial arts films, recognizes five distinct subcategories of martial arts *pian* (films): *wuxia pian*; kung fu (*gongfu*) *pian*; *guoshu pian*, the Shaw Brothers "new style," post-Bruce Lee mixture of *wuxia* and kung fu; *wuda pian*, modern martial arts and stunt films such as Jackie Chan's *POLICE STORY* (*GING CHAT GOO SI/JINGCHA GUSHI*, 1985); and Fant-Asia Film, coined by Reid himself for "the 1980s mixtures of horror, sci-fi, *wuxia* and fantasy."

<sup>5</sup> The Chinese term most closely related to the English "martial arts" is probably *wushu*, a generic expression associated in common parlance with a form of competitive performance art that transmutes martial movements into gymnastics. See Sam Ho's piece here, beginning on page 13.

hero is one of *wuxia*'s key distinguishing features as a genre.<sup>6</sup> *Wuxia* stories depict heroes who are prodigious martial artists, but the emphasis is on how the prowess is used, and to what end. On the other hand, the morally neutral Cantonese expression *kung fu* (*gongfu*) which can be literally translated as "skilled effort" has by association come to refer to any "skill acquired after long practice."<sup>7</sup> In this subgenre the martial arts themselves, as such, become pivotal narrative elements. Suspense may be generated by the hero's struggle to complete an arduous course of training, or the plot may hinge upon the development of an ingenious new technique. Or both, as in Lau Kar-leung's definitive period kung fu movie *THE 36TH CHAMBER OF SHAOLIN* (*SHAOLIN SANSHILIU FANG*, 1978). Kung fu stories are always, at least to some extent, *about* the martial arts. And the history of martial arts cinema can be seen, in part, as an ongoing debate between these two approaches, between the airborne *wuxia* and the down-to-earth kung fu.<sup>8</sup> The kung fu movie was invented, in fact, only in the 1950s, by filmmakers who were also martial artists, partly as a realist response to some of the wilder flights of *wuxia* fantasy.<sup>9</sup>

Both forms, it must be said, embody a strikingly similar populist approach to self-defense, which is often associated with arming social outcasts against oppression. A Chinese saying insists that "the font of all martial arts is Shaolin,"<sup>10</sup> and when the monks of the Shaolin Temple first broke the code of silence and passed on their top-secret fighting techniques to ordinary citizens, it was to arm them against a corrupt imperial regime. The invasion of China by the Manchus in 1644, which established the Qing (Ching) dynasty, inspired a succession of underground anti-imperial movements that for the next two-and-a-half centuries sought to restore indigenous Chinese to the throne. (The subsequent burning of the Shaolin Temple by imperial forces, in 1768, and the scattering of its adepts, is the *wuxia* equivalent of the Gunfight at the OK Corral, the Battle of the Alamo, and Custer's Last Stand, all rolled into one.) As recently as the early 20th century one of the great real-life folk-heroes of recent Chinese history, Wong Fei-hung (1847-1924), was a martial arts instructor and physician who formed an anti-imperial militia in Canton in the late 19th century.

Japan's samurai warriors were aristocrats, dutiful officials of a mammoth feudal bureaucracy; the pathos of the scruffy *ronin* is defined by the lofty social position he has been expelled from or has abandoned. The Chinese martial hero may be a natural aristocrat but he is also a counter-cultural figure. The earliest fictional *xia*, like those in the 14th or 15th-century novel *The Water Margin* (*Shui Hu Chuan*), were idealistic Robin Hood-style bandits who holed up in remote locations and staged wrong-

righting forays against the status quo. The world these heroes created for themselves has since taken on a life of its own, has become a "shared world" alternate universe in which, the mundane laws of physics are suspended, and men and women of spotless virtue roam the landscape searching for fresh challenges.<sup>11</sup> It is a world that is so well known to all Asian creators and consumers of *wuxia* stories that it even has a name: *jiang hu*.

In subtitles and dubbed dialog this key term is often translated as "the martial world" or "the martial arts world." Its literal meaning is simply "rivers and lakes," which has implications similar to "the wilderness" or "the frontier": a remote and under-populated region where groups of outcasts can safely congregate. But in a more important sense the *jiang hu* was everywhere and nowhere, permeating the straight world at every level, an alternate social structure which its denizens had fashioned in their own image.

The *jiang hu* described in *wuxia* novels and depicted in *wuxia* movies is a lavishly embroidered and glamorized version of this hardscrabble reality, this subculture of bandits, beggars, gamblers, and con artists. There are a few written reports and many oral legends of popular militias and criminal fraternities that practiced martial arts and contested with each other for preeminence. Some were literal secret societies or private armies, founded by mystical *sifus* chasing a vision of an earthly paradise. Today we'd refer to them as religious cults.<sup>12</sup> The elaborate, self-created social structures that evolved in this context still exist, in debased form, in the rituals and terminology of the gangster Triad societies, whose Kowloon capos refer to their milieu not as "this thing of ours" but as "the *jiang hu*."<sup>13</sup>

The tradition of martial democracy built into the concept of the *jiang hu* asserts that anyone who trains hard enough can achieve mastery: skill is acquired through hard work, not from a natural endowment. Training is the great equalizer, enabling a smaller and physically weaker person to defeat a larger, stronger foe. This outcome can seem downright paradoxical to Americans, whose action icons tend to be beefy body-builders rather than nimble acrobats. In fact, when the Asian fighting arts first began to attract serious interest in the US, as American GIs returned from Asia after World War II, they were often dismissed as sneaky or unmanly, as inimical to two-fisted Yankee notions of a fair fight.<sup>14</sup>

From *THE 36TH CHAMBER OF SHAOLIN* to *THE KARATE KID* (not to mention *THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK*) the classic plot pattern of the normative kung fu movie pivots upon its training sequences. Typically, a young man who has been humiliatingly pummeled into a hang-dog downtrodden state, leaves his home ground to lick his wounds in the wilderness. There he acquires new combat skills from an eccentric and/or legendary *sifu*. In the final reel the transfigured neophyte, strengthened in body and spirit, brings it all back home to flatten his astonished enemies.<sup>15</sup>

In part because martial arts prowess is defined as a product of training and not brute strength, the Woman Warrior has been a central figure in these stories right from the beginning. There are several even in *The Water Margin*, inspired perhaps by the legends that had grown up around historical figures like General Mu Lan. In movies the tradition has been

<sup>6</sup> This moral baseline, which is delineated on page 17 as "The Code of the *Xia*," provides the underlying frame of reference even for *wuxia* anti-heroes, like the hired killer played by Zhong Hua in Chu Yuan's *KILLER CLANS*, who sells his skills to the highest bidder.

<sup>7</sup> Bey Logan, *Hong Kong Action Cinema* (London: Titan Books, 1995), p. 186. One implication is that the catch phrase "Your kung fu is the best" is often used quite correctly even in contexts that have nothing to do with the martial arts. The expression absorbed a fitting *jiang hu*-like resonance from its association with the computer hacker underground when it was popularized on *THE X-FILES*.

<sup>8</sup> A classic expression of the debate is Lau Kar-leung's Shaw Brothers epic *LEGENDARY WEAPONS OF CHINA* (*SHIBA BAN WUYI*, 1982), which dramatizes a split in the martial world, in the Boxer era, between an old guard that clings to the folk belief in invulnerability, and a breakaway faction of "modernists" who reject it as a suicidal superstition. The story seems designed to lend a mythic resonance to Lau's own strong preference for authentic rather than fanciful martial arts sequences in movies.

<sup>9</sup> When a long series of B movies about Wong Fei-hung was launched in the late 1940s, the stated intention was to depict authentic, practical (and specifically Cantonese) fighting styles on the screen for the first time. See interview with series creator Wu Pang in *The Making of Martial Arts Films—As Told by Filmmakers and Stars*, ed. Winnie Fu, et al. (Hong Kong Film Archive, 1999), p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> See Ng Ho, "When the Legends Die: A Survey of the Tradition of the Southern Shaolin Monastery," in *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film* (4th Hong Kong International Film Festival/Urban Council, 1980), p. 56.

<sup>11</sup> It makes perfect sense that the best short description I've found of the *jiang hu* and its inhabitants is on the website for a shared-world role-playing game called *Once Upon a Time in China*. See <http://www.heroic-cinema.com/eric/>.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Holcombe, "Theater of Combat: A Critical Look at the Chinese Martial Arts," *Historian*, 52, No. 3, (May 1990), 411-431.

<sup>13</sup> "The *wuxia* idea of *jiang hu* has been used in many allegorical ways...the film industry is one such *jiang hu*, a world that often operates on its own rules and from which powerful influences are generated." Sam Ho, Intro., ed., *The Swordsman and His Jiang Hu: Tsui Hark and Hong Kong Film* (Hong Kong Film Archive, 2002), p. viii.

<sup>14</sup> Desser, pp. 27-28.

<sup>15</sup> As Bérénice Reynaud observes on p. 20, it's a telling lacuna in the conventions of the genre that the Woman Warrior's training process is almost never depicted.

reinforced by the cross-dressing performance conventions of Chinese opera.<sup>16</sup> Performers such as Xuan Jinglin and Qin Xi'ang (the grandmother of current kung fu superstar Sammo Hung) were major *xia nü* ("female knights-errant") of the silent era, paving the way for such latter-day action icons as Connie Chan Po-chu and Siao Fong-fong in the '60s, Zheng Peipei (Cheng Pei-pei), Xu Feng and Angela Mao Ying in the '70s, and Michelle Yeoh in the '90s and beyond.

As it happens, one of the genre's most memorable expressions of the efficacy of training was uttered by one of its supreme villains, Sek Kin's steel-clawed Han in ENTER THE DRAGON (1973): "We are unique, in that we create ourselves. Through long years of training, sacrifice, denial, and pain, we forge our bodies in the fire of our will." For the most part the moral code built into the genre (that is, The Code of the *Xia*, which mandates using power for good and to protect the underdog) serves to mitigate what could be called the "fascist potential" of its emphasis on the use of force.<sup>17</sup> This does manifest itself regularly, however, at the visual level.

Like all action movies, martial arts films fetishize the implements and the emblems of power: muscles and weapons.<sup>18</sup> Both tend to be displayed with a particular sense of engorged urgency in the moments just *before* a fight, in anticipation of the testing conflict to come. Canny directors, and some performers, too, have understood that these display rituals could be capitalized on to produce additional crowd-pleasing effects upon certain segments of the audience.<sup>19</sup> For many decades, of course, it was only the male physique that could be so displayed. Cantonese *wuxia* films of the '50s are almost as straight-laced as American B Westerns, and their Woman Warriors (even when they aren't actually actresses playing male roles or female characters impersonating men) tend to be sexless tomboys who stay demurely bundled up. Only the slimy bad guys in an old school *wuxia* film would ever look at a martial sister "that way."<sup>20</sup> Even when the unwritten Shaw Brothers production code began to loosen up in the late '70s, so that the female form could be undraped and displayed as a visual attraction (as in the films of Chu Yuan [Chor Yuen]), this ploy was rarely attempted in a martial context—except in the special sense that in the hidebound masculine world-view of these movies a beautiful and ambitious woman can always be counted on to use her endowments as weapons, the way The Shadow used his psychic skills: to cloud men's minds.<sup>21</sup>

The martial arts may seem a tad impractical, however, for purposes of everyday self-defense: It can take up to ten years to fully master traditional Shaolin-style kung fu. (The wide-legged crouch of the Horse Stance looks like a hernia waiting to happen.) This grueling training process is depicted in many martial arts films with a fierce attention to

detail that can seem obsessive. But we should bear in mind that in the Chinese martial arts tradition the habits of discipline and endurance that are acquired in the process are seen as ends in themselves: Reflecting its monastic roots, it has a spiritual dimension somewhat more profound than the fortune cookie version peddled by David Carradine in the '70s television series KUNG FU.

In *wuxia* films the degree of mastery that can be acquired through training takes off from the ex-urban legends of the *jiang hu* into a realm that to many westerners looks frankly supernatural. But in Chinese folklore the line between the natural and the supernatural is not always easy to draw. As Sam Ho notes here, the paragons of the increasingly ingrown and fantastic martial arts novels of the 19th and early 20th centuries were prodigies of self-discipline who acquired an array of powers known collectively as *qing gong* ("lightfooted kung fu"), shooting bolts of fire from their palms and leaping tall buildings in a single bound. The forces they harness, in other words, are clearly seen as natural rather than supernatural phenomena. In fact, these fantasy elements were elaborations of a body of folk beliefs collectively known as *shen gong* ("spirit kung fu"), the superstitions that led the insurgents of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 to believe that they could safely face British rifles unarmed and bare-chested.

How much do you actually need to know about the martial arts to fully appreciate a good martial arts movie? Just enough, perhaps, to read the visual clues that indicate where a given fighter stands in terms of some very broad distinctions. The ones that crop up again and again are the split between Northern styles and Southern, and between the inner disciplines and outer ones. Roughly speaking, the Northern, Daoist, Wudang-based styles emphasize the husbanding of inner forces, while the Southern, Buddhist, Shaolin styles concentrate on physical prowess and endurance. Thus the soft Northern styles favor broad, sweeping dance-like movements, while the hard Southern styles concentrate on short fast punches. (Bruce Lee was a key exponent of the shorter-harder-faster Southern style known as *Wing Chun* [*Yong Chun*], named after the nun who is said to have originated it.<sup>22</sup>)

There are implications galore in these distinctions. *Wuxia* stories, for example, tend to be oriented toward the Northern Wudang school, concentrating on feats associated with the marshaling of inner forces, like "weightless leaps" and palm power. Li Mubai in CROUCHING TIGER is specifically identified as a follower of Wudang. The kung fu subgenre, on the other hand, tends to be dominated by the Southern Shaolin style, with its emphasis on sheer grueling physical ordeals. On that level it makes perfect sense that the proponents of the so-called "new school" of martial arts films, which swept the Hong Kong industry in the '70s, tended to be

<sup>16</sup>As Stephen Teo notes on page 24, Zhang Che's VENGEANCE! (*BAOCHOU*, 1973), which is set partly in the opera world, is one of the few classic martial arts pictures that alludes explicitly to the relationship between stylized movie fight choreography and stage techniques. (Sammo Hung's THE PRODIGAL SON [*BAI GA CHAI/BAI JIA ZAI*, 1981] is another.)

<sup>17</sup>"With great power comes great responsibility," Peter Parker, 2002.

<sup>18</sup>Action movies are, by and large, male power fantasies. Someone (I wish I could remember who) referred to them as "the dreams of the powerless," a resonant idea considering their perennial popularity in the Third World and in the Inner Cities. In terms of conventional psychoanalytic categories, in other words, their inclinations are more likely to be sadistic than masochistic.

<sup>19</sup>"The shirtless stars of Shaw Brothers' kung fu epics filled movie palaces around the world," suggests critic Karen Tarapata in *Hollywood East*. "Men may come for the mayhem, but the ladies come to see the boys." (BLOOD BROTHERS' star Di Long [Ti Lung] tops Tarapata's list of "Shaws Throbs.") The shoe on the other foot is dropped in gay filmmaker Stanley Kwan Kam-pang's landmark documentary YANG+YIN: GENDER IN CHINESE CINEMA (*NANSHENG NUXIANG*, Channel 4, UK, 1995).

<sup>20</sup>In an interview included in the recent Celestial/Intercontinental (HK) DVD release of COME DRINK WITH ME, actress Zheng Peipei acknowledges that it was a bold step for her in 1966 to pull open her tunic even a discreet fraction of an inch, so that co-star Yue Hua could "suck out the poison."

<sup>21</sup>The acceptance of "cross-dressing" in martial arts films does not extend to the spectacle of male actors playing, or even male characters impersonating women, except in the occasional comic drag sequence. While there is a long tradition on the opera stage of males who play female roles exclusively (a profession honorably represented by Lam Ching-ying in THE PRODIGAL SON), and while some such specialists were extremely popular in film adaptations of Cantonese operas in the 1950s and '60s, the largely male audience for *wuxia* and kung fu movies was never asked to overcome its discomfort to that extent.

<sup>22</sup>According to historian Jean Chesneaux, the secret societies of the real-world *jiang hu* also split into camps along regional/spiritual lines: "[T]he *chiao-men* ('sects') [are] more concerned with religion or superstition...the *hui-t'ang* ('lodges') [are] more politicized...The sects [are seen] as more characteristic of North China, the lodges of South China....It is generally agreed that by the mid-nineteenth century China's secret societies were organized in two large systems. The Northern or White Lotus system [and the] Southern or Triad system..." Jean Chesneaux, ed., "Secret Societies in China's Historical Evolution," *Popular Movements and Secret Societies in China: 1940-1950*, (Stanford UP, 1972), pp. 4-5.

Southerners, and that it was only at that point that stories based upon the legends of Shaolin began to proliferate, with Lau's 36TH CHAMBER as the prototype. It is also no accident that these were also the films that finally sidelined the Woman Warrior, who had played a noble co-paragon role in the movies of the old school. The *qi*, apparently, is more democratic than the bicep.<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand it is entirely possible to know too much, to the point that a fixation upon authenticity for its own sake becomes a distraction—as in the famous case of the lifelong New Yorker who “gets thrown out of the movie” if a character travels on the IRT between stations that are not actually connected. Those who regard themselves as martial purists insist that the depictions of particular fighting styles must always be as accurate as possible, and reflexively reject any film that incorporates “wire work” or special effects, or in which the performers have no real martial arts training. The success of CROUCHING TIGER, however, indicates that for mainstream audiences this sort of martial fundamentalism has little resonance.

Then too, *wuxia* stories on both page and screen have always deployed widely varying degrees of realism, as you will see if you stay with this series from start to finish. Some of these films (like ESCORTS OVER TIGER HILLS [HUSHAN HANG, 1969] and FROM THE HIGHWAY [LUKE YU DAOKE, 1970]) hew close to the underlying historical *jiang hu* realities of bandits, rebels and bodyguards. Others (like THE SIX-FINGERED LORD OF THE LUTE [LOKE CHI KAM MOH/LIU ZHI QIN MO, 1965] and Tsui Hark's ZU: WARRIORS FROM THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN [SAN SOOK SAN KIM HAP/XIN SHUSHAN JIANXIA, 1983] are full-bore old school fantasies populated entirely by rival clans of airborne super-swordsmen and women.

And as is often the case in creative endeavors, the richest specimens are those that mix elements freely. Stephen Teo notes here that even the archetypal “new style” *wuxia* film, King Hu's COME DRINK WITH ME [DAI ZUI XIA, 1966], relishes the shock value of introducing old-school magical fighters into a carefully established context of realistic swordplay modeled (in part) on Japanese samurai films.<sup>24</sup> And Chu Yuan, in his adaptations from the hard-boiled *wuxia* novels of Gu Long, such as KILLER CLANS [LIUXING HUDIE JIAN, 1976], adopts a wised-up, downright cynical view of the human motivations of his heroes. But Chu also sets his stories in the heart of the mythical *jiang hu* at its most efflorescent, embellishing it with multi-plane layers of flowers and silks and gilded furnishings, in gorgeous images that look like Maxfield Parrish paintings come to life. (The women in the Gu-Chu films, though often relegated to behind-the-scenes roles as amoral schemers, are also lavishly displayed *en déshabillé*, their undraped bodies employed, in effect, as additional elements of his luxuriant décor.)

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<sup>23</sup> Many films depict a long-running bitter feud between the followers of Wudang and Shaolin. Song Dynasty scholar Zhang Sanfeng, a student at Shaolin, supposedly left the Temple around 1000 AD to found a school of his own, at Wudang Mountain in Hubei province. There he created the inner Northern style *par excellence*, *taiji*. The name “Wudang” means “what the martial arts should be,” which understandably irked some Shaolin loyalists, who blamed Wudang informers for the burning of the Temple. An unusual depiction of the relationship is Lau Kar-fai's (Gordon Liu Jiahui's) SHAOLIN VS. WUDANG [SHAOLIN YU WUDANG, 1981], which strikes a conciliatory note: a corrupt Qing Dynasty official foments conflict between the schools, until the best Shaolin and Wudang fighters team up to shut him down. See Ng Ho, “When Legends Die,” in *Martial Arts Films*, pp. 60-61; additional information from Craig D. Reid.

<sup>24</sup> It was the alarming popularity of imported samurai movies in Hong Kong in the early 1960s, especially those in which Katsu Shintaro portrayed Zatoichi the Blind Swordsman, that prompted Shaw Brothers to launch its so-called “new school” of grittier, bloodier *wuxia* movies. The tavern scene in COME DRINK WITH ME is clearly modeled on many similar trademark episodes in the Zatoichi canon, and the disabled warrior played by Wang Yu in Zhang Che's ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN [DUBI DAO, 1967] owes his existence partly to Ichi's example. Katsu and Wang faced off in person a few years later in the Hong Kong/Japanese co-production ZATOICHI MEETS HIS EQUAL [ZATOICHI YABURE! TOJIN-KEN, dir. Yasuda Kimiyoshi, 1971].

Even CROUCHING TIGER is a mixed specimen. The *ma ze* (mounted bandit) character played by Zhang Zheng, and Michelle Yeoh's Yu Shulian, the professional *biao shi* (security escort/bodyguard), are staple figures of the down-to-earth school. Yet its heroes can also take off and fly when the need arises. Even here, though, the fantasy elements are not unadulterated. “I was trying to express the magical characteristics of *shenguai* (“gods and demons”) *wuxia*,” said the film's martial arts coordinator, Yuen Wo-ping. “[But] I still tried to incorporate some realistic touches, so that the people were not just flying through the air. They can leap high, but they always have some kind of springboard on the ground.”<sup>25</sup>

Like all the great film genres the martial arts movie is a commodious vessel into which any number of personal styles, attitudes and philosophies can be poured. In fact, the genre's almost limitless flexibility is what has kept it current and enduringly popular for over 50 years, adapting effortlessly to sweeping changes in its demographic. Heroes who were staunch Confucian conservatives in the '50s became youthful rebels in the '60s, satirical cut-ups in the '80s, alienated loners in the '90s. And the very best martial arts films, like those of King Hu and Chu Yuan, transcend every finicky distinction between *wuxia* and kung fu, the fantastic and the down-to-earth. What they seem to be hinting at is a form of *moral* superiority that shines forth in combat as perfection of style. Not just the power but the elegance and beauty of the movements become values to be pursued for their own sake, and they can remain splendid even in defeat.

Movies that celebrate these qualities in their characters while neglecting them on the level of film-craft lose all credibility. But in the hands of a master the heroic grace of great filmmaking tells its own story. It amounts to an additional demonstration of the proposition that a skill acquired through long practice is, if not a virtue in its own right, then certainly the product of a virtue. It is at once the end product and the ultimate expression of the discipline and the strength of character that were called upon to achieve it. The martial arts movie is, in other words, both fundamentally populist and irremediably elitist. It celebrates the triumph not of the fittest or the strongest, but of the most excellent.

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*Thanks to Cheng-Sim Lim, Stephen Teo and Craig D. Reid, for advice and correction. Your kung fu is the best.*

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in David Chute, “Martial Artist: Yuen Wo-Ping, action cinema's puppet master,” *LA Weekly*, Dec. 15-21, 2000. According to actress Michelle Yeoh, even the characters' varying degrees of buoyancy have dramatic significance in CROUCHING TIGER: “Why is it that some people can fly through the sky and some people are always grounded and will never reach that level? Even in our flying we express the different stages of enlightenment. Li Mubai [Chow Yun-fat] is the one who flies the easiest and the fastest. He has gotten to the stage where he is almost enlightened. He has freed himself as much as he can from all worldly ties. Whereas my character [Yu Shulian], whenever I sort of flew I always had to bounce off the walls or the rooftops, because I was more burdened by responsibilities to family and to society. I was the more grounded person.” Quoted in David Chute, “The Year of the Tiger,” *Premiere*, Dec. 2000.

