

Identities From Shaolin

Identity and Culture in 1970's Hong Kong Kung Fu Genre Movies

Introduction

Of the many stories and legends which became part of the Hong Kong cinema canon, one of the most famous is the destruction of the Shaolin temple by the Qing. Numerous films throughout the 1970's and into the 1980's, such as *Shaolin Temple* (*Shao lin si*, 1976), *Five Shaolin Masters* (*Shao lin wu zu*, 1974), *Executioners from Shaolin* (*Hong xi guan*, 1977), and *Clan of the White Lotus* (*Hong Wending san po bai lian jiao*, 1980), further popularized this legend and interpreted it in various ways. The use of the Shaolin temple legend in Hong Kong cinema narratives was part of larger shift in the direction of Hong Kong cinema during the 1970's. The previous era of Hong Kong cinema was dominated by the *wuxia* genre (武侠, "martial hero," sometimes read as "knight-errant"). This *wuxia* genre was marked by operatic stories, lavish set pieces and swordplay as the core of fight action.

As the 1960's gave way to the 1970's, a shift occurred in the genre of Hong Kong action cinema. The lavish, high flying scenarios were replaced by stories featuring more realistic settings, gritty storylines and blood-filled fights focused on hand-to-hand martial arts over weapons use. These action films become known as the kung fu genre. Almost naturally, the plots of these kung fu movies began to utilize the legends and setting of the Shaolin temple (arguably the most famous institution of martial arts in the world). While the plot structures of the new kung fu genre films shared many similarities with the *wuxia* genre, mainly the protagonist looking for vengeance, the themes presented within the kung fu genre (particularly with the Shaolin pieces) strike a new tone. Some of these include the experience of exile and the coming-of-age of new generation heroes, as it were. These movies using the Shaolin stories were particularly pioneered by the world famous Shaw Brothers Studios.

Interestingly, the shift in the genre and themes in Hong Kong action cinema mirrors a shift in Hong Kong itself. In 1901, just three short years after the British had acquired the total range of their Hong Kong possessions, the territory had a population of 368,987. Seventy years later, Hong Kong was pushing the four million mark.¹ During that time, Hong Kong had experienced not just an economic boom as Britain's key trading port in the Far East, but also a population boom due to a mass influx of immigrants from the mainland. A series of chaotic and destructive events which took place in China over the course of the twentieth century, drove hundreds of thousands of immigrants across the border, seeking refuge from the violence and tumult on the mainland.

There has been much research done on the culture and effect of Hong Kong action films. However, much of this work tends to focus on the creation and influence of the *wuxia* genre through the 1950's and 60's and the hard transition away from traditional narratives in the

¹ Fan Shuh Ching, *The Population of Hong Kong* (New York: Committee for International Coordination of National Research in Demography, 1974), 2.

1980's, such as the playful films of Jackie Chan or the bloody, bullet ballads of John Woo.² Scholarship that does exist on the kung fu genre films of the 1970's is mostly constructed from a gender studies perspective, looking at the masculinized and violent actions within the films.³ Beyond this gender aspect, though, the kung fu genre films of the 1970's seem to lack significant attention and scholarship (at least in the English language). The one work (in English at least) which deals with the nationalism issue of 1970's kung fu films, Siu Leung Li's "Kung Fu: Negotiating Nationalism and Modernity," focuses only the Bruce Lee films of the period.⁴ This paper is designed to add to this literature and add complexity to this most intriguing intersection of film, history and culture that is the 1970's Shaolin kung fu film.

This paper seeks to show that the parallel timing of the formation of the kung fu genre and the growth of Hong Kong is no accident. The kung fu genre's themes and narratives were directly attached to Hong Kong's social situation coming out of the mid-twentieth century. There was a symbiotic relationship between the culture of Hong Kong and the action films as they reciprocally influenced and pushed each other. This connection between culture and film is further highlighted by the experiences of those who took part in the creation process of the kung fu movies.

Between Two Kingdoms

At the beginning of the 1960's, Hong Kong was a land between worlds. To the north was freshly Communist China. The Nationalist government, led by Chiang Kai-Shek, fled to Taiwan and the old world came under the rule of a new form of government and ideology. For many Hong Kongese, though, mainland China was still the cultural and social, not to mention physical, origin point. Large portions of the population increase during the post-WWII years were the result of immigration. Between 1948-1963, nearly 600,000 immigrants moved into the Hong Kong region.⁵ In 1961, there was a nearly even split between native born citizens and foreign born citizens (mostly coming from Guangdong province).⁶ The mass immigration from the mainland was spurred by intense turmoil from events such as the Communist Revolution and the famine following the Great Leap Forward.