# HOW TO WATCH A MARTIAL ARTS MOVIE

by DAVID BORDWELL

Like childhood, this world is a bright, hard-edged phantasmagoria. Swordsmen—and swordswomen—leap, somersault and fly. Lightning bolts fly from their fingertips, and they can leave the impression of their palms on boulders. Other warriors fight unarmed, muscles oiled and bulging. Everyone looks exactly like what they are: virtue itself, incarnated as impossibly handsome heroes and stunning heroines, or as hearty elders who serve as teachers and guardians. Their paths are strewn with witches and wizards, treacherous princes and humble monks. There are buckteeth and hairy warts, and men with white eyebrows like coiled ropes. The cowards scuttle and hug the earth; the brave stalk ramrod stiff, greeting one another by raising one fist and holding the other hand flat against it in a gesture of—well, not always genuine greeting but at least respect, sometimes just bullying.

This world has a dreamlike obsessiveness not just for us, but also for its inhabitants. They are compelled to right wrongs, or to achieve vengeance; they are relentless moral beings. No less implacable, though, is their urge to center their *qi*—life-energy—through excellence in the martial arts. Every motive, every family or professional tie, nearly every human emotion is fired in the crucible of *wushu*, or fighting ability. For western analogies, we must go back beyond Christianity to ancient Greece: at the core of this world lie martial virtues like strength,

courage, cleverness, loyalty, and merciless retribution. Yet not even the Greeks insisted that every human relationship find its expression in punches, kicks, dodges, leaps, or thrusts with a weapon.

Cultural historians will point out that this world was precipitated out of centuries of Chinese culture. From Confucianism comes the respect of younger for elder, subordinate for sovereign, woman for man, *along with* all the obligations which weigh upon the characters. From Buddhism comes the cultivation of spiritual purity through rigorous disciplining of the body. From Daoism comes a recognition of the essential mixedness of all things. From China's unhappy history comes a bone-deep suspicion of all rulers but also a faith in the outlaw fighter, who can bring rough justice to a world pervaded by greed and hypocrisy. And from Chinese popular culture pours a wealth of written tales and theatrical traditions which have streamlined, exaggerated and mythified the national heritage.

Chinese popular cinema is a noisy, vulgar version of these images and ideas. And no version of that cinema is more extreme than the martial arts films which came to prominence in Hong Kong after World War II, especially from the mid-1960s onward. To reap the rewards of that cinema, the viewer must first accept, or at least tolerate, some of the most shameless assaults on taste yet contrived by any film industry. We must take for granted overacting, along with bad teeth, bad skin and bad fake hair. We have to live with music cues stolen from other movies. (For some reason the Max Steiner score for the 1933 KING KONG became a favorite musical fallback at Shaw Brothers in the 1980s.) We must accept that any movement of arms or swords through air creates a fearsome whoosh, and that any punch or kick sounds like kindling being split. We must get used to geysers of blood, hurried decapitations and amputations. We must not be over-shocked by grotesquerie and deformity, all treated with a casual callousness that might give pause to Buñuel. Again we are in a world echoing childhood: playground morality meets our fascination with the frailties of the flesh. Both exalting and mocking the body in extremis, Hong Kong presented the most nakedly carnal cinema the world had yet seen.

The single-minded pursuit of sensation drove this cinema to unique cinematic accomplishments. At their best, these films have made powerful contributions to the art and craft of moviemaking. From the 1960s through the 1980s Hong Kong filmmakers invented a new range of vivid cinematic forms and carried them off boldly. But to appreciate this cinema as a "martial art," we need to adjust our mental framelines.

## PLOT AS A CANTONESE MEAL

Although the most ambitious swordplay films of the 1960s often present fairly complicated tales of quest or military intrigue, the kung fu films of the next decades offered something more casual and episodic. The Hong Kong critic Li Cheuk-to compares these later films to Cantonese cuisine: the cook confidently mixes a variety of ingredients into a single dish, letting each one retain its identity.

It's as if directors began to realize that the fights were the film's *raison d'être* (especially for overseas audiences) and that several were necessary to hold the audience's interest. Whereas a COME DRINK WITH ME (*DAI ZUI XIA*, King Hu, 1966) could hold the audience's attention with smoldering intrigue, most filmmakers felt that overt action was the key. This called for a new approach to plot architecture. First, combat would need to be arranged on a continuum: Salt several varied fight sequences through the movie, varying them in intricacy and emotional intensity. The climactic fight might take as long as 10 or 15 minutes, providing a

wholly engaging, if exhausting wrap-up to the action. So now the problem was: How to motivate more and varied fights?

Well, you could survey a range of fighting tactics. The plot could bring in fighters adept in varying weaponry or techniques. This allowed martial arts choreographers, themselves typically aware of alternative traditions, to freshen up their presentation. The 1970s kung fu films became repositories of a huge number of (cinematically spruced-up) combat styles, from southern Chinese *Wing Chun* (*Yong Chun*) to Korean *Hapkido*. Lau Kar-leung (Liu Jialiang) surveyed the whole vocabulary of Asian martial arts. A single Lau film can explore one tradition in depth, as in the "rooftop kung fu" variants on pole-fighting that enliven RETURN TO THE 36TH CHAMBER (*SHAOLIN DAPENG DASHI*, 1980). He juxtaposes Japanese and Chinese styles in SHAOLIN CHALLENGES NINJA (*ZHONGHUA ZHANGFU*, 1978), while the climax of LEGENDARY WEAPONS OF CHINA (*SHIBA BAN WUYI*, 1982) features a virtuoso display of techniques with swords, halberds, maces, and other heavy armaments—18 weapons in all! This all-out assault was borrowed in the final reels of Ang Lee's CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON (*WO HU CANG LONG*, 2000), when Yu Shulian (Michelle Yeoh) tries out an array of weaponry against the pilfered Green Destiny Sword wielded by Jen (Zhang Ziyi).

Introducing a range of styles or weapons could thus fill out the number of fights; another, not unconnected, tactic was to create a hierarchy of opponents. Bruce Lee taught kung fu filmmakers the need for a range of villains to pad out the plot. Otherwise our invincible hero would advance straight to the big boss, wipe him out, and the movie would be over. So while the hero often has several allies, some of whom will be conveniently killed, the main opponent may also have a posse of subordinates, trained in a variety of styles. The protagonist will often have to work his or her way up the chain of command, dealing with each figure in turn. Of course one could also multiply heroes, a strategy to which both King Hu and Zhang Che (Chang Cheh) were drawn. With every new protagonist came the display of new fighting skills and one-off encounters with villains. Hu's fighting brigade in DRAGON INN (*LONGMEN KEZHAN*, 1968) represented a complementary balance of skills and shortcomings; here even sets and costumes seem designed to highlight complementary and conflicting aspects of each skirmish. Zhang was fascinated by bonded pairs of heroes, but he expanded the cast to include three in BLOOD BROTHERS (*CI MA*, 1973): As the friendship among his fighters is corroded by ambition, adultery, and revenge, the plot encourages a range of thrilling fights. Zhang carried this ruthless multiplication even further in his ensemble-based FIVE VENOMS (*WU DU*) films.

Even if the plot sticks with a single protagonist, he or she may still be unfinished—a youngster with promising talent but lacking in skill. The apprentice plot which results allows for a variety of combat sequences, particularly between masters and bullies, and montages of training sessions can keep the action moving. An early prototype was Zhang's ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN (*DUBI DAO*, 1967), in which the maimed hero must agonizingly retrain himself. THE 36TH CHAMBER OF SHAOLIN (*SHAOLIN SANSHILIU FANG*, 1978) makes grueling training central to the plot, while the last third of Sammo Hung's THE PRODIGAL SON (*BAI GA CHAI/BAIJIA ZAI*, 1981) plays out a slapstick variant of the apprentice plot, with the young hero (Yuan Biao) hampered by an arm-cast and the rivalry of two *Wing Chun* masters.

More generally, the milieu of a martial-arts school permits many plot expansions. If the action revolves around the Confucian hierarchy of a school, with its echelons of masters and disciples, the conflict may spring from jealousy and mistrust among students, as in ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN. The school also yields the hierarchy of villainy and range of

fighting arts, which allows for extended action scenes. For instance, the school can be pitted against a rival school advocating a different style, as in the earliest US kung fu imports such as *FIVE FINGERS OF DEATH* (*TIAN XIA DI YI QUAN*, 1971) and Bruce Lee's *THE CHINESE CONNECTION* (a.k.a. *FIST OF FURY/JINGWU MEN*, 1972).

The 1970s also brings one of the most characteristic strategies for stretching out the story—the insertion of comic interludes. While King Hu's and Zhang Che's 1960s masterworks benefit from a fairly unified tone, the arrival of comic kung fu in the mid-1970s seems to have invited filmmakers to plug in facetious moments. Often these are just tiresome, but sometimes they create a forceful counterpoint. *LEGENDARY WEAPONS OF CHINA* centers on the Boxer Rebellion and secret societies longing to create an invulnerable kung fu, but a farcical interlude with fake intestines and voodoo-like dolls makes fun of the Boxers' blindness and obedience to their masters. Often one film can comically invert another, as when in *RETURN TO THE 36TH CHAMBER*, Lau Kar-fai (Gordon Liu Jiahui) parodies the steely training regimen set forth in the earlier film.

By mixing and matching heroes, villains, fighting traditions, master/student relationships, and contrary tones, martial arts moviemakers arrived at what we might call an "additive" conception of plot. Episodes and off-center incidents casually fill out the overall structure. Characters come and go, new villains may be introduced fairly late, chance meetings may provoke fights or inspiration (e.g., the discovery of a combat technique by noticing an animal's predatory strategies). By the standards of western plotting (a three-act structure, with carefully planted foreshadowings and tight scene linkages), martial arts movies look fairly ramshackle. But across world history, this approach may be far more common than the Aristotelian model. Accretive, episodic storytelling harks back to folk literature in many cultures. "This, and therefore that" is replaced by "This...and then that...and then that."

Simple as they are, these storytelling ingredients can be combined in a virtually infinite number of ways. Consider Lau Kar-leung's *EXECUTIONERS FROM SHAOLIN* (*HONG XIGUAN*, 1977). The driving impetus for the plot is, as usual, vengeance: Hong Xiguan (Chen Guandai) must avenge himself on Bai Mei (Luo Lie), the white-eyebrow priest who burned the Shaolin Temple, killed Hong's master, and led to the death of Hong's best friend and Shaolin "blood brother." Although Hong marries and has a child, he nourishes the desire to defeat Bai Mei and practices to perfect his kung fu. There is a subsidiary villain as well, a corrupt official promoted thanks to Bai Mei's treachery. Individuals are distinguished less by psychology than by their adherence to a martial arts school. Hong's commitment to the Tiger Style is balanced by the expertise in the Crane Style displayed by his wife, Fang Yongchun, also known as Swan (Li Lili), which she urges him to master as well. Hong tries twice to kill Bai Mei, dying in the second attempt. In the meantime, the couple's son Wending (Wong Yu, not to be confused with *Wang* Yu of *ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN* fame) becomes a jaunty kung fu adept. Both his mother's and father's boy, he fluidly blends their styles and, with a few fillips of his own, avenges his father's death.

Spanning several years, *EXECUTIONERS FROM SHAOLIN* binds its scenes together with training sessions and comic skirmishes between husband and wife, father and son. There are also serio-comic motifs of a sometimes startling carnality. On their wedding night, Hong cannot consummate his marriage because for all his skill he cannot make Swan open her legs! Only when he finds her *qi*-governed weak points does she unlock her limbs. Later, Hong knows that Bai Mei's weak point is his crotch, and he attacks it vigorously—only to find his foot stuck deep there. (Bai Mei, it turns out, has mastered his *qi* to such an extent that he can shift his weak point from his crotch to his skull.) Still later, the son Wending

attacks Bai Mei's crotch once more, but this time he eludes the master's trap. Instead, he reverts to a trick he discovered as a child: leaping to his father's shoulders and locking his legs there for a free ride. Now surmounting Bai Mei, Wending can ride him relentlessly, slamming his temples and jabbing his eyes until the old villain stumbles forward. Dying, Bai Mei plunges down a steep flight of steps—the very staircase down which he had hurled Hong in an earlier bout. Such symmetries make revenge particularly sweet.

## FASCINATING RHYTHM

Cathay, Shaw Brothers and other companies sought to turn out films fast, and with tight budgets it was better to invest in sets and set pieces than in script development. Squeezed for time and money, proceeding intuitively, these filmmakers managed to add to the resources of world film language.

The fundamental materials, of course, are the athletic fighting styles on display, halfway between acrobatics and dance. One can relish these movies just for the choreography, as many film buffs sit through the plot *longueurs* of Fox musicals. But the most ambitious filmmakers went beyond simply recording martial arts stunts, creating something purely filmic by new approaches to cutting, framing and camera movement. The early WONG FEI-HUNG entries of the late 1940s and early '50s are of cultural interest, but they hardly represent strong filmmaking. By the time Shaw and Cathay launched their swordplay cycles in the mid-1960s, though, directors had begun creating a rich and bravura style.

Over the period of Hong Kong's rise, Hollywood was picking up its editing pace. A 1950s movie would average around 8-11 seconds per shot, but from the 1960s on, 7 seconds or less became common. Hong Kong martial arts filmmakers pushed the envelope much further. A slow-ish kung fu film of the 1970s would average 6 seconds per shot, while some directors—King Hu, the Shaw stable—took things down to 4 seconds or so. The films of Sammo Hung and Jackie Chan routinely averaged 2-3 seconds per shot, as did Tsui Hark's *ZU: WARRIORS FROM THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN* (*SAN SOOK SAN KIM HAP/XIN SHUSHAN JIANXIA*, 1983) and the gunplay sagas of John Woo.

Today's Hollywood directors also cut swiftly, but the similar shot totals disguise some basic differences of approach. A rapidly edited passage in a US action film of the 1990s looks mostly unintelligible, the rapid cutting making it hard to discern what's going on. Hong Kong editing triumphed through its commitment to legibility, making the key components of the action carry over clearly from shot to shot. Not that some things aren't faked. (It's hard to make a punchee fly 20 feet without some fudging.) Rather, the action is reduced to simple elements—a single vector of action, a bold jab of color, even just the twist of a neck or a face popping up from the bottom frameline—that allow the spectator's eye to track a continuous, pulsating pattern of movement. "Pulsating" is the key term here, because along with the simplicity of pictorial design comes a staccato rhythmic pattern which not only clarifies the action but *exhilarates* the viewer.

Two approaches emerged. The older generation learned to stage and cut action around rhythmically articulated long shots. The traditions of martial arts and theatrical performance broke the action into percussive bursts followed by fractional seconds of stasis. After a punch, a pause; after a leg lashes out, a moment of equilibrium. Conventional wisdom held that you couldn't cut long shots fast; there was too much information in them. But the great choreographers such as Han Yingjie (in his

Films with King Hu) and Lau Kar-leung (working with Zhang Che before launching his own career as a director) developed long shots which cut smoothly together through exact control of what was pictorially salient at each moment: one or two bodies thrusting or flipping across the widescreen frame. The much-maligned zoom lens played a crucial role in this long-shot strategy, not only picking out the most salient action, but also lending its own rhythm to redouble that of the figures. The shot can start with a rapid zoom back, echoing the first whoosh of action, or the zoom can punch in and out, reinforcing the action's rhythm.

The opening test of strength between Hong (David Jiang Dawei/ David Chiang) and Ma (Di Long/Ti Lung) in *BLOOD BROTHERS* can stand as a stripped-down model of the full-shot approach, which Zhang Che refined across a dozen years. The same principles rule *LAST HURRAH FOR CHIVALRY* (*HAO XIA*, 1979), the work of Zhang's assistant and pupil John Woo. Look, for example, at the six-minute combat between Zhang (Wai Pak) and Pray (Fung Hak-on), in which 75 shots render each thrust and blow utterly intelligible, the whole sequence but a warm-up for the two grueling battles in the finale—which reveals the fearsome Pak as only a subsidiary villain after all. The Hong Kong martial arts style was far from uniform, however: against Zhang's no-frills pan-and-zoom fights stands the pictorially dense, almost decorative imagery to be found in *KILLER CLANS* (*LIXING HUOIE JIAN*, 1976) and other Chu Yuan (Chor Yuen) works.

A younger generation of choreographers began to explore a more "precisionist" approach to staging and cutting combat. Here the action is built out of many more detail shots—a face, a body part, a weapon lashing out—and the rhythm comes not only from the figures' action but also from a barrage of hyper-composed details, which we assemble into an integrated action. This became the dominant style of Woo's 1980s Triad Films, Tsui's *PEKING OPERA BLUES* (*DI MA DAN/DAO MA DAN*, 1986), and Ching Siu-tung's *A CHINESE GHOST STORY* (*SIN LUI YAO WAN/QIANNÜ YOUHUN*, 1987). The fights in the gangster's lair at the close of Corey Yuen Kwai's *YES, MADAM!* (*WONG GA BAI CHE/HUANGJIA SHIJIE*, 1985) perfectly illustrate this approach, with Michelle Yeoh's dodges and feints captured in a flurry of fight, exactly-judged setups. And skillful choreographer-directors like Jackie Chan fused the two approaches; the climactic mall fight of *POLICE STORY* (*GING CHAT GOO SI/JINGCHA GUSHI*, 1985) superbly balances full-shot choreography with passages built out of precise details.



Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3



Fig.4



Fig.5

One of the pioneers of rapid editing and rhythmic staging was King Hu, who perhaps best exemplifies the range of experimentation available in this kinetic genre. He was famous as a fast cutter (once boasting of making China's first eight-frame cut), but just as important was his powerful awareness of screen space. Allowing his choreographer Han Yingjie to model his fights on Chinese opera rather than real kung fu, he experimented with unnerving, almost subliminal spatial effects. In the stupendously inventive *DRAGON INN*, as the woman Zhu (Polly Shangguan Lingfeng) fights with an adversary outside the inn, the camera tracks back to catch the crumbling edge of a wall; she may seem to be trapped (Fig. 1). A quarter of a second (that is, six frames) before the cut, a dim

shape pops up at the wall, and Chu starts to stab it (Fig. 2). Cut to a disorienting extreme long shot in which her attacker is already recoiling in agony (Fig. 3). The attack and the response are over before we have fully registered them. No less bold is the moment when the fleeing Mao (played by choreographer Han Yingjie) ducks behind a wall in long shot (Fig. 4) and appears at another end of it instantly, leaping up to the inn balcony (Fig. 5). Not only does the wall hide the mini-trampoline, but (allowing for the use of a double) it suggests that Mao commands an otherworldly speed. Hu's films are full of such ingenious spatial twists, driving home the agility and resourcefulness of his fighters.

For many young viewers today, the swordplay and kung fu films of Hong Kong's Golden Age are less immediately accessible than the gunplay dramas and supernatural fantasies of the 1980s and '90s. The suavity of Chow Yun-fat may seem more appealing than the self-torment of *ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN*. And the 1960s and '70s movies may seem embarrassingly rooted in crude conventions and local limits of budget, time, taste, and imagination. In fact, though, the crime and costume sagas owe everything to these strange and wondrous creations. Here we find stories which are refreshingly baggy, full of unexpected turns and returns. Here protagonists are defined through their obsessive pursuit of moral and professional achievement. And here we encounter a cinematic technique aiming to carry the characters' percussive energy down into the fibers of our bodies. These films, cranked out by directors almost completely unaware of experimental cinema, made a revolution in the way movies work, and work upon us.

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# FROM PAGE TO SCREEN: A BRIEF HISTORY OF *WUXIA* FICTION

by SAM HO

**“*Wuxia* novels are *wu* plus *xia* plus novels.”**

—Martial arts novelist and screenwriter Ni Kuang<sup>1</sup>

For many Americans, the martial arts hero exists only as a badly dubbed acrobatic avenger on scratchy celluloid, or as a fast-moving blur on video. But for the Chinese, he is a figure deeply ingrained in the Chinese psyche.<sup>3</sup> He is our Robin Hood, our knight-errant, our *ronin* samurai, and our Westerner, all rolled into one. And he is over two thousand years old.

He first appeared in history around 400 BC<sup>4</sup> but truly entered the popular imagination more than a millennium later, in the ninth century. It was the late Tang Dynasty, a period of social and political chaos, and the martial arts hero filled an urgent need for courage and justice. Since then, he has never left, changing with the times (but not too much) and accumulating thick layers of implication. His exploits were recounted orally or sung for centuries before the first of them was written down, and he was celebrated in print for several centuries more before his stalwart image was first imprinted on celluloid, in 1925, in a silent film produced in Shanghai.

Simply put, the *xia* is a chivalrous hero who possesses the ability to fight, and the martial arts novel (*wuxia xiaoshuo*) is a story form that celebrates his exploits, though its exact point of origin is still a topic of debate. Claims have been made for works dating back to the third century BC, while some accounts favor the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907) or even the Qing (AD 1644-1911).<sup>5</sup> (That martial arts are featured in some very early stories was never in doubt; the bone of critical contention is which story form most closely fits the modern concept of the novel.)

First things first: The English phrase “martial arts” and the Chinese term “*wuxia*” are not synonymous—although “*wu*” does, in an odd sense, mean “martial.” The Chinese word *wu* is written by combining two other characters, *zhi* and *ge*, meaning “stop” and “fight,” respectively. In other words, the term is an oxymoron, suggesting that it takes fighting to put an end to fighting, a paradox that is central to the appeal of the *wuxia* form. The term *xia*, however, has nothing at all in common with the English “arts.” It can be loosely translated as “chivalrous hero,” although

**“It was a wonderful time, indulging in favors and revenge, love and hate.”**

—Martial arts novelist Gu Long on the milieu of *wuxia* fiction<sup>2</sup>

that meaning incorporates connotations that have accumulated over time.<sup>6</sup> Comprised of the words *ren* and *jia*, “person” and “armor”, it was used initially to refer simply to armed men, men who engaged in fighting.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, in early Chinese writing, martial artists are often referred to with disdain. A thinker of the Warring States period (403-221 BC) considered the *xia* one of “five vermin” infesting society, a renegade who “violate[s] prohibitions by force [*wu*].”<sup>8</sup> By about 90 BC, however, the *xia*’s stock had risen considerably: He was described by one of China’s first professional historians as “honest in words, effective in action, faithful in keeping promises, brave in offering his own life to free the righteous from bondage.”<sup>9</sup> Thereafter the *xia* was increasingly romanticized, in poetry, fiction and on the Chinese opera stage, before reaching the mythic position he occupies today, as the embodiment of China’s ideals of courage and personal honor.<sup>10</sup>

Among the early, pre-novelistic story forms, the episodic prose romances (*chuanqi*) of the late Tang Dynasty are of particular significance. Though not devoted entirely to martial adventures, they include many anecdotes of wandering “knights-errant” who uphold justice, thus integrating for the first time the fighting ability of the heroes with their altruistic nature, the *wu* with the *xia*. Romantic entanglements also figure prominently, when love interests develop alongside the heroic quests, or when martial dimensions are introduced into what are primarily love stories.

From character types to story situations, many of the *wuxia* novel’s conventions were already well established. The title character in the story *Just Swordsman*, for example, is a hired killer who, instead of car-

<sup>1</sup> Ni Kuang, *My Take on Jin Yong's Novels* (Hong Kong: Ming Publishing, 1997), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Liu Tianci, *Secret Scroll of Wuxia Scriptwriting*, (Hong Kong: Subculture Publishing, 1996), p. 126.

<sup>3</sup> Editor’s note: To avoid the awkward repetition of s/he or “he or she” throughout this essay, “he” is used here in the gender-neutral sense of the Chinese third-person pronoun “*ta*.”

<sup>4</sup> James J.Y. Liu, *The Chinese Knight-Errant* (University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> For ready references in English, see James J.Y. Liu; or Liu Damu, “From Chivalric Fiction to Martial Arts Film,” in *A Study of the Hong Kong Swordplay Film 1945-1980*, ed. Leong Mo-ling, rev. ed. (5th Hong Kong International Film Festival/Urban Council, 1981), pp. 47-62.

<sup>6</sup> Liu Tianci, *Wuxia Scriptwriting*, p. 126.

<sup>7</sup> The best known English translation of *xia* is probably “knight-errant”, from the James J.Y. Liu book where the word is transliterated as “hsia.” Liu in fact asked his readers to accept “knight-errant” as “a matter of convenience” because it’s “the least misleading of several possible translations.” (p. xii). Indeed, there is no English word that fully translates the concept of *xia*.

<sup>8</sup> Han Fei, *The Five Vermins*, quoted in Liu, p. 10. Han Fei was a Legalist thinker who had a low opinion of those who did not follow the letter of the law.

<sup>9</sup> Sima Qian, *Records of the Historiographer*, quoted in *Swordplay Film*, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that *wuxia* as an adjective has also assumed the additional meaning of “possessing the qualities of the *wuxia* ideal.”

rying out his mission to assassinate a righteous official, turns around and kills the villain who hired him, when he discovers the latter's ignominious designs. But the *chuanqi*'s most monumental contribution is perhaps the introduction of the "woman *xia*," the *xia nü*, into the popular imagination, the most notable being Nie Yinniang, Hong Xian and Xie Xiao'au, collectively known as the "Three Women *Xia* of Tang."<sup>11</sup>

It is fascinating to watch the various elements of the modern *wuxia* story being added to the mixture over the years. Another important contribution of the Tang prose romances, for example, is the introduction of elements of fantasy, inspired by the *shenguai* ("gods and demons") literature that was popular in the earlier Six Dynasties period (AD 222-589), such as the aptly titled *Chronicles of Searching for Gods* (*Sou Shen Ji*). Inspired by these examples, the *xia* began to flaunt supernatural powers: launching flying swords like projectiles, leaping from one locale to another miles away, or even turning inanimate objects into living beings, like animal dolls that come to life to fight other "animated" simulacra.

Liang Yusheng, one of the best-known modern *wuxia* novelists, maintains that the political instability of the Tang period contributed to the popularity of its *wuxia*-flavored prose romances, as both writers and readers sought refuge in escapist fiction.<sup>12</sup> As such, the historical circumstances of the Tang Dynasty were paralleled in the early republican era and in the years before and after World War II, two other periods of great upheaval in which the *wuxia* novel achieved remarkable breakthroughs in creativity and enjoyed tremendous popular support.

Throughout the many ups and downs of Chinese history, *wuxia* fiction has continued to thrive. A couple of milestones appeared in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644): the novels *The Water Margin* (*Shui Hu Chuan/All Men Are Brothers/Outlaws from the Marsh*) and *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* (*San Guo Yan Yi*). *The Water Margin* started out as embroidered oral legends inspired by vaguely remembered historical events. In the Yuan Dynasty (1280-1367), the stories were collected into a prose romance, written and revised by a series of known and unknown writers. By the Ming Dynasty, it had become a novel with hundreds of chapters, written in colloquial language that greatly enhanced its readability. *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* is actually more historical fiction than *wuxia* novel, but it was immensely popular and the three "blood brothers" at the center of the story cast the mold for chivalric relationships among men in future *wuxia* forms. Guan Yu, one of the "blood brothers," has become the god of martial artists, still worshipped today by cops and Triad members alike and featured frequently in John Woo's "hero films" as a symbol of chivalry.

*Wuxia* heroes became so popular that they were often introduced as supporting players in works in other genres. In the Qing Dynasty in the 17th century, popular fictions like the so-called *gong an* ("public cases") novels were detective stories about imperial magistrates such as Judge Di and Judge Bao, who enlisted posses of colorful *xia* as their assistants or enforcers. Many story situations that originated in these loosely structured works went on to become *wuxia* staples. *The Seven Heroes and the Five Gallants* (*Qixia Wuyi*, 1889), for example, is still nominally a Judge Bao detective story, but the emphasis is less on the magistrate's crime-solving abilities than on the chivalrous deeds and awesome heroics of his constables, who have become the central characters.<sup>13</sup> One of the novel's featured fighting forms is the striking of acu-pressure points to immobilize opponents, a much-imitated device that surfaced recently in Ang Lee's *CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON* (*WO HU CANG LONG*, 2000), when Bo, the security chief, is frozen in mid-fight by Zheng Peipei's (Cheng Pei-pe'i's) Jade Fox.

The martial hero has been a consistently popular fellow for tens of generations, but it was not until the early republican era, soon after the turn of the last century, that the *wuxia* novel truly came into its own as a genre of popular fiction in the modern sense, first of all with the introduction of the term itself. Ironically, the word used to designate this most Chinese of story forms was coined by Japanese novelists in the 19th century. Chinese scholars living in Japan borrowed this usage for their own critical writing, introducing it into the Chinese lexicon.<sup>14</sup> In spite of the form's deep roots, in other words, the very first "official" *wuxia* novel was published only in 1915, followed quickly by a host of others.<sup>15</sup>

Most of these stories featured similar plot constructions that were already firmly established genre conventions: revenge, rivalries between different martial arts schools and power struggles among clans, all animated by detailed descriptions of fighting styles. Unlike the early prose romances or the *gong an* detective stories, these works feature martial artists as their central characters exclusively, with the heroes embodying an altruistic ideal that manifests itself as an unwritten but rigid moral code. (See "The Code of the *Xia*" on page 17.) In other words, they are the *xia*. The villains, obviously, are those who violate that code, even when they possess the same fighting abilities as the heroes. The conflicts between these characters, therefore, can only be solved by the exercise of that fighting ability—in short, the *wu*.

Their martial ability as well as their noble natures set the *xia* apart from ordinary folks, somewhat literally. They interact in a parallel universe known as the *jiang hu*, governed by the *wuxia* code, in effect a set of rules separate from the laws of the land. The Chinese for *jiang hu* is "rivers and lakes," which indicates that though primarily a state of mind, it is anchored in the physical world. The domain of the martial artist is therefore a subculture, at once a part of the real world but also apart from it.

The genre soon became wildly popular. In addition to its headlong story appeal, readership was enhanced by two social factors. First, in response to a populist movement to promote literacy, the novels were written in the form of conversational Chinese known as *bai hua wen* ("plain speaking words"), as opposed to the scholarly *wen yan wen* ("literary words"). Also, newspapers had arrived on the scene and were competing fiercely. Many started carrying serial novels to build circulation, and one of the breakthrough works of this type was Xiang Kairan's *Legend of the Strange Hero* (*Jiang Hu Jixia Zhuan*), serialized in the early 1920s and published in book form in 1928. Combining the chivalrous adventure of the Tang prose romances with the fantastic imagination of the *gong an* detective stories, the story presents in 150 chapters an addictive hodgepodge of iconoclastic characters, serpentine plot twists and high-flying fights.

Witnessing the triumph of the *Strange Hero*, the entrepreneurs of a new entertainment medium decided to capitalize on his popularity, and the 1928 silent feature *BURNING OF THE RED LOTUS MONASTERY* (*HUOSHAO HONGLIAN SI*) became a huge box-office hit. *RED LOTUS* was not the first *wuxia* movie; *SWORDSWOMAN LI FEIFEI* (*WUXIA LI FEIFEI*, 1925) earned that distinction. But it was "the first attempt to adapt a popular *wuxia* novel onto the screen."<sup>16</sup> Though only a 20-minute fragment of *RED LOTUS* survives today, and very little at all is known about *LI FEIFEI* (the film is presumed lost), enough was written about *RED LOTUS* to give us a sense of what it must have been like to watch. The film concentrates on several chapters of the novel, telling the story of a fight for dominance among village power clans and martial arts schools. Archetypal

<sup>11</sup> Accounts in English of Nie and Hong's exploits can be found in James J.Y. Liu, pp. 89-91.

<sup>12</sup> Liang Yusheng, *A Collection of the Works of Fifty Wuxia Novelists of the Tang Dynasty* (San Yu Publishing Co., 1961); quoted in *Swordplay Film*, p. 47.

<sup>13</sup> A condensed English version of the novel, translated by Song Shouguan, was published in 1997 by Panda Books of Beijing.

<sup>14</sup> Ye Hongsheng, *The Art of Wuxia Fiction* (Taipei: Lian Jing Publishing, 1994), p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Ye, p. 13. In 1915, the story *Bo Meishi*, published in *Novels Panorama*, was described for the first time in history as a "*wuxia* novel."

<sup>16</sup> Kong Jialong, *Kong Jialong's Silver Screen Memoirs*, (Hong Kong: Cultural Book House, 1968), p. 156.

situations of the genre are already evident, such as the struggle between good and evil, the structure of putting the heroes through a series of increasingly fierce confrontations, and the characters' embodiment of the Three Confucian Virtues of Bravery, Intelligence and Charity. Action scenes also take on the fantastic dimension of the Tang novels, featuring such supernatural skills as flying daggers (in the form of "white light" painted on film stock), disappearing acts and earth-burrowing abilities.<sup>17</sup> Audiences were so enthusiastic that 18 sequels and dozens of imitations quickly followed.<sup>18</sup>

In the 1930s the genre made great strides in both creativity and popularity, facilitated by the emergence of a new class of professional writers. Most early *wuxia* novels were written by scholars who dabbled in period fiction as a hobby. But the practice of newspaper syndication created urgent demands for stories and attracted writers who either needed to make a living or could now afford to write full time.<sup>19</sup> Li Shoumin, for instance, began writing *Chivalrous Swordsmen of the Sichuan Mountains* (*Shushan Jianxia Chuan*) under the pen name Huanzhu Louzhu ("Master of the Pearl-Rimmed Tower"), for a newspaper in Tianjin in 1932.<sup>20</sup> But what he at first regarded as a potboiler developed chapter by chapter into an exemplary, epic work in the subgenre known as *shenguai wuxia*, a form resembling "sword and sorcery" heroic fantasy which can be traced back to the Six Dynasties era of the third to sixth centuries. In his landmark study *The Chinese Knight-Errant*, James J.Y. Liu offers a vivid description of Huanzhu Louzhu's novels: "The heroes and heroines... are swordsmen and swordswomen with magical powers: they can turn their swords into death rays and conceal them in their bodies... They can ride the air on these rays or on trained birds... They perform miracles and kill monsters... Many of them are Buddhist or Taoist [Daoist] priests, and the rest also tend to lead a life apart from ordinary men."<sup>21</sup>

China's three major schools of belief, Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism are simmered in Huanzhu Louzhu's melting pot, their essences interacting with the fighting ethos of *wu* and the chivalrous spirit of *xia* to produce a magic potion that nourished the genre for decades. Huanzhu Louzhu himself wrote a large number of sequels, prequels and spin-offs (this one-man franchise runs to 27 novels in more than a hundred volumes),<sup>22</sup> and many other writers imitated him blatantly: his florid emphasis on atmosphere, his extravagant leaps between the human world and the eyre of the god-like *xia*.<sup>23</sup> Through these tributes and imitations, many of Huanzhu Louzhu's innovations soon made their way onto the screen: Fights against monstrous creatures became a staple ingredient in Cantonese *wuxia* films of the 1950s and '60s, along with secret scrolls, magic potions, and cameo appearances by monks, nuns and wizard-like Daoists. The most celebrated direct adaptation of his work, Tsui Hark's *ZU: WARRIORS FROM THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN* (*SAN SOOK SAN KIM HAP/XIN SHUSHAN JIANXIA*, 1983), was nothing less than a milestone in Chinese cinema. The use of computer graphics to animate the original novel's blend of Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist thought with the *wuxia*

spirit updated the Chinese imagination by reconciling traditional beliefs with modern technology. It also strengthened the industrial base of Hong Kong cinema itself, contributing significantly to the industry's renaissance in the 1980s.<sup>24</sup>

Wang Dulu was another pivotal figure of the 1930s who began writing out of necessity. Born into a noble family fallen on hard times, and forced to turn out *wuxia* novels at a tremendous pace to make a living, Wang nevertheless brought so much intensity to the task that he had a lasting impact on the genre. In his literary temperament Wang was almost the polar opposite of the flamboyant Huanzhu Louzhu, downplaying elaborate martial exploits and flights of fantasy to focus instead on characters and drama—even melodrama. He devoted a lot of attention to the romantic side of the martial hero and to the social pressures on both the hero's love life and his martial practice. So heart-wrenching are the characters' loves, so noble are their chivalrous sacrifices that Wang came to be known as the founder of the "tragedy of chivalrous love" (*bei ju xia qing*) school of *wuxia* novels.<sup>25</sup> He gave legitimacy to the figure of a martial hero endowed with both "chivalrous bone and tender love" (*xia gu rou qing*)—an archetype nobly represented by Chow Yun-fat when a section of Wang's most popular work, *The Crane-Iron Pentology* (serialized from 1938-1942) was filmed by Ang Lee as *CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON*.

With writers as different as Wang Dulu and Huanzhu Louzhu elaborating upon the genre, *wuxia* fiction enjoyed a fruitful expansion of its boundaries. At the same time, it was being recognized as a major literary and social force, though not by the intelligentsia. So powerful was this force that when China was split in two after 1949, *wuxia* novels by writers with even rumored connections to opposition parties were banned by repressive governments on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.<sup>26</sup> Hong Kong was the only major Chinese community where the *wuxia* form managed to survive.

Screenwriter and author Ni Kuang has referred to the unprecedented explosion of *wuxia* fiction in Hong Kong in the 1950s as the genre's second golden age, after the upsurge represented by Huanzhu Louzhu and Wang Dulu.<sup>27</sup> Introducing several breakthroughs in style and content, among them somewhat more realistic depictions of Chinese culture and forms of combat, the work of this period was soon dubbed "new style *wuxia* fiction."

Hong Kong-based writers like Liang Yusheng and Jin Yong (a.k.a. Louis Cha), influenced by modern ideas and western literature, attacked their stories of the 1950s with lively language and suspenseful plots. They also created characters who were much more individualistic and free-wheeling than the somewhat priggish *xia* of previous generations, often delving deep into their psychology. Unlike the fanciful god-like figures of Huanzhu Louzhu, or the lovelorn, burdened souls of Wang Dulu, Liang and Jin's characters embraced the freedom and non-conformity of the martial lifestyle. Followed by millions in Chinese newspapers around the world (though not, of course, in China itself), their stories appealed to a younger, more cosmopolitan readership.

Writing in colonial Hong Kong and freed from the ideological constraints of Mainland China, Liang and Jin also channeled their patriotic concerns into their work. Well-versed in Chinese history, they set their stories against carefully researched backdrops, favoring periods in which China was ruled by foreign forces, the Manchurians or the Mongols, striking chords with readers who had lived through the Japanese occupa-

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Cheng Jihua, *The Historical Development of Chinese Cinema* (Beijing: China Film Publishing, 1980), p. 133-135; and Liu, *Swordplay Film*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>18</sup> Numerous remakes of RED LOTUS have been produced over the years, including Wang Yu's popular Shaw Brothers version in the early 1960s. The most recent update, known in English as BURNING PARADISE, was released in 1994, directed by Ringo Lam for producer Tsui Hark.

<sup>19</sup> Ye, p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> The *hanyu pinyin* system is used for names throughout this essay. In James J.Y. Liu's *The Chinese Knight-Errant*, the author and title of this novel are rendered, respectively, as Huan-chu-lou-chu and *The Chivalrous Swordsmen of the Szechwan Mountains*.

<sup>21</sup> James J.Y. Liu, pp. 119-120.

<sup>22</sup> Ye, pp. 47-48. One of these prequels has been published in English as *Blades from the Willows*, trans. Robert Chard (London: Wellsweep, 1991).

<sup>23</sup> As recently as the 1950s and '60s renowned authors such as Liang Yusheng and Gu Long continued to honor him by imitation, to the point of injecting characters from *Sichuan Mountains* into their own novels.

<sup>24</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Sam Ho, Introd., ed., *The Swordsman and His Jiang Hu: Tsui Hark and Hong Kong Film* (Hong Kong Film Archive, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Xu Shinian, *Xia De Zhongji* (Beijing: Peoples' Literature Publishing, 1995), pp. 127-156.

<sup>26</sup> Ye, pp. 60, 75, 109.

<sup>27</sup> Ni Kuang, "Martial Arts Novels and Martial Arts Films," in *Da Cheng Magazine*, No. 57; quoted in *Swordplay Film*, pp. 25-32.

tion or were heartsick over the domination of China by foreign powers. Yet Liang and Jin were also shrewd enough to retain what was most attractive in the work of their predecessors, the supernatural powers depicted by Huanzhu Louzhu, and the doomed loves movingly portrayed by Wang Dulu. The penetration of these works into the everyday lives of Asians cannot be overstated. Jin Yong, arguably the most important *wuxia* author in history, reports in the revised edition of *Laughing with Pride over Jiang Hu* (*Xiao'ao Jiang Hu*, a.k.a. *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer*) that when the novel was serialized in Saigon newspapers during the Vietnam War, government officials embroiled in policy debates used the names of its villains as curses to insult their rivals.<sup>28</sup>

Hong Kong cinema was also enjoying a growth spurt in the 1950s, and filmmakers naturally looked to the most popular *wuxia* novels for material. The novels of Jin Yong and Liang Yusheng, which often had dozens of chapters and hundreds of thousands of words, were typically adapted in several feature-length installments. Jin's *Legend of the Brave Archer* (*She Diao Yingxiong Chuan*, 1957) and *Story of the Book and the Sword* (*Shu Qian En Chou Lu*, 1955), and Liang's *Story of the White-Haired Demon Girl* (*Baifa Monü Chuan*, 1959) and *Three Women Warriors* (*Jiang Hu San Nüxia*, 1960) were all made with one or more sequels.

It was only years later that Jin Yong's and Liang Yusheng's works were enacted again on the big screen, although they had continued to be staple fare on television. In the 1990s, Tsui Hark and Ching Siu-tung turned Jin's *Laughing with Pride over Jiang Hu* into the *SWORDSMAN* series (*XIU NGO KONG WOO/XIAO'AO JIANG HU*, 1990-1993). Wong Kar-wai's partner Jeffrey Lau adapted Jin's *The Eagle Lovers* (*Shen Diao Xia Lu*, 1959) as *SAVIOR OF THE SOUL* (*GAO YAT SAN DIU HAP LUI/JIUYI SHEN DIAO XIA LU*, 1991), and Wong himself took *Legend of the Brave Archer* (*The Eagle-Shooting Heroes*) as the jumping-off point for *ASHES OF TIME* (*TONG CHE SAI DUK/DONGXIE XIDU*, 1994), a new prequel that re-imagined the early lives of two of the novel's minor characters. And Ronny Yu presented his own set of variations on Liang's *Story of the White-Haired Demon Girl* in *THE BRIDE WITH WHITE HAIR* (*BAK FAT MOH LUI CHUEN/BAIFA MONÜ CHUAN*, 1993). Consistent with the flamboyant, high-flying style of 1980s and '90s Hong Kong cinema, these were really reinterpretations of, even challenges to, the *wuxia* myth rather than true adaptations, executed with the directorial virtuosity and personal visions of a new school of filmmakers.

The hiatus in adaptations of classic *wuxia* stories was occasioned by a tide of change that swept through Hong Kong cinema in the 1960s and '70s, spearheaded by the so-called "new school" of Mandarin *wuxia* films. With their elaborately staged action, quick-tempo editing and punchy plots, the films of Zhang Che (Chang Cheh), King Hu and others made the relatively faithful adaptations favored by Cantonese cinema look stilted and threadbare. Hu and Zhang, the top auteur directors of this new movement, which propelled the Hong Kong film industry into the "kung fu" era, preferred original scripts that they could shape from the ground up. Both adept visual stylists, they were also more concerned with the bravura staging of fight sequences than with plot or character. But that didn't mean that the film industry had come entirely out of the *wuxia* novel's shadow. Novelist Ni Kuang (*The Six-Fingered Lord of the Lute*) plunged headlong into movies as an astonishingly prolific screenwriter, turning out literally hundreds of scripts and affecting great changes in the martial arts cinema. The central plot point of Ni Kuang's script for Zhang Che's *ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN* (*DUBI DAO*, 1967), the film that ushered in the Mandarin *wuxia* era, was inspired by a major incident in Jin Yong's *The Eagle Lovers*, in which the hero's arm is hacked off by one of his "martial sisters."

Meanwhile, the *wuxia* novel, too, had continued to evolve. About a decade after the first appearance in print of Jin Yong and Liang Yusheng, another major "new style" figure emerged. Operating out of Taiwan, Gu Long rose to prominence in the mid-1960s and introduced radical changes that adapted the genre to the spirit of a new generation. Gu's language was sparse and stylized, using totally unexpected words in increasingly short sentences and paragraphs, some only one word long. His dialogue, too, was laconic to a fault, forcing readers to intuit the characters veiled intentions. As such, his writing was thick with atmosphere, suggestive of the unknown and the dangerous. This style was perfectly suited to Gu's intrigue-filled stories of rivalries between far-flung secret societies, influenced by detective thrillers and the James Bond films.

In a drastic departure from traditional *wuxia* novels, even those of other "new style" authors like Jin and Liang, Gu Long's "hard-boiled" characters were not bound by any chivalrous code. Instead, they were amoral creatures not above fighting for money and gleefully indulging in mind games of manipulation, deception and betrayal. When they fight, they shun the elaborate martial moves of previous heroes, investing their energy instead in lengthy pre-fight confrontations that culminate in quick flurries of lethal blows, obviously influenced by the explosive encounters in samurai films and spaghetti Westerns. In fact, Gu Long's writing was extremely cinematic, frequently adapting to prose such filmic techniques as *mise-en-scène* and rapid-fire editing, creating "stage pictures" in an almost theatrical sense with evocative physical descriptions. Which is exactly why he was able to effortlessly switch to screenwriting in the 1970s, penning scripts in Hong Kong and Taiwan that unmistakably bear his personal stamp, such as *JADE TIGER* (*BAI YU LAO HU*, 1977) and *MAGNIFICENT BODYGUARD* (*FEI DU JUAN YUN SHAN*, 1978).

Gu Long's novels were also popular fodder for adaptation by other filmmakers. Most notable among them was director Chu Yuan (Chor Yuen), who filmed many of Gu's novels, most of them scripted by Ni Kuang. Chu skillfully recreated the author's world on film, using spectacular high-wire fight scenes, colorful costumes and fancy sets to realize the novel's convoluted whodunit plots and quasi-existential plays of greed and desire. His adaptations were so faithful in spirit and so successful at the box office that they can be categorized as a Chu Yuan-Ni Kuang-Gu Long subgenre, with its own formulaic conventions and iconoclastic style.

New *wuxia* novels continue to be written and are still quite popular, though not nearly as hot as they were in the 1960s and '70s. By and large, modern Chinese moviegoers seem to find more resonant metaphors for the conflict and striving of their lives in the *wuxia* surrogates of the gangster genre. On the other hand, a young writer named Yi Huang was the number one bestseller in Hong Kong for several months in 2002 with his epic *Legends of the Far Wasteland*; his earlier novel, *Looking for Qin*, is currently being adapted for television. Could this be the beginning of yet another "new style" of *wuxia* cinema, with fiction once again leading the way?

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<sup>28</sup> Jin Yong, "After Words," in *Laughing with Pride over Jiang Hu* (Hong Kong: Ming Pao Publishing, 1989), p. 1691.

## THE CODE OF THE XIA

Like the similar codes found in American Westerns or Japanese samurai films, the rules of thumb that govern the behavior of the *xia* are never spelled out, though they can be deduced from the conduct of the characters and the values they uphold.

Scholar James J.Y. Liu, in his trailblazing book *The Chinese Knight-Errant*, lists eight basic tenets of the *xia*: altruism, justice, individual freedom, personal loyalty, courage, truthfulness and mutual faith, honor and fame, and, finally, generosity and contempt for wealth.<sup>1</sup>

Screenwriter Liu Tianci, in his evocatively titled book *Secret Scroll of Wuxia Scriptwriting*, adds to the list by drawing upon the ideas of several *wuxia* writers. Jin Yong, for example, claims that a *xia* is characterized by an intuitive sense of right or wrong and by a willingness to sacrifice his interests or even his life. Critic Wu Xiaoru observes that the hero either opposes the governing class, or, when he himself is part of the government, belongs to a righteous group within it resisting a villainous group. Writer Oyang Yingzi maintains that the *xia* is patriotic, to the point of risking his or her life.<sup>2</sup>

More specific prohibitions that emerge in some stories amount to a set of unwritten rules of “fair play.” For example, the *xia* does not gang up on opponents, but faces them man to man; such score-settling one-on-one encounters form the climaxes of many films. The *xia* does not steal other martial practitioners’ secret skills (although the bad guys often try), and he does not cross the line of decency between men and women. There is also a long list of thou shalts: a *xia* is humble, respects his elders, looks upon the opposite sex as equal, and notifies his opponents when throwing dart-like objects. (The barked phrase “watch the dart!” recalls the “en garde” of western practice).