To the south lay the South China Sea which connected Hong Kong to the rest of the world through the medium of the British Empire. The British imperial government had control of Hong

² Many of these texts are utilized in this paper, but see: Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* (London: British Film Institute, 1997); Poshek Fu and David Desser, *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li and Stephan Chan Ching-Kiu, ed., *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005); Poshek Fu, ed., *China Forever: The Shaw Brothers and Diasporic Cinema* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2008); Stephen Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

³ See: David Desser, "Making Movies Male: Zhang Che and the Shaw Brothers Martial Arts Movies," in *Masculinities and Hong Kong Cinema*, ed. Laikwan Pang and Day Wong, 17-34 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005); Michael Eng, "Reforming Vengeance: Kung Fu and the Racial Melancholia of Chinese Masculinity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, ed. Carlos Rojas and Eileen Cheng-Yin Chow, 281-300 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Stephen Teo deals with the issue of gender in both of his books as well.

⁴ Siu Leung Li, "Kung Fu: Negotiation Nationalism and Modernity," in *Asian Cinemas: A Reader & Guide*, ed. Dimitris Eleftheriotis and Gary Needham (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 100-125.

⁵ Ching, *The Population of Hong Kong*, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

Kong starting in the 1840's after the First Opium War. It was an important entrepôt for Britain's activities in the Far East. However, following World War II, there had a been a shift in attitude by the British towards their Chinese colony. Much of this was due to geo-political concerns. In 1950, Britain was trying to hold a neutral position by acknowledging the legitimacy of both the new Communist government in Beijing and the exiled Nationalist government in Taiwan. This led to a great level of frustration and political action by Communist China, Nationalists in Taiwan, and the staunchly anti-communist United States.⁷ Through the 1950's and into the 1960's, the British government operated on a policy that Frank Welsh termed "benign neglect."⁸ This hands-off approach allowed for a great deterioration within the territory. The large numbers of migrants into the tiny island had created a housing crisis to which there was no serious solution aside from some public housing construction in the late fifties. Employment conditions were atrocious with brutal work hours. This gained minor attention in 1958. On top of those important structural problems, there was the occasional violence which erupted around the Hong Kong territory, often involving Nationalists and Communists.⁹

The state of Hong Kong cinema at the beginning of the 1960's reflected a similar state of liminality. Much of Hong Kong cinema at the time was still directly connected to the traditions of Chinese narratives. The most prominent aspect of Chinese cinema narratives was the genre of *wuxia*. The genre finds its earliest expressions in the ancient Chinese historical masterpiece *Shi Ji* ("Records of the Grand Historian") by Sima Qian. Qian describes these *xia* individuals as lone warrior types, wandering the land in search of glory or seeking to fight for a noble cause. *Wuxia* becomes further popularized by novels during the later imperial period such as *Shui Hu Zhuan* ("The Water Margin").¹⁰ When film began to establish itself in China, *wuxia* continued to set the tone for narrative tales. The Shanghai film industry during the early 1900's utilized many aspects of the *wuxia* genre, but mixed them with Western-style cinematic forms. The most popular of these were the romantic and historical action epics. In the late 1920's, the *wuxia* genre film would take on its more fantastical form as the plot material for *wuxia* movies shifted from history to literature. The seminal production of this style of *wuxia* movie was *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* (*Huoshao Honglian si*, 1928).¹¹ The film industry in Shanghai suffered great pains throughout the 1930's and 1940's due to a mixture of censorship and war to the point where, "following the end of the Second World War, virtually the whole Shanghai film industry was transplanted into Hong Kong."¹²

The *wuxia* narratives were populated by characters that one could associate with Robin Hood or Sir Galahad. They were exceedingly skilled martial artists with righteousness and honor as their guide. There are secret societies, evil villains and wrongs to be righted. They live by a chivalrous code (*xia*) that forms the basis of their being. The martial ability of most *wuxia* warriors is centered around the use of a favored weapon and their internal powers. Also, most characters have an illustrative name. These attributes were inherited from the *xiayi* styles of

⁷ Frank Welsh, *A Borrowed Place: The History of Hong Kong* (New York: Kodansha, 1993), 445-447.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 453.

⁹ *Ibid.* 453-458.

¹⁰ Stephen Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 18-20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24-30.

¹² *Ibid.*, 52.

literature and became entrenched in the modern period by authors like Jin Yong (Louis Cha) and Liang Yusheng.¹³ An excellent example of this style of *wuxia* is King Hu's cinematic powerhouse, *Come Drink With Me* (*Da Zui Xia*, 1966). Set during the Ming period, a general's son is taken captive by a bandit group known as the Five Tigers (a group where each of the five main members has a tiger related name). The general sends his martially skilled daughter, Golden Swallow, to try and bring his son back. In this endeavor, she is assisted by a homeless drunk, Fa Dan Pei, who goes by the epithet Drunken Cat. To get Golden Swallow off their backs, the Five Tigers call in the abbot of the local monastery, Liao Kong. As it turns out, Fa is an exiled monk from the same temple who left after disagreeing with the evil Liao's usurpation of the abbot position. The film ultimately climaxes with a giant battle scene where Golden Swallow defeats the Five Tigers (with the help of some army forces) and Fa Dan Pei defeats Liao Kong. The good guys win, the bad guys lose (in epic fashion) and all is set right in the world.¹⁴

During the Hong Kong years, *wuxia* cinema would become augmented by technical aspects of another Chinese tradition. One of the most popular forms of traditional entertainment was opera. During the 1930's, the martial arts tradition and choreography of the Peking Opera, often referred to as *beipai* ("northern style"), became widely incorporated into the southern Cantonese Opera.¹⁵ During the rise of cinema in Hong Kong, the martial skills of the opera tradition were incorporated into the stylistic choreography of action cinema. One of the fathers of this fusion was famous opera actor Yuen Siu-Tin (father of famous martial arts cinema choreographer, Yuen Wo-Ping). The focus on the action of the body found in opera performance translates onto the screen in the cinematographic focus on bodies. Not to mention the fact that many of the opera trained martial artists, such as Yuen Siu-Tin, became the lead choreographers in much of the action cinema which came out of the 1960's and 1970's. Prop-based choreography from the opera tradition (in this case, the Teochow tradition) also became typical of *wuxia* action cinema, such as the "flying sword" technique.¹⁶ Some of the narratives of the opera would also find their way into film format.¹⁷

At the same time, many foreign influences were leaving their indelible mark on the action cinema of Hong Kong. The closest partner to the growth of Hong Kong action cinema was Japanese cinema. The mid-1950's to the mid-1960's saw the production of the most popular pieces of Japanese cinema: Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954), *Yojimbo* (1961), and *Sanjuro* (1962); Tomo Uchida's *Miyamoto Musashi* (1961-1965); and Kenji Misumi's *Zatoichi* (1962). Both Cantonese and Mandarin language film production sought to take advantage of the cinematic techniques of Japanese cinema. Chang Cheh (Zhang Che) was directly influenced by the stylings of Japanese cinema for his popular 1967 film *One-Armed Swordsman* (*Du Bei Dao*).¹⁸

¹³ Ibid., 22-23.

¹⁴ Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Hidden Dimensions* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), 90-91.

¹⁵ Yung Sai-Shing, "Moving Body: The Interactions between Chinese Opera and Action Cinema," in *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*, ed. Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li and Stephan Chan Ching-Kiu (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 22.

¹⁶ Ibid., 24-29.

¹⁷ Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema*, 41.

¹⁸ Kinnia Yau Shuk-ting, "Interactions between Japanese and Hong Kong Action Cinemas," in *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*, ed. Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li and Stephan Chan Ching-Kiu (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 38-43.

By the late 1960's, Hong Kong was a mixed pot of influences. Hong Kong was still highly populated by people from the mainland of China, even as the population of native born Hong Kongese continued to increase. At the same time, Hong Kong was adrift in a political sense as British interest in the colony wavered while Nationalists connected with the government in Taiwan and Communist supporters used the region as a battleground. The cinema of Hong Kong was also a mixed situation. Hong Kong cinema took much of its plot and technique from the traditional narratives and art forms of China, including *wuxia* and Chinese opera. However, foreign stylistic forms, such as those from Japan, became integral in the construction of action cinema. In these ways, Hong Kong found itself in the middle of a cultural, social and political vortex which would give it new shape in the coming decade.