James J.Y. Liu’s “ideal” of honor and fame is one of the most resonant concepts of the genre. Liu notes that while honor drives the knight-errant to establish standards of integrity, the longing for fame is also central, and is, in fact, their only truly selfish motive.<sup>3</sup> In many novels and films, a hunger for esteem is a major cause for conflict, as fighters compete for status as the strongest martial artist in the *jiang hu*—not unlike the gunfighter or samurai for whom fighting prowess has become an end in itself. In John Woo’s *LAST HURRAH FOR CHIVALRY* (*HAO XIA*, 1979), for example, the character Pray (Fung Hak-on) is a martial artist whose only goal in life is to defeat Zhang (Wai Pak), reputed to be the best in the world with the *dao*. If he succeeds, Pray will be able to rest on his laurels as the “King of *Dao*.”<sup>4</sup>

Another purer example of the *xia*’s pursuit for fame is the title character played by Wang Yu in Zhang Che’s *THE ASSASSIN* (*DA CIKE*, 1967). Although a superb swordsman, he is a poor commoner destined for a lowly position in life. When given a chance to assassinate a villain, he refuses to accept a fee in spite of his poverty. But he undertakes the challenge anyway, just to leave his name in the annals of history. Interestingly, despite his thirst for fame, he naturally assumes another tenet of the code when complimented on his fighting skills, responding with aw-shucks humility. The *xia* may desperately want bragging rights to the title of Number One, but they would never be so uncool as to brag about it themselves.

The *xia*’s code, like those of the Westerner or the samurai, is often seen as archaic, not suitable for the corrupt modern world in which the warrior is cast adrift. But it is revered nevertheless, as an embodiment of a traditional, even impossible, standard of goodness. (SH)



photo: LAST HURRAH FOR CHIVALRY

<sup>1</sup> James J.Y. Liu, *The Chinese Knight-Errant* (University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 4-6.

<sup>2</sup> Liu Tianci, *Secret Scroll of Wuxia Scriptwriting* (Hong Kong: Subculture Publishing, 1996), pp. 26-27.

<sup>3</sup> James J.Y. Liu, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> In the English subtitles this becomes “King of Swordsmen.” But the *dao* is actually a very different weapon from the sword (*jian*). Heavy and short, it falls somewhere between a broadsword and a machete. The word is translated as “machete” in the subtitles for *CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON*, and elsewhere as “sabre,” but in fact there is no precise English equivalent. The titles rendered in English as *THE BLADE* (*DAO*, 1995) or *ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN* (*DUBI DAO*, 1967), in which a broken aristocratic *jian* takes on the characteristics of a plebeian *dao*, carry untranslatable connotations of blunt-force brutality.

# THE BOOK, THE GODDESS AND THE HERO:

## SEXUAL AESTHETICS IN THE CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS FILM

by BÉRÉNICE REYNAUD

### THE BOOK

In a postmodern reworking of a classical martial arts trope, *SWORDSMAN II* (*XIAO'AO JIANG HU II: DONGFANG BUBAI*, 1992) shows heroes and villains fighting over a sacred text (in this case, a scroll), designed to ensure its possessor superhuman martial skills.<sup>1</sup> To acquire such skills, the price to be paid is self-castration; only the most consummate villain, Asia the Invincible, is willing to go to such extremes, and Asia appears in the film as a ravishing—and lethal—swordswoman, played by the spectacular Lin Qingxia (Brigitte Lin Ching-hsia).

A secret desire for self-annihilation, mutilation, punishment, and death haunts many martial arts stories, but what interests me here is how the relationship between the sacred text, the feminine gaze and the castration (real or symbolic) of the hero is explored in two classic films. In Zhang Che's *ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN* (*DUBI DAO*, 1967), the eponymous hero, Fang Gang, is given a martial arts manual by the young woman, Xiao Man, who saved him after his mutilation. Her own father, a nameless swordsman, had died for that book (as Fang's father himself had died), and, in anger, her mother had tried to burn it. The book is therefore as incomplete as the hero. Fang, however, manages to insert himself into the gaps of this fragmentary discourse and develop a technique, making innovative use of his left arm and the short, broken sword left by his father.

Similarly, in Lau Kar-Leung's *EXECUTIONERS FROM SHAOLIN* (*HONG XIGUAN*, 1977), the young Wending—once his father, Hong Xiguan, is killed by the evil eunuch Bai Mei—finds his father's "Tiger kung fu" training manual. But the book is in an advanced state of decomposition—a fact that Wending hides from his mother (Li Lili), who had raised him in the fine art of "Crane kung fu." Protecting the "secret" of the book, Wending adopts a feminine position—that of the hysterical daughter who has to hide, *at all costs*, the possible castration of the Father. Not surprisingly, Wending's dress and physical appearance, his hair-do, his body language, are coded as feminine. During training, Wending makes up for the lacunas of the book by combining "Crane" and "Tiger," masculine and feminine, which allows him to defeat the castrated "monster," Bai Mei.

In both cases the flawed book is passed on from a defeated, dead father to an imperfect hero through the hands/care/guidance of a woman assuming a motherly position. In turn, the hero becomes a worthy son to the symbolic father.

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<sup>1</sup> The film is produced by Tsui Hark and directed by Ching Siu-tung.

## THE GODDESS

The development of the film industry in Shanghai played a major role in the social advancement of women. In the early republican era (which coincides with the beginning of film production in China), the concept of “new woman” (*xin nǚxing*) was discussed at all levels, in the society at large, in literature and in cinema.<sup>2</sup> And in this climate the martial arts film—itsself a hybrid cultural product in which East meets West,<sup>3</sup> and in which nostalgia for a lost (non-fragmented) China lingers<sup>4</sup>—became a playful and spectacular way of enacting a grand-scale redefinition of gender roles.

The 1772 ban against female performers on stage created the tradition of the female impersonator (*dan*) in Beijing Opera.<sup>5</sup> Later, filmic realism demanded real women’s bodies and the ban was eventually lifted.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the Shanghai urban environment provided countless employment opportunities for women—from bilingual secretaries to dance-hall hostesses to movie stars—allowing them to escape the Confucian tradition of the three obediences (to one’s father, husband and son). Yet, such radical changes generated profound anxieties, soon echoed by popular culture. Was the new woman a revolutionary social reformer? Would she fail and kill herself? Would she become a prostitute?<sup>7</sup> Inherited from early martial arts stories and legends,<sup>8</sup> the figure of the fighting heroine came to the rescue to alleviate this anxiety—but with a somewhat perverse twist.

<sup>2</sup> The Chinese Republic was founded by Sun Yat-sen in 1911. In 1913, in Shanghai, Zhang Shichuan directed the first Chinese short feature, *THE DIFFICULT COUPLE* (*NANFU NANQI*). The same year, in Hong Kong, Li Minwei directed another short film, *ZHUANGZI TESTS HIS WIFE* (*ZHUANGZI SHIQI*), in which, in the tradition of Chinese opera, he played the part of both Zhuangzi and his wife (see note 5); while his own wife, Yan Sansan, cast in the small part of the maid, became the first actress in a Chinese film.

<sup>3</sup> See Zhang Che, “Creating the Martial Arts Style and the Hong Kong Cinema Style,” in *The Making of Martial Arts Films—As Told by Filmmakers and Stars*, ed. Winnie Fu, et al. (Hong Kong Film Archive, 1999), pp. 16–17.

<sup>4</sup> After the two Opium wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860), China had to open “treaty ports” and foreign concessions to the western powers; Hong Kong and Macao were ceded to Britain and Portugal respectively. The 1894–95 Sino-Japanese war ended in the loss of Taiwan to Japan, and indirectly in a 99-year lease of Kowloon to Britain. After the 1911 democratic revolution, the country was divided by opposing warlords, ambitious generals, various factions of the Kuomintang (Guomindang/Nationalist) Party and the Communists. In 1931, Japan invaded China, and Chiang Kai-shek’s government retreated to Chongqing. In 1946 the civil war between the Kuomintang and Communists that had begun in the early ’30s resumed, ending in a Communist victory in 1949 and the retreat of Chiang Kai-shek’s government to Taiwan.

<sup>5</sup> The word *dan* denotes all female roles in Beijing Opera (no matter the gender of the performer). Such roles are divided into *hua dan* (vivacious woman or maiden), *cai dan* (despicable, comical female character), *wu dan* (warrior woman), *dao ma dan* (horse-woman/swordswoman; interestingly, this is the Chinese title of Tsui Hark’s landmark *PEKING OPERA BLUES* [1986] in which female fighters play a most important role), and *lao dan* (old woman). In 1772, an edict was passed forbidding women to appear on stage (it was believed they would turn to prostitution to augment their meager income as performers, and that the mingling of both sexes in an opera troupe was immoral), and the word *dan* came to signify a male performer who specializes in female roles. See Wu Zuguang, Huang Zuolin and Mei Shaowu, *Peking Opera and Mei Lanfang* (Beijing: New World Press, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> “Filmic realism demanded an authentic object called ‘woman’—to be *seen*, and then ‘known’ and ‘had’.” Quoted in Michael G. Chang, “The Good, the Bad and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s–1930,” in Yingjin Zhang, ed., *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–43* (Stanford UP, 1999), p. 129.

<sup>7</sup> I am alluding here to the plot of three popular movies—all starring Ruan Lingyu, the great Shanghai star of the 1930s. In Bu Wancang’s *THREE MODERN WOMEN* (*SAN GE MODERN Nǚxing*, 1933), a man refuses an arranged marriage, only to discover that his former fiancée is involved in social and political work on the side of the working class. Cai Chusheng’s *NEW WOMAN* (*XIN Nǚxing*, 1934) is a young divorced writer, who, the victim of a slanderous campaign, commits suicide. The heroine of Wu Yonggang’s *THE GODDESS* (*SHEN Nǚ*, 1934), a sweet-hearted prostitute, eventually kills the pimp who steals the money she had saved for her young son’s education.

<sup>8</sup> Fighting heroines appear quite early in “chivalric” literature. For example, the Song Dynasty story *Cheng Yuanyu and the Eleventh Lady* features a number of fighting women. In addition, the legend of Mulan, who dressed up as a man out of filial duty, to take her father’s place in the Emperor’s army, inspired countless works of poetry, opera and painting. In 1939, Bu Wancang directed the film *MULAN JOINS THE ARMY* (*MULAN CONGIJUN*).

In 1922, Zhang Shichuan founded the Mingxing Film Company, Shanghai’s most important studio. Between 1928 and 1930, he produced and directed 18 episodes of *BURNING OF THE RED LOTUS MONASTERY* (*HUO SHAO HONGLIANG SI*), whose tremendous success fanned the *wuxia pian* (“martial chivalry” film) craze. Zhang’s other claims to fame were his discoveries of glamorous actresses—Wang Hanlun, Hu Die, Ruan Lingyu—and implementation of a well-organized star system, mostly centered around female performers. In 1926, Zhang cast one of his most alluring discoveries, Xuan Jinglin, in *THE NAMELESS HERO* (*WUMING YINGXIONG*), making her one of the first swordswomen in Chinese cinema.<sup>9</sup>

Zhang had paid to redeem Xuan Jinglin from a low-class brothel in 1925, and some of the films he made with her cashed in on her persona as a kind-hearted prostitute—a “goddess” in Chinese slang.<sup>10</sup> *Shen nǚ*, “prostitute,” is an inversion of the two Chinese characters composing the word “goddess,” *nǚ shen*. This linguistic slippage alludes to the mythological Yao Ji, who, having died a maiden, returned to sexually haunt the dreams of emperors—therefore debasing her divine powers in the sexual service of men. This tale of “falling from grace,” from divinity to abjection, of the subjection of feminine powers to the reprobation and constraints of a male-dominated society seems to be a universal trope.<sup>11</sup> Chinese mythology contains the story of the original Goddess-Mother, Nǚ Wa, who not only created mankind out of clay, but mended the sky after a war between men and giants had destroyed it. Exhausted by this Herculean task, Nǚ Wa prepares to die. Among the “little people” she created, one, a pompous priest, berates her nudity as “lewd...immoral... forbidden by the laws of the land.”<sup>12</sup>

The myth of the Fallen Goddess expresses ambivalence toward the image of the Mother. First, she is feared, loved and worshipped. However, the institution of a male-dominated society demands the submission of all females to an all-powerful Father, a process in which the son is required to collaborate, via identification with the Father. When the Goddess refuses to submit, she “returns” in a “monstrous,” threatening form: as Medusa or the Sphinx, Hecate mother of all witches, or a hideous demoness, as in the fantastic tales popularized by Tsui Hark and Ching Siu-tung’s *A CHINESE GHOST STORY* (*QIANNŪ YOUHUN*, 1987/1990) series. In an urban environment, she reappears as the no less threatening figure of the killer prostitute. Belonging to no man in particular, but sold to all, she is *in-between*: her profession gives her an intimate knowledge of men, and yet she is their mortal enemy.

It is this mythological dimension that gives Chu Yuan’s (*Chor Yuen*’s) *INTIMATE CONFESSIONS OF A CHINESE COURTESAN* (*AI NU*, 1972) its dream-like, almost surreal quality. Forced into prostitution by a group of thugs and Chun Yi (Bei Di), a lesbian madam, Ai Nu (He Lili) becomes the highest-priced courtesan of the brothel, bewitching men into submission until she decides to exact revenge. Bedroom scenes turn into swordfights, foreplay into murders. Chun Yi victimizes and exploits Ai Nu while being in love with her, and conversely Ai Nu pretends to be lured into a lesbian relationship with Chun Yi to entrap her. So sex and seduction become

<sup>9</sup> See *A Study of the Hong Kong Swordplay Film 1945–1980*, ed. Leong Mo-ling, rev. ed. (5th Hong Kong International Film Festival/Urban Council, 1981), pp. 7–8 (photo of Xuan with an unsigned caption). One should, however, note that *SWORDSWOMAN LI FEIFEI* (*Nǚxia Li Feifei*, 1925) precedes *RED LOTUS*. *LI FEIFEI* was directed by Shao Zuiweng, a former collaborator of Zhang Shichuan who had founded his own production company, Tianyi, in 1925. He was one of the four Shaw Brothers, who in 1957 officially relocated their production company in Hong Kong.

<sup>10</sup> Zhang, “Prostitution and Urban Imagination,” in *Cinema and Urban Culture*, p. 166. For a more detailed account of Xuan Jinglin’s life, see Zhang Zhen, “An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: The Actress as Vernacular Embodiment in Early Chinese Film Culture,” *Camera Obscura*, 16, No. 3 (Duke UP, 2001), 229–263.

<sup>11</sup> See J.J. Bachofen, *Myth, Religion and Mother Right—Selected Writings* (Princeton UP, 1967); Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1948); Marilyn French, *Beyond Power: On Men, Women and Morals* (London: Random House, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> Lu Xun, “Mending Heaven” [1922], in *Old Tales Retold* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1961), p. 13.

the ultimate weapons for power. The two heroines never lose either their regal poise or their mysterious, slightly ironical smiles. A tribute to female power, the film also constructs the women as sex objects, through titillating episodes that could almost qualify as soft porn. While the beauty of the protagonists, the elegant virtuosity of the fights and the erotic interludes create a highly pleasurable spectacle, a faint whiff of terror can also be felt. What *is* behind this mask, this perfectly smooth performance?

## JIANG HU

The *wuxia pian* is a symptom of disorder. It depicts an alternative, marginalized “world of vagrants” (*jiang hu*), composed of thieves, travelling entertainers, knights-errant, killers, bodyguards for hire, and unattached women. More than likely, the historical *jiang hu* attracted peasants or craftsmen displaced by incessant warfare between rival states, and warriors of the defeated armies.<sup>13</sup> In King Hu’s COME DRINK WITH ME (*DAI ZUI XIA*, 1966), the male protagonist, “Drunken Hero” (Yue Hua) describes himself as a “waif” raised out of kindness in a martial arts school, and he leads a group of beggar children. A literature of the downtrodden, the martial arts novel was often banned, along with pornographic writing.<sup>14</sup> The former represented also the *revenge* of the downtrodden. Despised by society, the martial arts hero could offset his marginalization by displaying unsuspected skills: “in the fictional martial arts world...cripples, beggars, thieves, *women* and scholars may be weak in appearance, but are often martial arts experts.”<sup>15</sup>

It is the very marginalization of the *jiang hu* that turns it into a world where some form of female agency can be upheld. Women are less confined, their freedom of movement is greater, they can travel and fight. Not surprising for a genre so indebted to Beijing Opera, the *wuxia pian* from its inception asserts the primacy of “the performative”: the protagonists are equated with their martial arts skills—not to the position assigned to them by society and biology. So a frail-looking, pretty body could be that of a fierce warrior. This is also why the issue of treachery (who is your friend, who is your foe, who can you trust) plays such an important role, with the figure of “woman” often at its center, in an interesting variation of the western concept of the femme fatale in film noir. Like Ballen’s cane-knife in Charles Vidor’s *GILDA* (1946), the *wuxia* heroine “looks like one thing and right in front of your eyes...becomes another thing.”<sup>16</sup>

## NARRATIVE STASIS

Born in a time of national crisis, the *wuxia pian* performs a radical reconfiguration of both the structure of the filmic narrative and the balance of power between the sexes. In his analysis of the Hong Kong action

film, David Bordwell stresses the importance of *stasis* in the choreography of a fight.<sup>17</sup> One could argue that the entire narrative structure of the *wuxia pian* is organized around a “pause-thrust-pause” pattern, with the fighting sequences interspersed as pure spectacles to break the narrative flow. The parallel here is with the dance numbers in musicals or the hard-core scenes in porn, that apparently constitute the *real subject* of the film (what the fans pay to see).

At the core of the *wuxia pian* is the well-choreographed spectacle of beautiful bodies—most of them male, some female—fighting each other, performing extravagant feats and even flying in the air. Therefore the libidinal investment of the spectator is bound to be triggered by the fight sequences, although the “plot” provides the framework necessary for the viewer to process any aspect of his/her pleasure that goes against the grain of traditional identification. The “story” makes it possible, and even exhilarating, for male and female spectators, whatever their sexual preferences or identification, to take great pleasure in looking at the (sometimes scantily-clad) bodies of warriors of the same gender as themselves.

The *wuxia pian* elegantly inverts the terms of Laura Mulvey’s groundbreaking analysis. For the British theorist, the presence of the heroine in a narrative film often works “against the development” of the plot. The way the female star is framed, lit and exhibited constructs a spectacle whose erotic contemplation “freezes” the flow of action. Moreover, the classical film exposes a situation of “imbalance” between the sexes. The man is the motor of the action, and has the privilege of looking. The woman, on the other hand, is, more often than not, “acted upon” and, instead of looking, she is *displayed* as an *image*.<sup>18</sup>

Conversely, in the *wuxia pian*, exhibitionism is the privilege of the male, and it is the fetishized spectacle of *his* body that “stops the narration.” The focal point of such exhibitionism is the training of the hero. The story of countless martial arts films can be summarized in the well-documented efforts of the protagonist to acquire the skills necessary for his mission. The One-Armed Swordsman has to (re)learn how to fight with his disability. In Zhang Xinyan’s (Cheung Yam-yim’s) *SHAOLIN TEMPLE* (*SHAOLIN SI*, 1982), Jet Li trains to become a Shaolin monk in interpolated vignettes staged and shot like musical numbers, with peach blossoms, waterfalls or autumn leaves in the background.

## WHERE DO THESE SKILLS COME FROM?

Interestingly, the *wuxia pian* devotes very little time, if any at all, to the training of the *female* fighter. And her kung fu or swordsmanship is all the more terrifying because it is unexplained. In *INTIMATE CONFESSIONS*, we never see Ai Nu “in training,” so the acquisition of her lethal fighting skills, within the confines of a brothel, remains an alluring enigma. Chun Yi supervises a “training session” at the beginning of the film, but it teaches the girls how to use their muscles for sex, and borrows the codes (and tricks) of erotic novels or porn films dealing with “the making of a prostitute,” such as Pauline Réage’s *The Story of O* or Henry Paris’ *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* (1975).<sup>19</sup> The possible slippage between “sex training” and “martial arts training” strengthens the equation the film draws between women’s erotic power and their fighting skills.

A more recent—and less sexually explicit—example would be Cynthia Rothrock’s arrival at the Hong Kong airport in the first third of *Corey*

<sup>13</sup> See Ng Ho, “Jiang Hu Revisited: Towards a Reconstruction of the Martial Arts World,” in *Swordplay Film*, p. 75. Similarly, in the early republican era, social unrest, foreign invasion and unchecked westernization were blamed for a variety of social evils, such as the emancipation of women and the rise of prostitution. See Frank Dikötter, *Sex, Culture and Modernity in China* (Hong Kong UP, 1995), especially pp. 122–145.

<sup>14</sup> See Liu Damu, “From Chivalric Fiction to Martial Arts Film,” in *Swordplay Film*, pp. 49–50. Liu adds: “The unhealthy proliferation of small newspapers after the Second World War led to an abundance of pornographic tales...As for the *wuxia* stories, they were populated with the most ‘fantastic’ flying swordsmen...Most of these stories included pornographic details. (Italics mine.)” See also Ng Ho, p. 74: “China traditionally favored the literati over those with military skills, which led to the martial arts being periodically prohibited and the disdain for this tradition harboured by the average Chinese.”

<sup>15</sup> Koo Siu-fung, “Philosophy and Tradition in the Swordplay Film,” in *Swordplay Film*, p. 27. (Italics mine.)

<sup>16</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales—Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), p. 103.

<sup>17</sup> David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong—Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2000) pp. 221–247.

<sup>18</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley, (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hill, 1988), p. 62.

<sup>19</sup> The “recipe” of using an astringent to tighten the (vaginal) muscles seems to come straight out of *The Story of O*—except that Chinese erotic and pornographic literature has an even longer and more intricate history than its French counterpart.

Yuen Kwai's YES, MADAM! (*WONG GA BAI CHE/HUANGJIA SHIJIE*, 1985). Mistaken for an innocuous passenger by a villain on the run, she single-handedly overpowers him, only to be mocked, a few minutes later, by two Chinese policemen who make unsavory comments about her figure. As it turns out, not only is the villain in for a surprise (she's a martial arts expert), but the bumbling cops are as well (she speaks perfect Cantonese). The figure of the *wuxia* heroine is at the center of a precarious balance between devaluation/defilement/abjection (sexist jokes, threats of rape) and the fetishization of her fighting skills. (Wow, she can really do it!) In turn, this fetishization sometimes makes her even more titillating as a sex object.<sup>20</sup>

This "double take" reflects the anxiety of the male subject wondering if the woman has *it* or not—like Freud's "Wolf Man" hallucinating a penis where there was none.<sup>21</sup> Legs, fists, swords, guns, hairpins, conic hats, leaps in the air, acrobatic feats involving the throwing of objects, and, last but not least, the warrior's gaze<sup>22</sup> are as many extensions of the body that function as phallic substitutes. But, if the existence of such attributes can quell the subject's anxiety by denying the existence of "castrated" human beings, it opens up an area of no less fearful uncertainty.

For the hero wandering though the *wuxia pian* is never sure, when he meets a woman, if she's a potential soul mate, a femme fatale or a fighting demoness. Worst of all, while the acquisition of fighting skills is the result of a *process* for a man, no such narrative development seems to exist for the woman. Like Athena, she comes out in the world dressed in full warrior regalia. She appears as a "no-man's-land" (a very apt term in this case) between subject and object, having *it* and *not* having *it*, possessing frightening power and subject to victimization—and can switch without transition between these two poles, leaving her male suitors and foes equally confused and puzzled.