A New World

Hong Kong in the late 60's was a city experiencing drastic tension. By 1966, the pot was starting to boil over. While the economic power of Hong Kong had been increasing, political and economic equality had not necessarily risen along with it. Tensions erupted in the spring of 1966 over a raise on the fares of the Star Ferry.¹⁹ In 1967, an even deadlier riot broke out which would put Hong Kong's position into sharp contrast. Linda Butenhoff succinctly describes the matter: "Factory workers in San Pokong, who had been locked out of the factory during labor negotiations, had a violent confrontation with the police which turned into an anti-British imperialism movement." The confrontations were supported by pro-Communist groups, some of which ended up clashing with police forces.²⁰ These riots were seen as representative of the poor social and economic situation which many of the residents of Hong Kong were experiencing.²¹ Issues of overpopulation and housing also continued to be a problem. There was a fresh wave of immigration from mainland China following the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution.²² By the early 1970's, there were four different departments focused on meeting the housing needs of Hong Kongese.²³ Indeed, what this signaled was a "trust crisis" with the colonial government.²⁴ With these two events setting the tone for the upcoming decade, the 1970's became a "'Golden Age' of social movements."²⁵

What developed was an attempt to reform many of the endemic issues which existed in Hong Kong which became known as the urban movement. Throughout the course of the 1970's, there would be student led movements, grassroots community movements and a realignment of unions. A prominent example of the community focused activity is the work of several student

¹⁹ Linda Butenhoff, *Social Movements and Political Reform in Hong Kong* (Newport: Praeger, 1999), 23; Welsh, *A Borrowed Place*, 466-467.

²⁰ Butenhoff, *Social Movements*, 23; Welsh, *A Borrowed Place*, 468.

²¹ Hsin-Chi Kuan, "Political Stability and Change in Hong Kong," in *Hong Kong: Economic, Social and Political Studies in Development*, ed. Tzong-Biau Lin, Rance P.L. Lee, and Udo-Ernst Simonis (White Plains: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1979), 153.

²² Ching, *The Population of Hong Kong*, 3.

²³ C.Y. Choi and Y.K. Chan, "Housing Development and Housing Policy in Hong Kong," in *Hong Kong: Economic, Social and Political Studies in Development*, ed. Tzong-Biau Lin, Rance P.L. Lee, and Udo-Ernst Simonis (White Plains: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1979), 187.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁵ Butenhoff, *Social Movements*, 25.

organizations which, “besides their campaign for the adoption of Chinese as an official language of Hong Kong, ... also demanded the end to corruption in the police force and improvement of education resources and teacher salaries.”²⁶ Results were also achieved during protests over housing conditions in 1971-1972 and 1978-1979.²⁷

Shaolin Experiences

The origins for the kung fu genre have their basis in the 1950's. Starting in 1949, there was a long running series of movies focusing on the legendary historical figure of Wong Fei-Hung. In many ways, these movies were perfect examples of the *wuxia* style of Hong Kong cinema and the cultural basis from China. The titular character was a paragon of the strong male with Confucian and Buddhist values, and the two most prominent actors to play the role, Yuen Siu-tin and Kwan Tak-Hing, were both from the Chinese opera tradition.²⁸ However, the impetus for the Wong Fei-Hung series would set the tone for the kung fu movies of the 1970's. According to the director of the first movie, Wu Pang (He Ping), wanted to create a hero that specifically spoke to the culture and experience of Southern China and also used the martial arts styles of the south.²⁹ The Wong Fei-Hung movies became a huge hit and the figure of Wong Fei-Hung became even more nationalistically charged than he already was.³⁰

Two seminal kung fu movies from the early 1970's set the tone for the martial arts films to come, including the Shaolin movies. The first of the kung fu wave movies to come out was Wang Yu's *The Chinese Boxer* (*Long hu dou*, also known as *The Hammer of God*, 1970). In the movie, the protagonist (also played by Yu) vows to get revenge after a group of Japanese martial artists kill his teacher. He learns a new, more powerful martial art which then gives him the power to defeat the Japanese martial artists and avenge the death of his master.³¹ This basic plot structure would become the staple of kung fu movies throughout the 1970's and beyond. The second movie is Chang Cheh's (Zhang Che) *Boxer from Shantung* (*Ma Yongzhen*, 1972). In this movie, the protagonist, Ma Yongzhen, leaves his home to move to Shanghai in hopes of finding a better economic situation and ends up getting involved in gang activity. Ma is a simple man facing real world problems. This marks a drastic shift from the wandering heroes of virtue of the *wuxia* genre.