## THE MASK: GENDER AS EQUILIBRIUM OR DISORDER

In COME DRINK WITH ME, the female protagonist Golden Swallow first appears as a dapper young man with top martial arts skills. The gender of the actress, Zheng Peipei (Cheng Pei-pe), appears clearly to the spectator, but not to the protagonists. Here King Hu masterfully plays with the ambiguity offered by Chinese theatrical conventions. In Chinese Opera-inspired films—such as THE LOVE ETERNE (*LIANG SHANBO YU ZHU YINGTAI*), which Hu co-directed in 1963—actresses play male roles, a practice that reoccurs in many Cantonese-language martial arts films as well.

Chan Lit-Ban's THE SIX-FINGERED LORD OF THE LUTE, PART I (*LOKE CHI KAM MOH, SELUNG CHAP/LIU ZHI QIN MO, SHANGJI*, 1965) is an exhilarating variation on the "sword and sorcery" martial arts subgenre. The son of the main warrior couple is played by Connie Chan Po-chu, a Cantonese opera-trained actress who specialized in male roles. (She often portrayed fresh-faced young scholars or lovers.) The confusion of genders in the film is further complicated by the great number of female fighters that keep on appearing, some dressed as women, some in male attire. Similarly, in the first 40 minutes of COME DRINK WITH ME, the spectator is free to wonder if Golden Swallow is supposed to be a male character

<sup>20</sup> Writing about the female cop in Kathryn Bigelow's BLUE STEEL (1990), Pam Cook notes that Megan's gun "endows her with power, yet simultaneously transforms her into a fetish object." Rf. *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 58 (1991), 312. A similar phenomenon is at work in the cult of "deadly Chinese dolls" applauded in magazines such as *Asian Trash Cinema*: "The whole idea of sexy Chinese girls wearing tight superhero costumes fighting and then having sex is possibly the finest development in the 100 years of cinema history a man could possibly hope for." Rf. Rick Baker and Toby Russell, *The Essential Guide to Deadly China Dolls* (Hinckley, UK: Eastern Heroes, 1996), p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Sigmund Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis" (1918), in *Three Case Histories* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), pp. 187-316.

played by an actress, or a female character who, to travel unhindered, finds it easier to dress as a man. The other characters are also involved in a masquerade of some sort. The effeminate gang leader, Jade-Faced Tiger (Chen Honglie), who first appears sporting a fan and wearing the white make-up of a Beijing Opera traitor, is a ruthless villain. The venerable abbot is himself a traitor, while Fan Dabei, the drunken beggar, turns out to be a warrior with a mission.

The presence of a fighting woman in a martial arts film upsets the balance of power between the sexes and points at some deficiency in the male protagonist. Fan Dabei's drunkenness is no less a flaw than Fang Gang's mutilation in ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN. He enters the fiction by helping the heroine, eventually caring for her when she is wounded.<sup>23</sup> Golden Swallow is the film's center of gravity, but the Chinese title means "Drunken Hero," indicating Fan Dabei as the main warrior. Conversely, the sequel directed by Zhang Che is titled GOLDEN SWALLOW (*JIN YANZI*, 1968), while the heroine yields center stage to the two swordsmen coveting her, Silver Roc (Wang Yu) and Han Tao (Luo Lie).

The difference lies in opposing conceptions of gender roles in King Hu's and Zhang Che's work. The latter advocated the concept of *yang gang* (masculinity) in his films and fought to give top billing to male actors in an industry that had traditionally favored female stars.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, King Hu depicted a world in which men and women were fighting on equal terms to restore a precarious equilibrium. Drunken Hero and Golden Swallow both have something to hide, and after their first hostile encounter, team up to reach a common goal. However, in spite of enticing possibilities no romantic heterosexual resolution is possible.<sup>25</sup> Martial arts ethics prove as effective in separating potential lovers as Siegfried's sword in Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. Golden Swallow returns to her father, the provincial governor, and the drunken hero to his wanderings.

The *jiang hu* is filled with heroes who have given up women to become monks, such as Qiao Hong (Roy Chiao) in Wang Zinglei's ESCORTS OVER TIGER HILLS (*HUSHAN HANG*, 1969). There are also figures who carry the process further, such as evil eunuchs lusting for superhuman martial skills, as in EXECUTIONERS FROM SHAOLIN, King Hu's DRAGON INN (LONGMEN KEZHAN, 1968), and Tsui Hark's SWORDSMAN series. As the *wuxia pian* upholds the primacy of the phallus, it is therefore logical that it represents a playful mode of enacting the sexual impasse.<sup>26</sup>

## FIGHTING AS SEX

A notable exception is EXECUTIONERS FROM SHAOLIN, a film that not only features a powerful, spirited, fighting heroine, but makes crystal clear

<sup>22</sup> Lacan considers the gaze as an organ. See the section "Of the Gaze as Object Petit a," in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1973), pp. 65-119.

<sup>23</sup> The unspoken tenderness created by the situation is a harbinger of similar moments in Wu Ma's THE DEAF AND MUTE HEROINE (*LONG YA JIAN*, 1971), in which the dyer Yang Shun (Tang Qing) cares for the eponymous heroine (Helen Ma).

<sup>24</sup> Zhang Che, pp. 21-22. See also Sek Kei, "The War between the Cantonese and Mandarin Cinema in the Sixties or How the Beautiful Women Lost to Action Men," in *The Restless Breed: Cantonese Stars of the Sixties*, ed. Stephen Teo (20th Hong Kong International Film Festival/Urban Council, 1996), pp. 30-33; and Stephen Teo, "Cathay and the *Wuxia* Movie," in *The Cathay Story*, (Hong Kong Film Archive, 2002), p. 117.

<sup>25</sup> Lack of space prevents me from further exploring the similarities between COME DRINK WITH ME and the musical—the initial hostility, the teaming up through dance-like movements, the tender moment when Fan Dabei catches a fainting Golden Swallow in his arms.

<sup>26</sup> For Lacan, the phallus is a *negative function* that operates as *the principal cause* of the sexual impasse, and prevents the sexes from reaching a true communication. See in particular the excellent introductions (I and II) Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose have written to the book they edited, *Feminine Sexuality—Jacques Lacan and the école Freudienne* (New York: Norton, 1982), pp. 1-57. In Lacan's work, the conception of the phallus as what prevents the subject to reach the Other is mostly developed in Chapters V and VI of *Encore* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1975), 49-71.

what heroes mean when they say “my kung fu is better than yours.” The war between the sexes is enacted as a competition between the “Tiger” and “Crane” styles of kung fu, and when Hong Xiguan (Chen Guandai) meets the beautiful Fang Yongchun (Li Lili), their duel is ironically accompanied by a tune from *Carmen* (“If I love you, woe to you!”). Romance, then marriage is in the air, but on their wedding night, the drunken jokes of Hong’s companions annoy Yongchun so much that she uses her “Crane” techniques to lock her legs closed. Hong counter-attacks with an assault on a secret pressure point, and the scene ends on the joyful sounds of kung fu moves being used as foreplay. Yongchun is as close to a feminist superwoman as the *wuxia pian* has yet produced: she can fight, but she can also cook, clean, do the laundry, and rule the roost. From alluring sex object she is elevated to the status of Mother/Goddess, yet is not given a chance to fight the villain herself.

COME DRINK WITH ME depicts a darker version of fighting-as-sex. Entering the temple where the gangsters are hiding, but now dressed as a woman, Golden Swallow is at once surrounded by Jade-Faced Tiger and his cronies. Her long gown hides the daggers she has slipped into her boots, and the basket she carries shields her against arrows and weapons. Dueling with her, Tiger slices through her clothes, and, laughing with “the boys,” promises to “undress [her] right now.” More than a match for her adversary, Golden Swallow nevertheless loses her composure when her top is (slightly) undone, and as a result is hurt by Tiger’s poisonous dart.

Tiger’s sexist spite in this scene may have another source. At the beginning of the film, we see his face light up at the prospect of testing himself against such a famous warrior as Golden Swallow. To his secret disappointment, he has to fight a girl.

## THE GAZE

Zhang Che’s films create what has been interpreted as an unabashedly homoerotic space in which men fight men; admire, kill, compete with men; and court the friendship of other men.<sup>27</sup> They stage the “passion” of the suffering male body, over-exerting itself, wounded, bleeding, tortured, transfixed by sharp objects (even, in later works, impaled), lying down, with limbs extended, after a violent death. Within the fiction, this spectacle is constructed for the male gaze, with, sometimes, the female gaze functioning as a relay or substitute.

In the beginning of ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN, handsome Fang Gang (Wang Yu) removes his jacket to chop wood, while his master’s spoilt daughter, Qi Pei (Qiao Qiao) looks on. Her repressed attraction for the young man may be read as a tragic metaphor for unrequited homosexual desire; she pines for him, but, dismayed at his “arrogance,” refuses to admit it. Shortly thereafter, out of spite, she cuts his right arm off. Since Wang Yu spends the rest of the film dressed in a way that hides the character’s wound (and the actor’s carefully concealed right arm), the wood-chopping scene is the only moment in which he is given a chance of displaying his muscles. Fang Gang’s wound becomes the equivalent of the female’s “castrated genitals” and has to be carefully hidden.

Zhang Che was obviously convinced that weapons shouldn’t be handled by women, and his distrust of the feminine applies to male characters that are guilty of treachery. In ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN, the villains’

secret weapon—a two-pronged “sword clamp” device that captures the opponent’s blade—brings to mind one’s worst fantasies of the mythical *vagina indentata* (“tooth-lined vagina,” a metaphor for the castrating female). It is because the hero is “castrated” (and forced to fight with a shorter sword) that he won’t be “caught” by the feminine device.<sup>28</sup>

In Zhang’s BLOOD BROTHERS (*CI MA*, 1973), the female protagonist, Mi Lan (Jing Li), intervenes from the outset, spelling trouble between the men. As the two brother-thieves, Zhang Wenxiang (David Jiang Dawei/David Chiang) and Huang Zhong (Chen Guandai), and would-be general Ma Xin (Di Long/Ti Lung) lay the foundation for their relationship, Mi Lan arrives on horseback to steal Ma Xin’s bag of gold. She is doing so on her husband’s, Huang Zhong’s order, but her entry into the all-male tableau nonetheless has a jarring effect. Later, when Mi Lan stops acting as a wife to behave as a subject by falling in love with Ma Xin, she causes catastrophe. The real culprit, however, is Ma Xin, who betrays the “brotherhood,” first through personal ambition, then when he yields to his passion for Mi Lan.

What one remembers in BLOOD BROTHERS, however, are the spectacular scenes in which each of the three “brothers” is put to death. Here exhibitionism is clearly linked with masochism, and the work of the narrative is to bring us to the moments where these beautiful bodies are displayed in pain. It has been noted that by stressing the importance of intricate, lengthy rituals and preparation, masochism creates a certain form of narrative suspense.<sup>29</sup> Zhang Che’s flamboyant sexual economy brings to light the true relationship between the narrative elements and the moments of fighting and killing. The “plot” is there to delay those moments of pleasure, in which the spectator can vicariously experience the thrill of being simultaneously the executioner and the tortured, bleeding body.

And whose gaze represents that of the spectator? For the killings of Huang Zhong and Ma Xin, other men (soldiers) are looking on. However, the public execution of Zhang Wenxiang, carried on with minute sadism by Ma Xin’s minions, is a more complex affair. Indeed, the last shot is a freeze frame of the executioners gloating. But, in a tower, hidden behind curtains, Mi Lan, in tears, is looking on.

Married to Zhang’s brother, Mi Lan is virtually put, by virtue of the incest taboo, in the position of the forbidden Mother. Like Prometheus on his rock, it is *for her gaze* that the hero suffers. Offering the annihilation of his own cumbersome masculinity to her, he hopes to end the symbolic debt to a dead father, to a brotherhood of men, as well as the relentless training/killing/revenge scenario on which the *jiang hu* is based. For Gilles Deleuze, the male masochist yields to an all-powerful Mother/Goddess figure from a “mythical and timeless realm” to “exorcise the danger of the father.” In his submission, the masochist seeks to “kill the father in him.”<sup>30</sup>

Unfortunately, the hero is mistaken—and this is why so many *wuxia pian* end tragically. The Mother had given him a book to read. It was full of gaps. Instead of concentrating on the gaps, like a Zen Buddhist meditating on the void, he thought the text was important. So he became a fighting hero, reproducing the endless cycle of violence. And he lost the Mother forever.

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<sup>27</sup> See in particular Stanley Kwan Kam-pang’s film, *YANG+YIN: GENDER IN CHINESE CINEMA* (*NANSHENG NUXIANG*, Channel 4, UK, 1995).

<sup>28</sup> His “castration” has liberated Fang from the lure of the feminine. It was not always so. At the beginning of the film, because of his secret attraction to Qi Pei, he is distracted by her pouting and moaning, unaware that she prepares to maim him.

<sup>29</sup> Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 199.

<sup>30</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), p. 58.

# CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON— PASSING FAD OR GLOBAL PHENOMENON?

by STEPHEN TEO

For most western moviegoers, *CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON* (*WO HU CANG LONG*, 2000) served to introduce an ancient Chinese action genre known as *wuxia* (“martial chivalry”), a term much less familiar outside Asia than “kung fu,” a genre freighted with uncomfortable connotations dating back to the brief fad for dubbed martial arts pictures that erupted in the 1970s. Audiences whose expectations of martial arts cinema were shaped by the realistic kung fu fighting of Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan or Jet Li were likely dazzled by director Ang Lee’s fantastic images of flying and vaulting fighters whose predominant mode of combat is swordplay. In fact, the genre that seemed novel and exotic to many western admirers of *CROUCHING TIGER* is an old and richly evolved narrative tradition, a cornerstone of Chinese popular culture. The fantasy seen in *CROUCHING TIGER* may strike a bell with westerners familiar with Tolkien as it parallels what he termed, “Faërie.” In Chinese, the term is *shenguai*—*shen* meaning gods and spirits, and *guai* indicating the weird and the supernatural. Chinese critics refer to *shenguai wuxia* as a composite genre, variously translated as “sword and sorcery,” “swordplay and magic” or “weird and supernatural knight-errant” pictures.

Such fantasy was the *sine qua non* of martial arts cinema from at least 1928 (with the popularity of *BURNING OF THE RED LOTUS MONASTERY*/*HUOSHAO HONGLIAN*) until well into the 1960s, as can be seen in late specimens like Chan Lit-ban’s *THE SIX-FINGERED LORD OF THE LUTE* (*LOKE CHI KAM MOH/LIU ZHI QIN MO*, 1965), a delirious throwback in depicting with scratchy lines drawn directly on the negative the deadly sound waves

transmitted by a mind-clouding magical lute. The *wuxia* genre has been declared passé many times over, but it seems to have a permanent niche in the affections of Chinese audiences, and it has always managed to bounce back. (In recent years a *wuxia* fantasy revival was instigated by Tsui Hark pictures like *ZU: WARRIORS FROM THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN* [*SAN SOOK SAN KIM HAP/XIN SHUSHAN JIANXIA*, 1983] and *SWORDSMAN* [*SIU NGO KONG WOO/XIAO’AO JIANG HU*, 1990], and it has been a staple on Hong Kong television all along.)

To the Chinese of my generation, growing up in the ‘60s on Hong Kong’s Mandarin movies meant being exposed to the “new school” of *wuxia pian*. The term “new school” (*xinpai*) was lifted from *wuxia* literature, where it referred to the fiction of authors such as Jin Yong and Liang Yusheng, who began publishing in the 1950s, and who replaced the extreme fantasy elements of older writers with somewhat more realistic depictions of Chinese history and the culture of the martial arts. In the cinema, *xinpai* was a fancy way to denote the repackaging of an old-world genre, with better production standards and new young faces in order to make it more relevant and attractive to the postwar baby-boom audience. These are the films that Ang Lee refers to most directly in *CROUCHING TIGER*.

The Shaw Brothers studio was the leading producer of new school *wuxia* movies, putting them out in two cycles: the first from 1965 to 1971 (typified by the early work of King Hu and Zhang Che [Chang Cheh]) and the second from 1976 to 1981 (notably a long series adapted by director Chu Yuan [Chor Yuen] from the *wuxia* novels of Gu Long), book-ending the so-called “kung fu craze” of the early to mid-’70s. Shaw defined their reconfiguration of the genre as a “progressive movement” that broke with the “conventional ‘stagy’ shooting methods” of the old school—referring not only to the Cantonese *wuxia* serials of the 1950s, with their cartoonish special effects, but also to the long-running series of kung fu B films about Wong Fei-hung, with their stiff, stage-derived action sequences.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than attempt to achieve supernatural effects such as flying swordsmen (a feat accomplished with the use of wires), or martial arts fighters projecting inner-body energy or *qigong* from their palms and becoming invulnerable to knives and swords, Shaw’s first new school cycle made a virtue of realism, especially in depicting action and violence. However, not even the new school could forsake fantasy altogether, not without fundamentally changing the shape of the genre. The movie that propelled the new school into mainstream box-office popularity, King Hu’s *COME DRINK WITH ME* (1966), was in fact an amalgam of new school concepts and old school magic.

Immediately breaking the old school mold of artificial violence, *COME DRINK WITH ME* begins with scenes of graphic mayhem as bandits attack a convoy: we see hands hacked off and soldiers impaled with swords which stick out of their backs. These scenes showed that in terms of technical effects Hong Kong cinema was coming of age. (From my experience as a kid watching the old Wong Fei-hung movies of the ’50s, I will remember that the method of depicting somebody being run through was to have the victim grasp the sword in his armpit.) And in a sequence set in a tavern, Zheng Peipei (Cheng Pei-pei), as the character Golden Swallow, faces down a group of enemies with a set of martial arts parlor tricks of the sort popularized by the Japanese blind swordsman Zatoichi. (When they hurl coins at her, she catches every one by threading her hairpin through their central holes.) The movie in these early scenes establishes a set of relatively realistic conventions and limitations for its swordplay, in effect spelling out the natural laws of the world in which the story takes place.

But in a later episode Golden Swallow comes upon the drunken beggar Fan Dabei (Yue Hua), referred to in the English subtitles as Drunken Cat, practising his palm-projecting power in the forest. She is startled to discover that Fan is actually a martial artist with supernatural powers who has only been posing as a drunkard for reasons of his own. In the down-to-earth context that has been carefully established, the supernatural powers of Fan and his adversary, the apostate monk Liao Kong (Yang Zhiqing), are like intruders from another level of reality, which is to say, from the *jiang hu* of legend. In other words, King Hu mixes old school styles of action with the new school styles, which he felt obligated to include in *COME DRINK WITH ME*.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Nanguo Dianying [Southern Screen]* (Hong Kong), No. 92 (October 1965), p. 30.

The fantasy element remained embedded in the *wuxia* movies of the new school: Zhang Che, known as a master of realistic violence, was just as likely to portray flying swordsmen in the early films of his *wuxia* cycle, notably *TRAIL OF THE BROKEN BLADE* (*DUANCHANG JIAN*, 1967), *HAVE SWORD WILL TRAVEL* (*BAOBIAO*, 1969), *THE WANDERING SWORDSMAN* (*YOU XIA ER*, 1970), and *THE HEROIC ONES* (*SHISAN TAIBAO*, 1970). Zhang’s mixture of macho violence and supernaturalism further blurred the distinction between realism and fantasy.

The element of pure fantasy only really took a back seat (for a time) when the kung fu movie broke onto the scene in the early 1970s. Kung fu’s emphasis was on “real fighting,” a concept that was meant to counter the tradition of supernaturalism in *wuxia*, and was reinforced by the involvement of actors who were genuine martial artists (as typified by Bruce Lee) rather than those unschooled in actual fighting skills and merely mimicking the motions. This emphasis on realism is a much more important distinction between *wuxia* and kung fu than the preference for armed or unarmed combat. In the *wuxia* genre, the knight-errant is almost always a master of both unarmed and armed techniques. It is not uncommon in *wuxia* movies to see a fighter wielding a sword in combat, only to lose it and continue with his bare hands. At the height of the kung fu boom in the ’70s, Zhang Che in *BLOOD BROTHERS* (*CI MA*, 1973) and King Hu in *THE VALIANT ONES* (*ZHONGLIE TU*, 1975) showed such a progression occurring naturally in the course of battle, demonstrating that the directors most responsible for the *wuxia* resurgence of the mid-’60s had by then gracefully accepted the switch from *wuxia* to kung fu.

The rise of kung fu was presaged in the new school *wuxia* era by the Cathay studio’s marvelous production *FROM THE HIGHWAY* (*LUKE YU DAOKE*, 1970), directed by Zhang Zengze (Chang Tseng-chai). The film is set in the northern Chinese plains during the early republican era and features a hero who fights only with his hands. The hero’s main adversary is a bandit leader whose favorite weapon is his bald head, which he uses as a battering ram; another villain uses his pigtail as a whip. Obviously, the notion of “real fighting” in *FROM THE HIGHWAY* cannot be taken too literally, but must be grasped as cinematic representations of violence and fighting techniques based on allegedly real kung fu traditions. The movie marked a turning point in the new school martial arts cinema because of its depictions of unarmed combat styles but in the vein just this side of *wuxia* folklore.

Shaw Brothers was immediately on cue with the Zhang Che opus *VENGEANCE!* (*BAOCHOU*, 1970), released a few months after *FROM THE HIGHWAY*. The preponderance of unarmed combat, complemented by the use of daggers and short swords, and even guns, confirmed that the transition from *wuxia* to the next phase of martial arts cinema was well in progress. *VENGEANCE!* is often erroneously cited as the first pre-Bruce Lee kung fu movie in Hong Kong cinema; that honor really belongs to *FROM THE HIGHWAY*. However, the former’s early republican setting and David Jiang Dawei’s (David Chiang’s) all-white wardrobe offered a foretaste of Bruce Lee’s *FIST OF FURY* (*JINGWU MEN*, 1972),<sup>2</sup> while the appearance of firearms and the Beijing Opera background, linking operatic performances with death and violence (countersigned by Zhang’s use of slow motion), foreshadow the 1980s “bullet operas” directed by Zhang’s former assistant and protégé John Woo.

The new school reached a culmination in the late ’60s, with two magnificent works: Wang Xinglei’s *ESCORTS OVER TIGER HILLS* (*HUSHAN HANG*, 1969) and King Hu’s *A TOUCH OF ZEN* (*XIA NI*, begun in 1968 but released in 1971), both shot in Taiwan with injections of talent and money from Hong Kong. *ESCORTS* is a wry study of the pursuit of *xia* (chivalry). It centers

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<sup>2</sup> Lee’s films were released out of sequence in the US and with confusingly re-shuffled titles. *FIST OF FURY* became *THE CHINESE CONNECTION* in the US; the movie known in the US as *FIST OF FURY* was released in Hong Kong as *THE BIG BOSS* (*TANGSHAN DA XIONG*, 1971).

on an unusual hero, the brooding Jing Wuji (Qiao Hong/Roy Chiao), an ex-guerrilla fighter who becomes a monk and is recalled to service to escort a convoy of Tartar prisoners through hostile territory. As a monk, Jing is bound by the Buddhist taboo against killing; as the film progresses, we also discover that he has abandoned two ex-wives, one of whom has gone over to the enemy in order to pursue him and badger his conscience. Director Wang employs flash cuts, superimpositions, freeze frames, and a dexterous, fluid camera to intense visceral effect; his style is so advanced that it feels like a foretaste of the postmodern impressionism of Wong Kar-wai, in the revisionist *wuxia* psycho-drama *ASHES OF TIME* (*TONG CHE SAI DIK/DONGXIE XIDU*, 1994).

The new school was, if nothing else, cinematically audacious by Hong Kong standards: Zhang Che was well known for his use of slow motion and King Hu for his sleight-of-hand editing techniques and dense mise-en-scène. Hu achieved international recognition with *A TOUCH OF ZEN*, which won a prize at the 1975 Cannes International Film Festival, the first Chinese film to do so. Thereafter the film was held up as a standard-bearer for the prestigious martial arts art movie—the only real role model, in short, for Ang Lee's crossover ambitions in *CROUCHING TIGER*.