Starting in the 1970's, the setting of the Shaolin temple would become one of the most popular backgrounds for Hong Kong kung fu films. These Shaolin films belonged primarily to the massive empire of Shaw Brothers Studios. In particular, many of the plots focused around the legend of the destruction of the Shaolin temple by the Qing forces. These movies connected a similar series of themes.

In 1974, Chang Cheh's *Heroes Two* (*Fang Shiyu yu Hong Xiguan*) premieres. The story follows the struggles of two students of the Shaolin temple, Fang Shiyu and Hong Xiguan, after the temple is attacked by the Qing. After the destruction of the temple, Fang and Hong spend

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 24.

²⁸ Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema*, 59; Yung, “Moving Body,” 24.

²⁹ Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema*, 58-59.

³⁰ Ibid., 61-63.

³¹ Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema*, 103-104.

their time helping out the anti-Qing rebels. A general of the Qing, Che Kang, manages to convince Fang that Hong is actually a bandit. Fang confronts Hong and Hong ends up imprisoned. Eventually, Fang realizes his mistake and joins up with the anti-Qing rebels to free Hong from prison. They then have a final climactic showdown with Che Kang and the Qing forces.³² Chang would produce a sequel that year called *Disciples of Death* (*Shao Lin zi di*, also known as *Dragon's Teeth*).

Later in 1974, another duo of Chang films would be released. The first was *Shaolin Martial Arts* (*Hong Quan yu Yong Chun*). At the beginning of the movie, both the members of the Shaolin martial arts school and the local Manchu (ethnic group of the Qing dynasty founders) martial arts school are celebrating the birthday of a deity. Tensions grow and a fight quickly breaks out after a Manchu student attacks one of the Shaolin students. After the confrontation, the local Qing general enlists the help of three powerful Manchu kung fu practitioners to assist the leader of the local Manchu school, Wu Chung-Ping, in taking out the Shaolin school. Eventually, a confrontation occurs between the Manchu and the Shaolin with the Manchu decimating the Shaolin students. Afterwards, the master of the Shaolin school sends off two of the remaining students for special training to defeat the Manchus. However, after the training, bravado gets the best of them and they confront the Manchus, and they are subsequently defeated. After hearing the news, the master of the school sends two more students, Li Yao (Alexander Fu Sheng) and Chen Pao-Rong (Chia Kuan-Chun), to learn Tiger-Crane Style and Wing Chun, respectively. While training, the Shaolin school is attacked by the Qing. Eventually, Li and Chen complete their training and defeat the Manchu fighters.³³

The second movie is *Five Shaolin Masters* (*Shao Lin wu zu*, also known as *Five Masters of Death*). This movie is an alternate perspective to the destruction of the Shaolin temple legend. Instead of following the exploits of the famous legendary escapees, Fang Shiyu and Hong Xiguan, the narrative follows five other escaped students: Tsai Te-Chung, Ma Chao-Hsing, Fang Ta-Hung, Li Shih-Kai and Hu Te-Ti. At the beginning of the film, the disciples are running from the Qing forces who are assisted by a traitor from within the Shaolin ranks, Ma Fu Yi. The five disciples decide to split up and reconvene when the time is right. Some of them end up getting involved with anti-Qing rebels. Eventually, Ma Fu Yi discovers the hidden disciples and Shaolin supporters after capturing the bumbling Ma Chao-Hsing. A rebel leader dies in the process of saving Chao-Hsing and the five disciples resolve to improve their kung fu skills to defeat Ma Fu Yi and the Qing headhunters. They spend some time training and are eventually able to defeat Ma Fu Yi and the Qing headhunters.³⁴

Another major movie dealing with the Shaolin story is Lau Kar Leung's (Liu Chia-liang) *Executioners from Shaolin* (*Hong Xi Guan*, also known as *Shaolin Executioners* and *Executioners of Death*, 1977). This story is a more classical, poetic retelling of the fallout from the destruction of Shaolin. As the movie opens, Hong Xiguan and other escapees are trying desperately to get away from the Qing forces. Xiguan goes into hiding, preparing himself to defeat the traitorous monk Bai Mei, and ends up getting married and having a child in the process. Xiguan spends years trying to perfect his Tiger style kung fu and figure out the secret to Bai Mei's powers. Eventually,

³² Run Run Shaw, *Heroes Two*, directed by Chang Cheh (1974; Hong Kong: Celestial Pictures, 2008), DVD.