*A TOUCH OF ZEN* was a sublime fusion of old school *shenguai* fantasy and new school realism, morphing into a meditation on superstition and Zen. But its single most memorable ingredient was the characterization of the taciturn lady knight-errant archetype whose fighting skills were a match for those of the most heroic male knight-errant in the genre. Hu practically reinvented the archetype; his character, Yang Huizhen (Xu Feng/Hsu Feng), and her role in the justly famous battle sequence set in a bamboo forest, was a direct source of inspiration for Ang Lee.

In the scene, Yang Huizhen vaults to the top of the bamboo tree and dives down to kill her enemy. Hu could have employed reverse motion to depict the vault, the technique used in the average *wuxia* picture of this period. But he was not interested in camera trickery because he wanted to stress realism (or, as we may understand the word, in the spirit of "real kung fu"). Hu wanted to show his protagonists as possessing credible martial arts powers, which were attained through assiduous training. The sensation of credibility is achieved in a series of brief close shots, spliced together in an overlapping "jump cut" style that places the emphasis squarely on Yang's practical skills. Her first challenge is reaching a suitable height for her dive, so she rebounds off one tree in order to land higher on another, pausing a moment before she dives, as if to judge the correct ratio of height to force that will propel her at the correct angle toward the ground. Paradoxically, Hu's choreographic style of action, based on opera and montage, actually accentuates the realism of the action.

When Ang Lee paid homage to this sequence with his own battle in a bamboo forest in *CROUCHING TIGER*, no editing magic was called for. Lee simply used computer technology to erase the support wires being manipulated by action choreographer Yuen Wo-ping and his crew, to show his human protagonists seemingly floating in mid-air in defiance of gravity. The frisky Jen (Zhang Ziyi) aviates effortlessly from one tree-top to another, and the male knight-errant, Li Mubai (Chow Yun-fat) alights onto the branches with the grace of an eagle. They fight and fly, fly and fight, the clangor of their swords adding a dissonant note to the natural serenity of the forest. In truth Ang Lee is not merely paying homage to King Hu, he is trying to recast one of Hu's most famous new school sequences in the vein of unadulterated old school *wuxia* fantasy—with the assistance of advanced technology.

On one level Lee was attempting to evoke, for a global audience of adults, the sense of wonder he had experienced watching *wuxia* movies as a boy. The key word here is "global." Throughout his career Lee has had two quite distinct audiences, one in the East and one in the West, that have perceived his movies very differently. As he told *Premiere*, "All the Chinese films I've made, from *PUSHING HANDS* (1992) to *EAT, DRINK, MAN, WOMAN* (1994), were mainstream summer blockbusters in Asia and art movies in the non-Asian territories. So I have always had to hit both standards."<sup>3</sup> In his audio commentary for the *CROUCHING TIGER* DVD, Lee admits feeling some pressure to "sell the movie to a western audience." He was taking a risk because he had to deliver the film as a martial arts blockbuster to the Chinese audience, who had strong proprietary feelings about the form's long-established traditions, and simultaneously as an arthouse product to the rest of the world, where few moviegoers were primed to take the genre seriously.

When the West first discovered Hong Kong's martial arts cinema in the '70s, it was in the form of boxing and kicking movies that western critics somewhat derogatorily described as "chopsockies." Even as "kung fu" came into general usage, it was as much a byword for schlock as a term to indicate the broad spectrum of martial arts. Bruce Lee epitomized kung fu both in its serious and schlock dimensions. Lee also spearheaded the trend of co-productions featuring Chinese martial arts and some element of western action style or genre. *ENTER THE DRAGON* (1973), starring Lee, successfully combined kung fu and James Bond-style action. But there also were some bizarre combinations such as *THE LEG-END OF THE SEVEN GOLDEN VAMPIRES* (*QI JIN SHI*, 1974), Shaw Brothers' joint venture with Britain's Hammer Film Company, that fused kung fu with the Dracula legend, suggesting at the very least that there was some misunderstanding in the West of what kung fu was all about. The genre's popularity quickly subsided although Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung and Jet Li have since revived it with their superior renditions of kung fu as Keaton-esque comedy, and as dance. However, their high profiles have led to audience perceptions of "martial arts cinema" that are too narrowly focused on the kung fu movie.

Western fans of *CROUCHING TIGER* who seek out older, more orthodox examples of the pre-kung fu *wuxia* genre will quickly realize that Ang Lee's movie was in many ways a misleading introduction to its central traditions. The film has in a sense been compromised by its awareness of the western audience. A reconstruction of the fundamentals occurs right at the beginning. A Hong Kong *wuxia* action movie normally starts with an action sequence. One device commonly used in Zhang Che's films, and later in those of Lau Kar-leung (Liu Jialiang; cf. *THE 36TH CHAMBER OF SHAOLIN* [*SHAOLIN SANSHILIU FANG*], 1978), was to stage an action sequence *under the opening credits*. In contrast, the "crossover" ambitions of *CROUCHING TIGER* require a long passage of exposition designed to familiarize westerners with the period, the characters and even the appearance of the sets. The first eruption of action does not occur until 15 minutes later. In his DVD commentary, Lee explains that he needed to show western viewers *why* the characters fight, because they would not be prepared to take them for granted as generic archetypes, conventional figures as deeply familiar in Asia as the frontier gunfighter is elsewhere. For Lee, "Fighting is an acceleration of repression," and so we are introduced to Yu Shulian (Michelle Yeoh) and Li Mubai not as warriors but as repressed lovers. We see Li Mubai initially as a world-weary hero who wants to give up his sword, the Green Destiny, because the duty it represents weighs upon him too heavily.

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<sup>3</sup> David Chute, "Year of the Dragon," *Premiere* (December 2000), p. 77.

This is in many respects a conscious reversal of the heroic tradition established in the new school *wuxia* movies. Even the convention of a heroic death is denied Li Mubai, who is killed by a woman and, as Ang Lee points out, “by a very small needle for a very small ambiguous cause.”<sup>4</sup> The final shot of the movie, Jen’s leap from Mount Wudang, is the kind of open, ambiguous ending that ultimately plays to the western sensibility of an arthouse movie rather than to the Chinese sense of a satisfying action movie finale. The final fight in *CROUCHING TIGER*, in which Li Mubai kills Jade Fox (Zheng Peipei), is not even the emotional climax of the movie, as Lee himself owns up: “There’s yet another 15 minutes to come,” he says, “and above that, when the villain is killed, we don’t feel good.”<sup>5</sup>

The film was adjusted to western eyes and ears even in some relatively minor details. Zhang Ziyi’s character was familiar to Chinese readers of Wang Dulu’s source novel *The Crane-Iron Pentology* (1938–1942), and from several pre-*CROUCHING TIGER* film and television adaptations, as Yu Jiaolong. Her Chinese name resonates with two important motifs of the story: her family name, Yu, meaning Jade, associates her with the Green Destiny sword, while her given name, Jiaolong, meaning “tender dragon,” identifies her as the “Hidden Dragon” of the title. Such associations are clearly lost with the name “Jen” in the English subtitles, a pure concoction whose only function is to place the character on a familiar-sounding first-name basis with the western audience.

Then there is the question of the *sound* of the movie’s Mandarin dialog. Although neither the Hong Kong Cantonese actor Chow Yun-fat nor the Chinese-Malaysian actress Michelle Yeoh are native speakers of Mandarin, the movie was nevertheless shot with live synch-sound, in the western manner. With the rise of Mandarin-language cinema in Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong in the 1960s, the local film industry adopted the practice of post-synchronization and “voice-doubling.” Actors who could not speak “proper” Mandarin were regularly dubbed by those who could. For example, Bai Ying, a regular in Hu’s *wuxia* films (he plays the eunuch Cao in *DRAGON INN* [*LONGMEN KEZHAN*], 1968) told me that he was regularly dubbed by actor Tian Feng, the Mandarin voice coach and director who appears as the principal of the martial arts academy in Zhang Che’s *ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN* (*DUBI DAO*, 1967). But because Ang Lee chose not to dub *CROUCHING TIGER*, both of his leading players can be heard on the soundtrack speaking Mandarin with their respective heavy accents. To a western audience, the result does not sound anomalous but it has a jarring effect on Chinese viewers—which may begin to explain why the film did poorly on the Mainland.

While some may argue that these issues are just side effects of the crossover phenomenon that don’t really affect the movie’s overall aesthetic design, these deviations from *wuxia* norm do point to a shift in the terms of reference for the genre’s development in the future. *CROUCHING TIGER* is not as bold a revisionist genre experiment as certain home-grown products (cf. Wong Kar-wai’s *ASHES OF TIME* or Tsui Hark’s *THE BLADE* [*DAO*, 1995]). But its crossover translation of the *wuxia* movie, necessitating the reconstruction of narrative conventions and the use of accented Mandarin, can be seen as representing an evolving paradigm of

the martial arts genre as it enters the new millennium. Filmed in Mainland China by a Taiwanese director based in the US, with money from Hollywood, Europe and Asia, and with a cast assembled from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Taiwan, and the Mainland, the film is unusual only in refusing to disguise the transnational circumstances of its production. “I can endure accents,” Lee says,<sup>6</sup> grafting the spirit of the global melting pot onto a genre whose traditional appeal to its Chinese diasporic audience has been its presentation of a mythic China.

*CROUCHING TIGER*’s impact on the world market suggests that Ang Lee may have been on to something. The *wuxia* subgenre has now gone well beyond the Chinese diaspora. For starters, it has become pan-Asian, as in the Korean production *MUSA THE WARRIOR* (2001), a *wuxia* look-alike featuring Zhang Ziyi as a Chinese princess who finds herself amidst a group of Korean knights-errant in long-ago China. Zhang Yimou’s new film *HERO* (*YINGXIONG*, 2003), unreleased at the time of writing, seems like another attempt to duplicate *CROUCHING TIGER*’s globalized postmodern paradigm: Mainland director, star from Hollywood by way of Hong Kong (Jet Li), co-stars from China (Zhang Ziyi again) and from the art-film wing of Hong Kong cinema (Tony Leung Chiu-wai and Maggie Cheung Man-yuk, the romantic couple in Wong Kar-wai’s highbrow date movie *IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE* [*DUT YEUNG NIN WA/HUA YANG NIAN HUA*, 2001]).

These ripples stemming from the international success of *CROUCHING TIGER* represent a *wuxia* resurgence, but of a very different kind from the one that swept through Hong Kong cinema in the ‘60s. More and more, this resurgence is taking on a transnational character—which also means that the *wuxia* picture is increasingly moving away from its center in the Hong Kong film industry, where it has flourished and evolved since the end of World War II. The economic malaise still plaguing Hong Kong cinema, a result of the Asian financial crisis, means that the industry must increasingly turn to multinational financing and co-productions like *CROUCHING TIGER* and *HERO*. What is not apparent is how the martial arts genre will develop when cut off from the nourishing culture of this center.

The Hong Kong Mandarin cinema’s new school *wuxia* picture was not a pristine genre to be sure. It absorbed influences from Hollywood and Italian spaghetti Westerns, the swashbuckler, the sword-and-sandal picture, the spy thriller, the detective genre, and Japanese *chanbara*. But these influences were digested and remade into an authentic, veritable Hong Kong action form, a distinctive local cultural product. For better or worse Hong Kong set the pattern for the genre for over 30 years. It is only fitting that we should now look back and celebrate this form, in all its indigenous splendor.

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<sup>4</sup> Lee, in the audio commentary of the *CROUCHING TIGER* DVD.

<sup>5</sup> Lee, DVD.

<sup>6</sup> Lee, DVD.

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## SELECTED INTERNET RESOURCES

Chang Cheh: The Godfather of the Kung Fu Film

<http://changcheh.0catch.com/>

Articles and interviews

A Chinese Cinema Page

<http://www.chinesecinemas.org/>

Articles, reviews and program notes

Chinese Wushia Knight-Errant

<http://edu.ocac.gov.tw/taiwan/kungfu/index.htm>

Information on *wuxia* fiction and film and its roots in Chinese history

Hong Kong Film Critics Association

<http://filmcritics.org.hk>

Hong Kong Film Archive

<http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/CulturalService/HKFA/english/eindex.html>

Hong Kong International Film Festival

<http://www.hkiff.org.hk/>

Hong Kong Movie Database

<http://www.hkmcb.com/>

The Illuminated Lantern

<http://www.illuminatedlantern.com/index.html>

Background articles, links, and film reviews

Kung Fu Magazine

<http://ezine.kungfumagazine.com/info/index.php>

Collection of FAQs and glossaries on martial arts styles, techniques, weapons, training, and legends



photo: BLOOD BROTHERS

邵仁枚

張徽

ONE-ARMED  
SWORDSMAN

# 獨臂刀

紫迎潘姣焦

FILM NOTES



poster: ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN



## RED HEROINE [HONG XIA]

China 1929    Director: Wen Yimin

Episode six of RED HEROINE (a.k.a. RED KNIGHT-ERRANT), the only surviving episode of the 13-part serial, is also one of the few complete and earliest extant silent martial arts films. Made at the height of the martial arts craze in 1920s Shanghai, this lively tale about the rise of a woman warrior features the genre's then-characteristic blend of pulp and mystical derring-do.

A rampaging army raids a village and kidnaps a maiden, causing the death of the young woman's grandmother. At the general's lair, the captive maiden faces imminent rape, but is lo and behold rescued by the mysterious Daoist hermit, White Monkey. Three years later, Yun Mei ("Yun Ko" in the English intertitles) reemerges as a full-fledged warrior, ready to deploy the magic powers learnt from White Monkey to avenge her grandmother's death.

This "maiden of the clouds" (the literal meaning of "Yun Mei") flies across the skies to rescue another innocent captured by the marauding soldiers. Appearing and disappearing in a puff of smoke, Yungu scurries up and down walls on a rope, runs and jumps, dodges here and attacks there. While sprinkled with anachronisms and prurient incongruities (for instance, the general's lair is part-country villa, part-operatic stage and part-DeMille den of iniquity with bikini-clad women and bestial men), the film is never less than a robust telling of a young woman's transformation from abject victim to resolute warrior. Her flight of empowerment noticeably leads her away from family and marriage towards a chaste omniscience in an otherworldly plane.

The film's director Wen Yimin plays the archetypal non-fighting scholar to whom Yun Mei plays matchmaker. According to Fan Xuepeng who stars as Yun Mei, her warrior garb was originally tinted, the better to be a vision in red.

—Cheng-Sim Lim

Studio: Youlian. Cinematography: Yao Shiquan. Art Director: Hu Xuguang. Cast: Fan Xuepeng, Xu Guohui, Wang Juqing, Wen Yimin, Chen Qiaxiang.  
Beta-SP, silent with Chinese and English intertitles, 94 min.  
Tape Source: Asian Union Film Ltd.

**With live musical accompaniment by KCRW DJ Anne Litt**



## SWORDSWOMAN OF HUANGJIANG [HUANGJIANG NÜXIA]

China 1930 Directors: Chen Kengran, Zheng Yisheng, Shang Guanwu

This entertaining curtain-raiser to the adventure series, *SWORDSWOMAN OF HUANGJIANG*, is sadly missing credits and footage at the beginning and end. (The 12 later episodes in the series are also presumed lost.) Nevertheless, enough remains of the film's ebullient mixing of special effects and now-familiar martial arts motifs—"weightless" vaulting, swordfighters competing to prove their superior technique, nighttime skirmishes in a temple—to make it an exemplary precursor to the Hong Kong "sword and sorcery" films of 30 years hence.

The eponymous swordswoman Fang Yuqin roams the countryside with her "martial brother" Yue Jianqiu, dispensing aid and protection to people in need. While travelling in the mountains, she chances upon a group of villagers terrorized by a giant "golden-eyed eagle." The monster has caught a little boy, and it is up to our *nüxia* [female knight-errant] to save him. That she does and spectacularly, with an animated superhuman leap across a deep ravine (although the primitive special effect may look quaint to modern eyes).

Fang is then induced to a neighboring town where she is challenged to a duel by a young martial artist, who can boast of her own gravity-defying feats. As Fang and her challenger parry and thrust, crossing blades, their all-female contest—a marvelously choreographed sequence posing a surprising and early reversal of Zhang Che-esque masculinist rhetoric—turns into female bonding. The erstwhile combatants decide to rout the robbers who are threatening the younger woman's town. Fang and Yue set off on the mission. As night falls, they stop at a temple where, as surely as the way of the *jiang hu* (underworld) evoked in the series' title, danger steals in with the dark.

—Cheng-Sim Lim

Studio: Youlian. Scenario: Gu Mingdao. Cinematography: Yao Shiquan. Cast: Xu Qinfang, He Zhigang.  
Beta-SP, silent with Chinese and English intertitles, 74 min.  
Tape Source: Asian Union Film Ltd.

**With live musical accompaniment by KCRW DJ Anne Litt**



## THE STORY OF WONG FEI-HUNG, PART I

[WONG FEI-HUNG CHUIN, SEUNG CHAP/HUANG FEIHONG CHUAN, SHANGJI]

Hong Kong 1949 Director: Wu Pang

The real-life Wong Fei-hung was an apothecary and martial arts instructor in Guangdong around the turn of the 20th century. Over the years following his death, he became the subject of a legend that cast him as a nationalist crusader for justice, fighting for the oppressed against evil and corruption. As a benevolent master to his disciples, teaching them both fighting skills and ethics, he came to represent the Confucian ideals of filial piety, wisdom, restraint, and moral rectitude.

In 1949 filmmaker Wu Pang, seeking to revive the moribund Cantonese cinema in Hong Kong, hit upon the idea of making a film about the legendary patriot. He and screenwriter Ng Yat-siu sought out one of Wong's surviving disciples. In the title role, they cast Kwan Tak-hing, an actor trained in Cantonese Opera. *THE STORY OF WONG FEI-HUNG, PART I* begins with Wong gaining a new disciple. Soon enough, there is a damsel in distress to rescue, and later, in a scene straight out of a Western, the wounded Wong is given shelter by a feisty woman who throws his pursuers off his scent.

Although replete with trap doors, sliding walls and venomous snakes, *WONG FEI-HUNG, PART I* is too early yet for the series' anthem, "Under the General's Orders." (The tune was famously resuscitated in the 1990s Tsui Hark *ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA* series starring Jet Li as the young Wong.) Instead, the film that launched an incredible 98 sequels and countless other spin-offs offers an unadorned Cantonese song set and energetic pole-fighting. Hewing close to actual Southern martial arts styles, this modest film marks the arrival of realistic combat onscreen, with Kwan Tak-hing as the kung fu forerunner of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan.

—David Pendleton

Studio: Yonyyao. Producer: Cheung Tsok-hong. Screenplay: Ng Yat-siu. Based on the story by Chu Yu-chai. Martial Arts Director: Leung Wing-hang. Cast: Kwan Tak-hing, Tso Tat-wah, Lee Lan, Sek Kin, Tse Chi-wai. 16mm, in Cantonese (unsubtitled), 72 min. Print Source: Hong Kong Film Archive



### KWAN TAK-HING

The actor was already a Cantonese Opera star and martial arts exponent when he took on the role of the Cantonese folk-hero in *THE STORY OF WONG FEI-HUNG, PART I* (1949). Kwan played Wong in about 80 more episodes, making his last appearance in the series in the early 1970s, and indelibly etching the persona of Wong Fei-hung for generations of martial arts movie fans.



## THE SIX-FINGERED LORD OF THE LUTE, PART I

[LOKE CHI KAM MOH, SEUNG CHAP/LIU ZHI QIN MO, SHANGJI]

Hong Kong 1965 Director: Chan Lit-ban

An action-packed “sword and sorcery” three-parter, *THE SIX-FINGERED LORD OF THE LUTE* leaves no narrative device unturned. (The Archive is only showing Part I, leaving the spectator in the most delightful cliffhanger, as sinister shadows gather in the dark around attractive young heroes.) There is a McGuffin (a box containing a mysterious object); a martial arts couple feuding over the education of their son; and the son, ravishingly played by 1960s (female) teen idol, Connie Chan Po-chu. There is a bevy of martial arts masters, thugs and lone women—all from different martial arts schools, dressed in ways that do not always coincide with their biological gender, and wielding swords, knives, bludgeons, whips, darts, or chains. There are beggars, ghosts and the mysterious Lord of the Lute himself, whose evil music, illustrated by some of the most exuberant pre-Tsui Hark special effects in Cantonese cinema, can paralyze those unlucky enough to hear it.

The protagonists are endlessly travelling, fighting their foes at crossroads, spending the night in sinister inns, arriving uninvited at the mansions of other clans, jumping in the air or through windows, are ambushed, drugged, challenged to duels, and even killed. Daughters and sons vow to avenge their parents, fathers their children, husbands their wives, and students their masters, so the plot keeps churning at a brisk pace.

As such, the film is a treat for contemporary audiences, though its historical significance is no less lacking. Its production company, Sin-Hok Kong-luen, helped revive in postwar Hong Kong, the Shanghai silent cinema’s practice of adapting martial arts fiction to the screen. In this case it was a novel by Ni Kuang (Ngai Hong), who later became Zhang Che’s screenwriting partner. The film was remade in 1994 as *DEADFUL MELODY*, starring Brigitte Lin Qingxia (Lin Ching-hsia) and Yuen Biao.

—*Bérénice Reynaud*

Studio: Sin-Hok Kong-luen. Producer: Yee Hoi-cheng. Screenplay: Leng Hon, Kong Yeung, Lau Tan-chong. Based on the novel by Ni Kuang (Ngai Hong). Cinematography: Leung Hong. Martial Arts Director: Kwan Ching-leung. Art Director: Tong Pui-sun. Editor: Tsui Kit-fong. Music: Poon Cheuk. Cast: Connie Chan Po-chu, Lee Gui-on, Sek Kin, Tam Cheng-hong, Kong Fu-seng. Beta-SP, in Cantonese (unsubtitled), 94 min. Tape Source: Hong Kong Film Archive



### CONNIE CHAN PO-CHU

This 1960s teen star appeared in over 230 films between her screen debut in 1959 and her retirement, at the age of 25, in 1972. Versed in both Southern and Northern fighting styles, Chan became an icon of the Cantonese cinema at a time when the industry was facing stiff competition from Mandarin productions. Chan tried a wide array of genres but became best-known for her work in contemporary youth dramas, teen comedies and martial arts films.



## COME DRINK WITH ME [DAI ZUI XIA]

Hong Kong 1966 Director: King Hu

A magistrate escorting prisoners is kidnapped by Jade-Faced Tiger (Chen Honglie), whose gang of unsavory thugs is holed up in a temple, under the protection of a mysterious abbot. In a country inn, a handsome warrior, Golden Swallow, challenges the gangsters, effortlessly warding off their attacks with his superior skills. A drunken beggar stumbles onto the scene, asking for a drink, and later, leading a posse of orphaned children. The country inn is turned into a stage on which the most elegant and dazzling acrobatics are performed.

Yet nothing is what it seems. Played by Zheng Peipei (Cheng Pei-pei), one of the most distinguished martial arts actresses of her time, Golden Swallow is the governor's daughter, on a mission to rescue her kidnapped brother. The blundering drunk turns out to be a top martial arts artist, Fan Dabei. (Ever heard of "drunken kung fu?")

The scene changes to the temple where, now dressed as a woman, Golden Swallow confronts Jade-Faced Tiger and his gang. Hiding in the shadows, Fan Dabei (Yue Hua) rescues her when she's hit by a poisonous dart, and cares for her in his little shack by a waterfall. Romance is in the air, especially in the tender moment when the Drunken Hero (the beggar's appellation as well as the Chinese title of the film) catches the swooning damsel in his arms. Yet these two have some work to do. And the final showdown may not be what is expected. In only his martial arts directorial debut, King Hu joins poetics to sophisticated action choreography, ushering in the "new school" swordplay and the martial arts film as a major art form.

—Bérénice Reynaud

Studio: Shaw Brothers. Producer: Run Run Shaw (Shao Cunren). Screenplay: King Hu, Er Yang. Cinematography: He Lanshan. Martial Arts Director: Han Yingjie. Art Director: Johnson Cao. Editor: Jiang Xinglong. Sound: Wang Yonghua. Music: Zhou Lanping. Cast: Zheng Peipei, Yue Hua, Chen Honglie, Li Yunzhong, Yang Qiqing.  
35mm, in Mandarin with English subtitles, 94 min.  
Print Source: Celestial Pictures Ltd.

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### KING HU (1932-1997)

Beijing-born King Hu entered the Hong Kong film industry as an art director but quickly moved on to acting, screenwriting and finally directing at the Shaw Brothers studio in the late 1950s. After an uncredited co-directing stint with Li Hanxiang on *THE LOVE ETERNITY* (1963), Hu directed his first full feature, *SONS OF THE GOOD EARTH*, in 1964. *COME DRINK WITH ME* was his first martial arts film. That and the follow-up, *DRAGON INN* (1968), made after the director left Shaw, defined many of the modern conventions of the swordplay film, with their operatic action choreography, innovative camera and editing techniques.

In 1975, Hu's *A TOUCH OF ZEN* (1971) became the first Chinese film to win a prize at Cannes. Subsequent films like *THE VALIANT ONES* (1975) and *RAINING IN THE MOUNTAIN* (1979) sealed his reputation as a master of the martial arts genre. Hu was a resident of Pasadena in the last 15 years of his life. His influence continues to be felt in the works of such directors today as Tsui Hark and Ang Lee.





## ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN [DUBI DAO]

Hong Kong 1967 Director: Zhang Che

Zhang Che's riveting revenge thriller is often identified as the key transitional film between the "old school" *wuxia* (swordplay) picture and what we now think of as the kung fu movie. And indeed, all the standard kung fu plot features are already firmly in place. The eponymous hero, Fang Gang, played with sullen charisma by Jimmy Wang Yu, is an orphaned "scholarship student" at a ritzy martial arts academy, a resentful commoner persecuted by the sneering gentry. He endures their bullying stoically, until his *sifu's* spoiled daughter (Qiao Qiao) happens to spy on him as he chops wood, shirtless and gleaming. Infuriated by her own desire, she takes out her Lawrencian frustration upon its object by chopping off one of his arms. (You don't have to be a psychoanalyst to parse the symbolism.) During a sojourn in the wilderness Fang masters the unfamiliar art of fighting left-handed with his broken blade, and returns home to trounce his astonished enemies—who in the meantime have perfected an unsportsmanlike "sword clamp" device that turns out to be useless against Fang's stubby weapon.

ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN created a revolution in the genre with its innovative emphasis on match-ups among various fighting styles and the warrior's training process. Even in its visual details the film announces the arrival of a new kind of hero: Wang Yu wears simple, functional clothing modeled on the dusty homespun of the *ronin* samurai (especially Zatoichi) that inspired director Zhang and screenwriter Ni Kuang, while his snooty persecutors sport layered sword-dude outfits trimmed with animal fur, like those worn by the stalwart prigs in conventional *wuxia* B pictures.

—David Chute

Studio: Shaw Brothers. Producer: Runme Shaw (Shao Renmei). Screenplay: Ni Kuang, Zhang Che. Cinematography: Yuan Zengshan, Guan Hanle. Martial Arts Directors: Tong Kai (Tang Jia), Lau Kar-leung (Liu Jialiang). Art Director: Chen Qingshen. Editor: Jiang Xinglong. Sound: Wang Yonghua. Music: Wang Fuling. Cast: Jimmy Wang Yu, Ban Yinze, Qiao Qiao, Zhang Beishan, Huang Zongxun.

35mm, in Mandarin with English subtitles, 111 min.

Print Source: Celestial Pictures Ltd.

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### NI KUANG (Ngai Hong)

Prolific novelist and screenwriter Ni Kuang is estimated to have churned out over 400 scripts and 300 pulp adventure novels over the course of a 50-year career. Ni Kuang emigrated to Hong Kong from Shanghai in 1957 and initially made his living writing *wuxia* serials for daily newspapers. When several of these were successfully filmed (including *THE SIX-FINGERED LORD OF THE LUTE*, 1965), he was recruited by Shaw Brothers to be a screenwriter. His first produced script for Shaw was *ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN* (1967).

In the late '70s Ni Kuang wrote the majority of scripts directed by Zhang Che, Lau Kar-leung and Chu Yuan (Chor Yuen). He also penned the first two Bruce Lee vehicles *THE BIG BOSS* (1971) and *FIST OF FURY* (a.k.a. *THE CHINESE CONNECTION*, 1972). In the 1980s Ni Kuang returned to fiction writing. His most popular pulp hero, the globetrotting occult investigator Wai Shut-lee ("Wisely"), has been portrayed onscreen by Chow Yun-fat and Andy Lau, among others.



### ZHANG CHE (Chang Cheh, 1923-2002)

The celebrated "Godfather" of the Hong Kong action cinema began as a screenwriter in the late '40s in Shanghai. He directed his first film in Taiwan in 1949 before moving to Hong Kong in 1957. Zhang joined MP & GI (Cathay studio's predecessor) as a screenwriter in 1960 but departed two years later for Shaw Brothers. The success of *TIGER BOY* (1964) propelled Zhang into a decade-long career zenith during which he directed some of the martial arts genre's best-known classics: *ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN* (1967), *GOLDEN SWALLOW* (1968), *VENGEANCE!* (1970), *THE BOXER FROM SHANDONG* (1972), *BLOOD BROTHERS* (1973), and *DISCIPLES OF SHAOLIN* (1975).

Zhang claimed to have overturned the primacy of female stars in the Hong Kong film industry with his aesthetics of masculine violence and his grooming of male stars, including Jimmy Wang Yu, David Jiang Dawei (David Chiang), Di Long (Ti Lung), and Alexander Fu Sheng. Among his protégés behind the camera is director John Woo. For a short spell in the late '70s, Zhang went independent with his own production company, culminating with the late-career highpoint, *THE FIVE VENOMS* (1978). He worked sporadically in the '80s and made his last film in 1993.



## GOLDEN SWALLOW [JIN YANZI]

Hong Kong 1968 Director: Zhang Che

A nominal sequel to King Hu's *COME DRINK WITH ME*, *GOLDEN SWALLOW* takes its title from the heroine of Hu's film but, in line with director Zhang Che's (Chang Cheh's) proclivity for male-centered stories, reorients the plot around a tormented swordsman. Although popular *wuxia* star Zheng Peipei (Cheng Pei-pei) reprised her role as Golden Swallow, the film's true protagonist is Silver Roc, the brooding knight portrayed by Zhang's new male star, Jimmy Wang Yu. A prototype for the conflicted heroes that would dominate virtually all of Zhang's subsequent films, Silver Roc is a psychologically complex figure, drawn to violence and driven by a death wish, while at the same time possessed of a poetic sensibility and powerful romantic yearnings. In Zhang's typically tragic scheme, these warring tendencies inevitably bring about the character's downfall.

Zhang's revision of Hu's narrative priorities is also reflected in the directors' differing approaches to thematics and style. Hu's exposition of Daoist and Confucian mores in *COME DRINK WITH ME* is here replaced by the advocacy of *yang gang*: a masculine code of honor that Zhang expresses through violent action. Where Hu emulates the studied rhythms and poses of Beijing Opera, Zhang emphasizes rough vigor—not to mention the grislier aspects of violence, including bodily maiming and psychological trauma. Nevertheless, both Zhang's bravura aesthetic, bolstered by the martial arts choreography of Tong Kai (Tang Jia) and Lau Kar-leung (Liu Jialiang), and Hu's more ethereal method would prove equally influential on the future Hong Kong action cinema.

—Jesse Zigelstein

Studio: Shaw Brothers. Producer: Runme Shaw (Shao Renmei). Screenplay: Zhang Che. Cinematography: Bao Xueli. Martial Arts Directors: Tong Kai, Lau Kar-leung. Art Directors: Chen Qirui, Chen Qingshen. Editor: Jiang Xinglong. Sound: Wang Yonghua. Music: Wang Fuling. Cast: Jimmy Wang Yu, Zheng Peipei, Luo Lie, Zhao Xiuyan, Yang Zhiqing.

35mm, in Mandarin with English subtitles, 108 min.

Print Source: Celestial Pictures Ltd.

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### JIMMY WANG YU

Along with actors Lou Lie, Yue Hua and Zheng Peipei, Wang Yu emerged as a Shaw Brothers star in the 1960s. Wang was cast in his first Zhang Che film, *TIGER BOY*, in 1964. His iconic image as a tormented warrior was cemented in subsequent Zhang Che collaborations: *ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN* (1967), *THE ASSASSIN* (1967) and *GOLDEN SWALLOW* (1968). Turning to directing with *THE CHINESE BOXER* (1970), Wang helped lead the transition from sword-play to kung fu movies in the '70s. He continued a career as an actor-director through the '80s, mainly in Taiwan.



### ZHENG PEIPEI (Cheng Pei-pei)

The Shanghai-born former ballet student made her screen debut in male drag in *THE LOTUS LAMP* (1963). She made over 20 films under contract at Shaw Brothers, most notably *COME DRINK WITH ME* (1966), *HONG KONG NOCTURNE* (1966), *GOLDEN SWALLOW* (1968), and *THE LADY HERMIT* (1971). Her many portrayals of the highly skilled *xianü*, or female knight-errant, throughout the '60s paved the way for such latter-day female action stars as Michelle Yeoh. Zheng returned to prominence as the villainous Jade Fox in Ang Lee's *CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON* (2000).





## DRAGON INN [LONGMEN KEZHAN]

Taiwan 1968 Director: King Hu

King Hu's follow-up to *COME DRINK WITH ME* (1966) is a rousing period tale about a heroic trio who defy the ruthless secret security forces of a corrupt despot to protect a family of political exiles. At the eponymous frontier establishment, the murderous agents of a powerful imperial eunuch, Cao Shaoqin (Bai Ying), lie in wait for the banished children of an executed rival. The trap is, however, complicated by a series of mysterious warriors—including Polly Shangguan Lingfeng as a dexterous female knight—who arrive at the inn as meddlesome guests to distract the waiting killers. An exquisite game of cat-and-mouse ensues as each side tests the martial skills of the other. When the exiles finally arrive, the mounting tension explodes in successive, sword-flashing climaxes that build to the entrance of the reputedly invincible Cao himself.

A painstaking recreation of Ming Dynasty costumes and settings circa 1450 adds a new element of authenticity to the film's mythic clash of knights and evil agents. Hu times the fluid dance of Han Yingjie's action choreography to the percussive syncopation of Beijing Opera. (Han himself appears as one of the arch-villain's lieutenants.) A huge hit across Asia, *DRAGON INN* firmly established Hu as a master of the emerging "new school" *wuxia* film, and later became a touchstone of the subgenre's revival when Tsui Hark paid direct homage to it in his 1992 remake.

—Paul Malcolm

Studio: Union. Producer: Sha Rongfeng. Screenplay: King Hu. Cinematography: Hua Huiying. Martial Arts Director: Han Yingjie. Art Director: Zou Zhiliang. Editor: Chen Hongmin. Sound: Zhang Hua. Music: Zhou Lanping. Cast: Polly Shangguan Lingfeng, Shi Jun, Bai Ying, Xu Feng, Miao Tian.

35mm, in Mandarin with English subtitles, 111 min.

Print Source: Chinese Taipei Film Archive

### HAN YINGJIE

A frequent onscreen performer, Han Yingjie made his most lasting contribution to the cinema as King Hu's martial arts director. In seminal works from *COME DRINK WITH ME* (1966) to *A TOUCH OF ZEN* (1971), Han brought Northern-style acrobatics, grace and power to his fight choreography, even as Hu's editing and camera techniques pushed the martial arts film into new kinetic terrain. Han is often credited with introducing the trampoline as a hidden aid for somersaulting stunts. He is also noted for his work with Bruce Lee on *THE BIG BOSS* (1971) and *FIST OF FURY* (a.k.a. *THE CHINESE CONNECTION*, 1972). His assistant Sammo Hung eventually succeeded him as martial arts director to Hu on *THE FATE OF LEE KHAN* (1973) and *THE VALIANT ONES* (1975).





## ESCORTS OVER TIGER HILLS [HUSHAN HANG]

Hong Kong / Taiwan 1969    Director: Wang Xinglei

The impressive arsenal of film technique in *ESCORTS OVER TIGER HILLS*—including flash cuts, freeze frames and a roving camera—has been described as a foretaste of the postmodern style of Wong Kar-wai. The film's meticulous production design and dazzling fight choreography, courtesy of celebrated martial arts director Han Yingjie, meanwhile reveal a debt to King Hu. At the center of the stylistic interplay is the story of a hero at odds with himself. Though ex-guerrilla fighter Jing Wuji (Qiao Hong/Roy Chiao) has renounced his violent past and become a monk, he is compelled by the Song imperial court to return to duty for one final mission: to escort a convoy of Tartar prisoners through enemy territory. Jing's daring race with his men and their prisoners through mountainous terrain affords the film ample opportunity for ambush, double-cross and intrigue, a devilish mix complicated by the presence of Jing's two ex-wives. One of them, Wanyan Wan'er (Hilda Zhou Xuan), is a Tartar, a cunning warrior herself who has joined Jing's enemies in pursuit of her own private ends. Torn between his Buddhist vows, his duty as a soldier and his unresolved feelings for Wanyan, Jing is pushed to the breaking point on the field of battle.

*ESCORTS OVER TIGER HILLS* was Cathay's first attempt at a *wuxia* blockbuster, and the studio reportedly spared no expense to make it. More than 30 years later, the film retains its charge—as a visually expressive high adventure that elevates the male swordsman to a new plane of emotional conflict.

—Paul Malcolm

Studio: Cathay. Producer: Zhu Guoliang (Choo Kok-leong). Screenplay: Song Xiangru. Cinematography: Hu Qiyuan. Martial Arts Director: Han Yingjie. Art Directors: Zou Zhiliang, Tang Guoshi. Editor: Wang Zhaoxi. Music: Gu Jiahui. Cast: Qiao Hong, Hilda Zhou Xuan, Song You, Jiang Qing.

35mm, in Mandarin with electronic English subtitles, 95 min.

Print Source: Cathay-Keris Films Pte. Ltd., Singapore



### WANG XINGLEI

Director Wang Xinglei began as a writer in the Cantonese and Amoy-dialect cinema. Among the over 20 scripts he wrote were ones for the popular WONG FEI-HUNG series. Wang segued to working as an assistant director in 1957, co-directed his first feature in 1964 and made his full directorial debut three years later with *ROMANCE IN THE NORTHERN COUNTRY*. His representative works include *ESCORTS OVER TIGER HILLS* (1969) and *THE HERO OF CHAOZHOU* (1972).



## FROM THE HIGHWAY [LUKE YU DAOKE]

Hong Kong / Taiwan 1970 Director: Zhang Zengze

This epic saga, framed against the windswept expanse of the northern Chinese plains (actually central Taiwan), channels into furious action the frenetic energies of a genre in flux. Set during China's post-1911 republican era of rampant warlordism and social upheaval, the film opens in the midst of chaos as a bandit horde, led by a slick-domed thug, Iron Gourd, ravages a defenseless village. The same bloody fate awaits the heavily guarded An, a remote but bustling outpost, until a lone stranger bent on revenge, He Yilang (Yang Qun), emerges to assume the mantle of hero. After Iron Gourd's gang, disguised as street performers and including a henchman who swings a deadly pigtail, infiltrates An, He must battle the threat from within and without in order to save the town and avenge the death of his own master.

Just as An teems with signs of an oncoming modernity—there are cannons on its ramparts and nickelodeons on its streets—the film's heroes and villains present a colorful array of fighting styles from bare hand to bare head that marks an imminent shift in the martial arts genre itself. By eschewing ancient settings and traditional swordplay, *FROM THE HIGHWAY* represents a turn towards the unarmed combat of kung fu that would dominate the next decade. In fact, while the Wang Yu-directed *THE CHINESE BOXER* (1970) is often credited as the first movie to signal that trend, *FROM THE HIGHWAY* actually owns the distinction, its release predating that of *THE CHINESE BOXER* by several months.

—Paul Malcolm

Studio: Cathay. Producer: Zhu Guoliang (Choo Kok-leong). Screenplay: Zhang Zengze. Based on a story by Sima Zhongyuan. Cinematography: Hong Qingyun. Martial Arts Director: He Xiong. Art Directors: Gu Yi, Wang Yizhao, Liang Xianxing. Editor: Wang Chaoxi. Cast: Yang Qun, Cui Fusheng, Ingrid Hu Yinyin, Sun Yue, Li Hong. 35mm, in Mandarin with electronic English subtitles, 79 min. Print Source: Cathay-Keris Films Pte. Ltd., Singapore



**ZHANG ZENGZE** [Chang Tseng-chai]  
A former theater director and documentarian, Zhang Zengze worked primarily in Taiwan before his move to Hong Kong to complete *FROM THE HIGHWAY* (1970). He joined Shaw Brothers in 1971. Zhang returned to Taiwan after 1974, and worked as an independent filmmaker through the early '80s.



## VENGEANCE! [BAOCHOU]

Hong Kong 1970 Director: Zhang Che

Zhang Che (Chang Cheh) transitioned from the swordplay subgenre with this ultra-violent revenge drama set against the backdrop of early 20th-century China. David Jiang Dawei (David Chiang) and Di Long (Ti Lung)—Zhang's preferred pairing of heroes throughout the 1970s—appear here in their first film together. Di Long plays a dignified Beijing Opera performer whose murder at the hands of a corrupt local cabal launches his mysterious white-suited brother—a relentless, wraithlike Jiang—down the path of bloody retribution. A conscious departure from the *wuxia pian* or swordplay film on which Zhang built his reputation, *VENGEANCE!* heralded the rise of '70s kung fu and radically revised narrative and stylistic templates at the Shaw Brothers studio.

A somber, tragic paean to the notion of *yang gang* (male honor), *VENGEANCE!* is energized by Zhang's unfailingly inventive representation of violence. Zhang combines expressive widescreen camera angles, dynamic editing and breathtaking use of slow motion to forge a stylized depiction of mayhem unrivalled outside Peckinpah's valedictory Westerns. The film is awash in blood, bright red pools of it drawn mainly by daggers and hatchets, although firearms do put in a brief appearance—a first for Zhang, and perhaps the seed for his protégé John Woo's later gunplay spectaculars. Indeed, Woo would pay explicit homage to *VENGEANCE!* in *HARD-BOILED* (1992), honoring specifically the unforgettable scene in which Di Long fights to his death against a horde of assassins. In this bravura sequence, Zhang intercuts Di Long's final moments, punctuated by a blinding worthy of Oedipus, with the character's equally dramatic, if highly stylized, performance of death onstage—a rare nod to Chinese Opera from a director who generally spurned classical tradition in favor of his own brand of "masculine" baroque.

—Jesse Zigelstein

Studio: Shaw Brothers. Producer: Runme Shaw (Shao Renmei). Screenplay: Ni Kuang. Cinematography: Gong Muduo. Martial Arts Directors: Tong Kai (Tang Jia), Yuen Cheung-yan (Yuan Xiangren). Art Director: Johnson Cao. Editor: Jiang Xinglong. Sound: Wang Yonghua. Music: Wang Fuling. Cast: David Jiang Dawei, Di Long, Wang Ping, Ao Yanjing, Gu Feng. 35mm, in Mandarin with English subtitles, 103 min. Print Source: Celestial Pictures Ltd.

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### TONG KAI (Tang Jia)

Tong Kai is considered one of the pillars of martial arts choreography in the postwar Chinese cinema, renowned as much for his expertise with weaponry as for his ability to design action set pieces with large crowds. His career began with choreographing action for the WONG FEI-HUNG series in the 1950s. In 1963 he partnered with Lau Kar-leung as the martial arts co-director on *SOUTH DRAGON*, *NORTH PHOENIX*. Tong's collaboration with Lau proved long and prolific, ranging from the "new school" *wuxia* film, *THE JADE BOW* (1965), to many of Zhang Che's masterpieces, including *ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN* (1967), *VENGEANCE!* (1970), *THE BOXER FROM SHANDONG* (1972), and *BLOOD BROTHERS* (1973). Another highpoint of Tong's work came in 1976 with the Chu Yuan-Gu Long Films, *THE MAGIC BLADE* and *KILLER CLANS*. Tong made his directorial debut with *SHAOLIN PRINCE* (1983).



### YUEN CHEUNG-YAN (Yuan Xiangren)

Yuen Cheung-yan is a member of the famed Yuen family of martial arts choreographers. His father Yuen Siu-tin was the main martial arts director on the WONG FEI-HUNG series in the 1950s and '60s. Early in his career, Yuen worked with his father's former pupil, the eminent martial arts director Tong Kai, most notably on *VENGEANCE!* (1970) and *KILLER CLANS* (1976). In the '80s and '90s, Yuen teamed up with his brothers, including Yuen Wo-ping, to design the action on such films as *DREADNAUGHT* (1981) and *IRON MONKEY* (1993), winning plaudits for his work on *ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA* (1991). Yuen has recently expanded his action choreography State-side, on Hollywood productions ranging from *CHARLIE'S ANGELS* (2000) and *DAREDEVIL* (2003) to the upcoming *MATRIX* sequels. Yuen's credits as a director include *THE BLOODY FISTS* (1972) and *KUNG FU VAMPIRE* (1993).





## INTIMATE CONFESSIONS OF A CHINESE COURTESAN [AI NU]

Hong Kong 1972 Director: Chu Yuan

Chu Yuan (Chor Yuen) is often credited with injecting surrealism and mystery into the Mandarin martial arts film of the 1970s; he had excelled in melodramas, comedies and spy thriller spoofs in his prior career in the Cantonese cinema of the '60s. *INTIMATE CONFESSIONS OF A CHINESE COURTESAN* casts in bold relief Chu's perceptive grasp of generic conventions. This remarkable, scabrous film holds up the "perverse" to such notional martial arts chestnuts as loyalty, sacrifice, revenge, the relationship between master and disciple, and the exaltation of physicality (awe-inspiring feats of bodily agility and exertion). It's an audacious and inspired flip, one that gives *CONFESSIONS* its narrative jolt and emotional potency, and propels the film into harder-boiled territory than the mere trafficking in gauzy, soft-core titillation (which the film does too).

Imagine relocating the martial arts school—site of many a scene of tortuous training of would-be warriors—to a brothel, and transposing the martial arts master to the brothel's madam and the martial arts disciple to a prostitute (who must be forcibly drilled in the sexual arts of servicing men). Imagine also that the madam is a lesbian who abducts virgins to work in her brothel; that she both exploits and is genuinely in love with her protégée; and that the protégée only fakes subservience while secretly seeking bloody revenge against all who have wronged her, no matter the cost. The ambience is baroque atmospherics spiced with a whiff of terror. The frame is that of a murder mystery, with the requisite police investigation. The slain and dismembered are almost all men. Who wins or loses in love and the martial arts is sealed with a dying kiss.

—*Cheng-Sim Lim*

Studio: Shaw Brothers. Producer: Runme Shaw (Shao Renmei). Screenplay: Qiu Gangjian. Cinematography: Wu Zhuohua. Martial Arts Director: Xu Erniu. Art Director: Chen Jingsen. Editors: Jiang Xinglong, Li Yanhai. Sound: Wang Yonghua. Cast: He Lili (Lily Ho), Yue Hua, Bei Di, Dong Lin, Wang Zhongshan.

35mm, in Mandarin with English subtitles, 90 min.

Print Source: Celestial Pictures Ltd.

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### CHU YUAN (Chor Yuen)

Chu Yuan started in the mid-'50s as a writer of romantic melodramas before establishing himself in the '60s as a major director in the Cantonese film industry. Versatile and keen to experiment, Chu moved easily between traditional melodramas (*RE MORSE*, 1965), thriller-parodies (*THE BLACK ROSE*, 1965) and juvenile dramas (*THE JOYS AND SORROWS OF YOUTH*, 1969). He gained a reputation for highly stylized compositions and radical editing techniques. In the '70s he directed three of the most innovative Mandarin martial arts films of the time: *INTIMATE CONFESSIONS OF A CHINESE COURTESAN* (1972), *THE MAGIC BLADE* (1976) and *KILLER CLANS* (1976). The latter two films are among the highlights of the 21 adaptations Chu has made of Gu Long's martial arts fiction. At the same time Chu initiated a revival of Cantonese cinema with the smash hit, *THE HOUSE OF 72 TENANTS* (1973), a film that significantly influenced the Hong Kong New Wave directors who emerged at the end of the decade.



## BLOOD BROTHERS [CI MA]

Hong Kong 1973 Director: Zhang Che

This widescreen epic of love, loyalty and betrayal is based on actual events surrounding the assassination of a general in the waning years of the Qing Dynasty (late 19th century). According to the story, the general was killed by one of his right-hand men who was avenging a brother. This retelling finds David Jiang Dawei (David Chiang) and newcomer Chen Guandai as bandit brothers who befriend the mercenary warrior Di Long (Ti Lung) after trying to rob him. The stage is set for tragedy when Di Long falls for Chen's neglected wife.

*BLOOD BROTHERS* represents a turn by Zhang toward ever-greater psychological complexity. Di Long is no longer a happy-go-lucky fighter (Chen Guandai inherits that role), but a brooding, tormented man. And as the female lead and fulcrum of the love triangle, Jing Li gets to play a role with more depth than almost any other woman in a Zhang Che film. While her character is typically portrayed as a heartless temptress in other versions of the story, here she is as conflicted as the men around her.

Nevertheless, the film's attention constantly returns to the men. From one tortured hero in *ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN* (1967) to two in *VENGEANCE!* (1970), Zhang now has three protagonists, the better to indulge his passion for the sadomasochistic display of the male body under duress. This threesome whose devotion grows into jealousy, treachery and revenge prefigures John Woo's *BULLET IN THE HEAD* (1990), and indeed, Woo served as an assistant director on *BLOOD BROTHERS*.

—David Pendleton

Studio: Shaw Brothers. Producer: Run Run Shaw (Shao Cunren). Screenplay: Ni Kuang, Zhang Che. Cinematography: Gong Muduo. Martial Arts Directors: Tong Kai (Tang Jia), Lau Kar-leung (Liu Jialiang). Art Director: Quang Sheng. Editor: Guo Dinghong. Sound: Wang Yonghua. Music: Chen Yongyu. Cast: David Jiang, Di Long, Chen Guandai, Jing Li, Tian Qing. 35mm, in Mandarin with English subtitles, 118 min. Print Source: Celestial Pictures Ltd.

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**DAVID JIANG DAWEI** (David Chiang)  
The son of thespian parents, David Jiang graduated from child actor to stuntman to superstardom in the early '70s with a string of box-office hits directed by Zhang Che, including *THE HEROIC ONES* (1970), *VENGEANCE!* (1970) and *THE BOXER FROM SHANDONG* (1972). Jiang was frequently honored for his acting ability as well as his martial arts skill, and his slender frame, fierce agility and urbane screen presence further set him apart from the Shaw Brothers pack. Jiang remains active as an actor in Hong Kong and Taiwan.



**DI LONG** (Ti Lung)  
As a young actor Di Long earned the attention of director Zhang Che, who cast him in *RETURN OF THE ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN* (1969) and later paired him with David Jiang in such hits as *VENGEANCE!* (1970), *THE NEW ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN* (1971) and *BLOOD BROTHERS* (1973). The actor, a *Wing Chun* exponent, also headlined a number of the Chu Yuan-Gu Long films, most notably *THE MAGIC BLADE* (1976) and *THE SENTIMENTAL SWORDSMAN* (1967). After a career lull in the early '80s, Di Long made a triumphant comeback opposite Chow Yun-fat in John Woo's *A BETTER TOMORROW* (1986).



## KILLER CLANS [LIUXING HUDIE JIAN]

Hong Kong 1976 Director: Chu Yuan

Along with *THE MAGIC BLADE* made the same year, *KILLER CLANS*' syncretic, extravagant mood-piece stands as a highpoint in director Chu Yuan's (Chor Yuen's) copious adaptations of the novels of Gu Long. This swordfighting parable of treachery and betrayal—the knife-point may be as near as one's closest confidant—brilliantly translates to the screen the Taiwan author's noirish propensity for solitary heroes caught in complex webs of intrigue.

An assassin (Zhong Hua) is sent to murder a famed martial arts patriarch, but as he sets about infiltrating his prey's inner sanctums, the killer with the clinical touch finds himself increasingly willing to be diverted from his mission. The lure of romantic love proves too hard to resist, while as a mere "professional" in a power struggle waged as cryptic move and counter-move by unseen actors, he is decidedly a bit player. Everything on view in the film's teeming canvas conspires to accentuate this hero's marginality, and to crowd out his import to the narrative: from the elaborate décor and multi-colored costumes and props, to the proliferating plots and subplots involving myriad characters. Even the set pieces, imaginatively choreographed by Tong Kai (Tang Jia) and Yuen Cheung-yan (Yuan Xiangren), demure in showing the hero's martial skills until the climactic showdown.

It's what unfolds around the hero that matters. Hence the patriarch (Gu Feng) and his trusted aide (Yue Hua) emerge as the true nexus of relationships, desires, conflicts, and stratagems that roil the world of the film. Chu Yuan's depiction of a landscape of failing codes and afflicted warriors foreshadows the later, starker alienation of the Hong Kong New Wave martial arts films. But for now, neither hero's retreat nor villain's ambition would triumph unequivocally. For now, the status quo would hold.

—*Cheng-Sim Lim*

Studio: Shaw Brothers. Producer: Runme Shaw (Shao Renmei). Screenplay: Ni Kuang. Based on the novel *Meteor, Butterfly, Sword* by Gu Long. Cinematography: Huang Zhie. Martial Arts Directors: Tong Kai, Yuen Cheung-yan. Art Director: Chen Jingsen. Editor: Jiang Xinglong. Sound: Wang Yonghua. Cast: Zhong Hua, Yue Hua, Jing Li, Chen Ping, Gu Feng.

35mm, in Cantonese with English subtitles, unrestored, 103 min.

Print Source: Celestial Pictures Ltd.

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### GU LONG

The Taiwan novelist Gu Long rose to prominence in the mid-'60s with his "new style" *wuxia* ("martial chivalry") fiction that infused the traditional literary genre with the spirit of a new generation. Cryptic and thick with atmosphere and intrigue, Gu's novels were clearly influenced by detective stories and James Bond spy thrillers. In the '70s Gu launched a screenwriting career. At the same time director Chu Yuan adapted a number of his books into a series of enormously popular and stylistically idiosyncratic *wuxia* films, including *THE MAGIC BLADE* (1976), *KILLER CLANS* (1976), *JADE TIGER* (1977), *CLANS OF INTRIGUE* (1977), and *THE SENTIMENTAL SWORDSMAN* (1977).



#### CHEN GUANDAI

Chen Guandai was the 1969 East Asian light-heavyweight kung fu champion before he became one of Shaw Brothers' most compelling action stars of the 1970s. His Everyman persona and actual martial arts prowess made him a potent onscreen presence as kung fu films came to prominence. Chen appeared frequently in Zhang Che's early '70s films, including *THE BOXER FROM SHANDONG* (1972), *MAN OF IRON* (1972), *BLOOD BROTHERS* (1973), and *HEROES TWO* (1975). Among his other notable credits are *THE FLYING GUILLOTINE* (1975), *CHALLENGE OF THE MASTERS* (1976) and *EXECUTIONERS FROM SHAOLIN* (1977).



#### LUO LIE (1939-2002)

Luo Lie was born in Indonesia and moved to Hong Kong as a teenager. He became an actor for Shaw Brothers in 1962 and was cast in over 70 films by the studio, including *GOLDEN SWALLOW* (1968), *THE CHINESE BOXER* (1970), *THE 14 AMAZONS* (1972), *KILLER CLANS* (1976), and *EXECUTIONERS FROM SHAOLIN* (1977). A rugged veteran with fierce martial arts ability, Luo became the quintessential villain of the '70s kung fu cinema. He moved on to acting in television and Hong Kong independent films in the '80s and '90s.



## OPENING NIGHT

## EXECUTIONERS FROM SHAOLIN [HONG XIGUAN]

Hong Kong 1977 Director: Lau Kar-leung

The mythology of the Shaolin insurgency against imperial Manchu oppression in the 18th century itself gets an insurgent once-over from a director whose martial arts lineage can be traced to the events enacted in this film. Lau Kar-leung (Liu Jialiang), arguably the least internationally known of the martial arts cinema greats, here interprets legend through a reflexive burlesque of slippery gender identities and role reversals. Playfully recasting martial arts in terms of sexuality, Lau disrupts the basic tropes of the genre: familial and clan allegiances that engender the drive for revenge, and the prolonged and masochistic preparation for cathartic bloodshed. It's a consummate act of daring and entertaining to boot.

After the Shaolin Temple is burnt by the Manchus, survivor Hong Xiguan (Chen Guandai) flees to the shelter of the Red Junks, rebel-friendly opera troupes plying the southern waterways. Hong vows vengeance against Bai Mei (Luo Lie), the fearsomely omnipotent Shaolin traitor who killed his master. Like the archetypal eunuchs he resembles, Bai Mei has traded his anatomical nature for power: he can migrate the most vulnerable spot on his body from his crotch to his head at will.

While in hiding, Hong weds a martial equal, Fang Yongchun (Li Lili), who promptly pits her "Crane" technique against him in a conjugal night of bedroom sparring (erotic foreplay incredibly syncopated as close-range combat). The couple conceives a child of indeterminate gender (he's a boy who looks like a girl). While Fang imparts her "Crane" expertise to the child, Hong devotes himself obsessively to perfecting "Tiger" kung fu, so that he might one day vanquish his sworn nemesis. Attempting retribution, Hong instead meets death. Now his child inherits his legacy of revenge, but how will an idealized "transgendering," a yin-yang reconciliation of maternal "Crane" and paternal "Tiger," prevail over its corrupted other?

—Cheng-Sim Lim

Studio: Shaw Brothers. Producer: Runme Shaw (Shao Renmei). Screenplay: Ni Kuang. Martial Arts Director: Lau Kar-leung. Cinematography: Qao Huiqi. Music: Chen Yongyu. Cast: Chen Guandai, Luo Lie, Lau Kar-fai (Gordon Liu Jiahui), Li Lili, Wong Yu. 35mm, in Mandarin with English subtitles, unrestored, 99 min. Print Source: Celestial Pictures Ltd.

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## LAU KAR-LEUNG (Liu Jialiang)

Lau Kar-leung is a third-generation disciple of the historical Wong Fei-hung, who expanded on the "Hong fist" style in turn believed to have been originated by Hong Xiguan, one of the Shaolin Temple's legendary adepts. After a stint in the 1950s-era WONG FEI-HUNG serials, Lau established himself, along with his partner Tong Kai, as an innovative martial arts director with the landmark "new school" *wuxia* film, *THE JADE BOW* (1966). The Lau-Tong partnership lasted through virtually all of Zhang Che's output from *THE MAGNIFICENT TRIO* (1966) onwards to *DISCIPLES OF SHAOLIN* (1975).

In the '70s and '80s Lau emerged as a major director in his own right with critically acclaimed films such as *THE SPIRITUAL BOXER* (1975), *EXECUTIONERS FROM SHAOLIN* (1977), *THE 36TH CHAMBER OF SHAOLIN* (1978), *DIRTY HD* (1979), *MAD MONKEY KUNG FU* (1979), *MY YOUNG AUNTIE* (1980), and *EIGHT-DIAGRAM POLE-FIGHTER* (1983). His integration of authentic Southern-style martial arts, dance-like choreography and humor proved to be revolutionary developments in the genre.



## THE 36TH CHAMBER OF SHAOLIN [SHAOLIN SANSHILIU FANG]

Hong Kong 1978 Director: Lau Kar-leung

THE 36TH CHAMBER OF SHAOLIN is the most popular screen version of one of the key foundation myths of the kung fu subgenre: the story of the dissemination of the top-secret combat techniques developed at the Shaolin Temple to the populace at large. An ebullient Lau Kar-fai (Gordon Liu Jiahui) plays a real-life figure long-since transmuted into legend, a Han Chinese commoner on the run from the Qing Dynasty's Manchu oppressors (including a glowering Luo Lie) who seeks refuge at Shaolin. The film's absorbing account of his initiation into the two-fisted mysteries takes up a good third of the running time. The Shaolin style is known for its emphasis on the external and the physical, but as depicted here the training process is very much an inner voyage of discovery: The novice must work his way through a series of torturous "chambers," designed to build strength and self-discipline, before winning permission to acquire actual fighting skills.

The newly minted monk, now known as San De (Three Virtues), soon demonstrates the truth of the adage that "the mind is also a muscle"; he invents a new weapon, the three-section staff, to counter a rival's "butterfly twin swords" style. In this tradition-bound milieu, however, innovation is always a dicey proposition: San De is drummed out of the corps when he suggests opening a "36th Chamber" to teach Shaolin techniques to the masses. Many of the pupils the reluctant apostate acquires in the final reel went on to become famed martial heroes in their own right. Some of their descendent disciples are still at work today in the Hong Kong movie industry.

—David Chute

Studio: Shaw Brothers. Producers: Run Run Shaw (Shao Cunren), Mona Fong. Screenplay: Ni Kuang. Cinematography: Huang Yuedai. Martial Arts Directors: Lau Kar-leung (Liu Jialiang), Tang Weizheng. Art Directors: Johnson Cao, Li Yanhai. Editor: Jiang Xinglong. Cast: Lau Kar-fai, Luo Lie, Yu Yang, Wang Yu, Lau Kar-wing (Liu Jiarong).

35mm, in Mandarin with English subtitles, 115 min.

Print Source: Celestial Pictures Ltd.

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LAU KAR-FAI (Gordon Liu Jiahui)

This one-time stuntman and martial arts instructor segued successfully to the front of the camera in SHAOLIN MARTIAL ARTS (1974). Headliner status followed two years later in Lau Kar-leung's CHALLENGE OF THE MASTERS, but it was the actor's portrayal of the monk San De in THE 36TH CHAMBER OF SHAOLIN (1978), again under the direction of his adopted brother, that rocketed him to fame. DIRTY HD (1979) and RETURN TO THE 36TH CHAMBER (1980) are other noteworthy collaborations between the two Laus. More recently Lau has branched into television drama. He is scheduled to appear in Quentin Tarantino's upcoming KILL BILL.



## LAST HURRAH FOR CHIVALRY [HAO XIA]

Hong Kong 1979 Director: John Woo

John Woo has often said that the self-sacrificing gangsters in *A BETTER TOMORROW* (1986) and *THE KILLER* (1988) were really *wuxia* (chivalrous knights) in modern drag. And this absorbing 1979 costume picture proves his point. Strongly influenced by the films of Woo's directorial mentor, Zhang Che, *LAST HURRAH* is a mournful meditation on the decline of the old swordfighterly virtues, which live on only as the cherished illusions of a few high-minded weirdoes.

The central action unfolds in an almost totally cynical, mercenary world. "You don't keep your promises," one character complains, and his rival cheerfully agrees: "That's the secret of my success!" A key subplot centers upon a single-minded glory-seeking fighter, Fung Hak-on's Pray ("If you touch my sword, you better pray"), who is so fixated on demonstrating his prowess that he attacks a celebrated knight's family just to draw him out of hiding. The pivotal character, Gao (Lau Kong), is duplicity personified: when he tries to recruit a couple of idealistic fighters, Zhang (Wai Pak) and Green (Damian Lau Chung-yan), for a mission of revenge, Gao is dismayed to learn that they can't be bought. His only hope is manipulating the rueful "blood brothers" into doing this dirty work for (misguided) reasons of their own.

The production values may be scrappy (threadbare studio exteriors, shiny plastic wigs) but this is recognizably a movie with a modern sensibility. There's an effort to make the characters talk and behave naturally, and the emotions feel authentic—as does the grim sense of a fog of amorality settling over the *jiang hu*.

—David Chute

Studio: Golden Harvest. Producer/Screenplay: John Woo. Cinematography: Yu Qing, Zhu Zhangyao. Martial Arts Directors: Fung Hak-on, Huang Ha, Alan Chui Chung-san. Editor: Peter Cheung Yiu-chung. Cast: Wai Pak, Damian Lau Chung-yan, Lau Kong, Wei Qiuhua, Fung Hak-on. 35mm, in Mandarin with English subtitles, 107 min. Print Source: FORTUNE STAR Entertainment (HK) Ltd.



### JOHN WOO (Wu Yusen)

John Woo joined Cathay studios as a production assistant in 1969. Two years later he moved to Shaw Brothers and became an assistant director to martial arts master Zhang Che. Woo made his directorial debut in 1973 with *THE DRAGON TAMERS*, and later tried his hand at opera and *wuxia* revival in films such as *PRINCESS CHANG PING* (1976) and *LAST HURRAH FOR CHIVALRY* (1979)—early efforts which display hints of the sweeping camera work, heroic pathos and sophisticated action choreography that would become the elements of Woo's signature style. In 1983 the director began a collaboration with actor Chow Yun-fat on an acclaimed series of contemporary gangster films, including *A BETTER TOMORROW* (1986), *THE KILLER* (1989) and *HARD-BOILED* (1992). Woo relocated to Los Angeles in 1992. He continues to create with his business partner Terence Chang through their production company Lion Rock Productions. His most recent credits are *FACE/OFF* (1997), *MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE II* (2000) and *WINDTALKERS* (2002).



## RETURN TO THE 36TH CHAMBER [SHAOLIN DAPENG DASHI]

Hong Kong 1980 Director: Lau Kar-leung

A freewheeling follow-up to the original, immensely popular *THE 36TH CHAMBER OF SHAOLIN* (1978), this quasi-sequel applies a light touch to the “warrior-in-training” subgenre and ably showcases director Lau Kar-leung’s (Liu Jialiang’s) considerable talent for kung fu comedy. Lau Kar-fai (Gordon Liu Jiahui) reprises his starring role, but rather than a full-fledged kung fu master, he portrays a con man merely impersonating a Shaolin priest. When Manchu thugs thrash him soundly and expose his imposture, he retreats to the fabled monastery, where the monks assign him a series of menial jobs while steadfastly refusing to teach him martial arts. Expelled from the temple, he returns to his village and discovers that, to his great surprise, he now possesses superb fighting skills. Indeed he realizes that his apparent drudgery in the temple actually constituted an oblique form of kung fu training!

*RETURN TO THE 36TH CHAMBER* is a delightful self-parody that pokes fun at the very conventions Lau Kar-leung was so instrumental in establishing. The famed 36 Chambers are here only incidentally depicted, while the clueless hero is almost entirely oblivious to the education-by-osmosis he receives at Shaolin. A testament to Lau’s refusal to facily recycle the formula of his past success, the film cleverly subverts expectations while fulfilling the narrative and action requirements of the classic revenge plot. Along with the slapstick kung fu films of Sammo Hung and Jackie Chan, *RETURN TO THE 36TH CHAMBER* helped usher in the vogue for martial arts comedy in the 1980s Hong Kong cinema.

—Jesse Zigelstein

Studio: Shaw Brothers. Producers: Run Run Shaw (Shao Cunren), Mona Fong. Screenplay: Ni Kuang. Cinematography: Ao Qiqun. Martial Arts Directors: Lau Kar-leung, Qing Qu, Xiao Ho. Art Director: Johnson Cao. Editors: Jiang Xinglong, Li Yanhai. Cast: Lau Kar-fai, Wang Longwei, Chen Sijia, Xiao Ho, Hua Lun. 35mm, in Mandarin with English subtitles, 111 min. Print Source: Celestial Pictures Ltd.

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ESCORTS OVER  
TIGER HILLS

A CHINESE FILM WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES IN EASTRACOLOR

PROGRAM  
INFORMATION

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# SCREENING SCHEDULE

**FRI., FEB. 28**

7:30 p.m. @ WGA

**EXECUTIONERS FROM SHAOLIN**

[99 min./p. 45-46]

**In person: Lau Kar-leung**

**Hosted by Quentin Tarantino**

[schedule permitting]

**SAT., MAR. 1**

7:30 p.m. @ UCLA

**KILLER CLANS** [103 min./p. 44]

**THE SIX-FINGERED LORD OF**

**THE LUTE, PART I** [94 min./p. 34]

**SUN., MAR. 2**

7:00 p.m. @ UCLA

**RED HEROINE** [94 min./p. 31]

**SWORDSWOMAN OF**

**HUANGJIANG** [74 min./p. 32]

**Live musical accompaniment**

**by Anne Litt**

**MON., MAR. 3**

7:30 p.m. @ UCLA

**FROM THE HIGHWAY**

[79 min./p. 40]

**THE STORY OF WONG**

**FEI-HUNG, PART I** [72 min./p. 33]

**SAT., MAR. 8**

7:30 p.m. @ UCLA

**COME DRINK WITH ME**

[94 min./p. 35]

**GOLDEN SWALLOW**

[108 min./p. 37]

**In person: Zheng Peipei**

**SUN., MAR. 9**

7:00 p.m. @ UCLA

**ESCORTS OVER TIGER HILLS**

[95 min./p. 39]

**DRAGON INN** [111 min./p. 38]

**WED., MAR. 12**

7:30 p.m. @ UCLA

**VENGEANCE!** [103 min./p. 41]

**ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN**

[111 min./p. 36]

**THU., MAR. 13**

7:30 p.m.

**INTIMATE CONFESSIONS OF A**

**CHINESE COURTESAN**

[90 min./p. 42]

**EXECUTIONERS FROM SHAOLIN**

[Repeat/99 min./p. 45-46]

**FRI., MAR. 14**

7:30 p.m. @ UCLA

**BLOOD BROTHERS**

[118 min./p. 43]

**LAST HURRAH FOR CHIVALRY**

[107 min./p. 48]

**SAT., MAR. 15**

7:00 p.m. @ UCLA

**THE 36TH CHAMBER OF**

**SHAOLIN** [115 min./p. 47]

**RETURN TO THE 36TH**

**CHAMBER** [111 min./p. 49]

**SUN., MAR. 16**

7:00 p.m. @ UCLA

**Program TBA**

## THEATER & TICKETS

*Heroic Grace* will open Feb. 28 at the **Writers Guild of America Theater**, located at 135 South Doheny Dr., one block south of Wilshire Blvd. in Beverly Hills.

**Parking:** \$2.75 in the lot north of the WGA Theater.

**Tickets:** \$7 general, \$5 students & seniors (ID required).

**Box Office:** Opens on-site at 6:30 p.m. Same-day ticket sales will be provided on an as-available, first-come, first-served basis. Also see advance ticketing information below.

All other screenings in *Heroic Grace* will take place at the **James Bridges Theater**, located on the northeast corner of the UCLA campus, south of Sunset Blvd., west of Hilgard Ave.

**Parking:** Free street parking on Loring Ave., east of Hilgard Ave. at the intersection of Charing Cross Rd., after 6 p.m. daily.

\$7 in Lot 3 on the UCLA campus; enter at Wyton Dr., off Hilgard Ave.

**Tickets:** \$7 general, \$5 students & seniors (ID required).

**Box Office:** Opens on-site one hour before the first show of the day. Same-day ticket sales will be provided on an as-available, first-come, first-served basis. Also see advance ticketing information below.

**Advance tickets** go on sale at the UCLA James Bridges Theater box office from 1:00-4:00 p.m. on the following weekends:

Sat., Feb. 15 & Sun., Feb. 16

Sat., Feb. 22 & Sun., Feb. 23

**Weekly schedule updates:**

310.206.FILM, [www.cinema.ucla.edu](http://www.cinema.ucla.edu)

**Program information:**

310.206.8013, [www.cinema.ucla.edu](http://www.cinema.ucla.edu)

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### HOLLYWOOD OFFICE

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### RESEARCH AND STUDY CENTER

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