³³ Run Run Shaw, *Shaolin Martial Arts*, directed by Chang Cheh (1974; Hong Kong: Celestial Pictures, 2008), DVD.

³⁴ Run Run Shaw, *Five Shaolin Masters*, directed by Chang Cheh (1974; Hong Kong: Celestial Pictures, 2008), DVD.

Xiguan thinks he's mastered the secret to defeating Bai Mei. When he confronts Bai Mei, he is ultimately defeated. Xiguan's son, Wending, resolves to learn his father's techniques to defeat Bai Mei. To augment his father's methods, he molds his father's Tiger style with his mother's Crane style. Wending confronts Bai Mei and is able to defeat him.³⁵

These stories all share a particular set of themes that mix in with the narratives of the Shaolin temple. Perhaps the most obvious is the theme of the common person fighting against a tyrannical government. The Qing are always representative of destruction and oppression. The Shaolin fighters are seen as defenders of righteousness and Chinese culture, often joining up with anti-Qing rebel groups after the destruction of the temple. It's also important to note that these Shaolin fighters are not monks. They are normal individuals who are simply learning the Shaolin style of martial arts.³⁶ In connection to that, another major theme (which is always part of the Shaolin story itself) is that of betrayal. There is someone associated with the temple, usually Bai Mei, who collaborates with the Qing. After the destruction, one of the most prominent themes is that of exile. Often, the survivors are escaping far from their home at Shaolin and heading into forests, mountains and towns to escape the reach of the Qing. They may live for years in secret, hoping and planning for a chance to avenge the wrong that was done to them. They may lose friends in the process and gain completely new lives. In looking at the characterization and endings of these movies, a prominent theme is that of the younger generation coming into their own. Often, the protagonist heroes are not masters of their style or seasoned fighters. Older protagonists are often defeated, as we see in the case of Hong Xiguan in *Executioners*, or as we see in the case of many murdered masters. The ones who finally win the day, and who are often the focus of these narratives, are the young disciples, put to test by the troubling conditions they find themselves in. Through their determination and ideals, they are able to overcome their own weaknesses to defeat the villain.

Kung Fu Identities

The themes that these various Shaolin movies portray are a direct reflection of the situation of Hong Kong in the 1970's. Many of the individuals who were part of the creative process were themselves immigrants and exiles. The Shaw Brothers had originally started their movie careers in Shanghai during the 1920's. After a few years, they moved their operations to Singapore and then, finally, to Hong Kong in 1935 to cash in on the Cantonese market. In 1957, Run Run Shaw moved down to Hong Kong to join his brothers and would establish the newly reorganized Shaw Brothers Studios into an international powerhouse. They produced their movies with the immigrant and exile population in mind.³⁷

The most important individual in shaping the themes and outcomes of these movies is the powerhouse script writer, I Kuang (Ni Cong, Ni Kuang). I Kuang had grown up in Ningbo and ended up working for the CCP in Shanghai. He was transferred to work in the Inner Mongolia

³⁵ Run Run Shaw, *Executioners from Shaolin*, directed by Lau Kar-Leung (1977; Hong Kong: Celestial Pictures, 2008), DVD.

³⁶ For a more in-depth discussion of this see: Meir Shahar, *The Shaolin Monastery: History, Religion and the Martial Arts* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

³⁷ Poshek Fu, "Introduction: The Shaw Brothers Diasporic Cinema," in *China Forever: The Shaw Brothers and Diasporic Cinema*, ed. Poshek Fu (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2008), 3-8.

region and quickly became upset with his position. In 1957, Kuang fled his post and escaped down to Hong Kong. Not long after, Kuang found himself a part of the Shaw Brothers Studios machine, turning out script after script. All of these Shaolin scripts were written, or at least co-written, by Kuang. With his definitive anti-communist position, it's not so hard to imagine that the narratives of these Shaolin movies were influenced by his feelings.³⁸ Many of the residents of Hong Kong could share in this narrative of exile. In his study on student self-image in Hong Kong at the end of the 1970's, Tak-Sing Cheung notes that a sense of belonging within Hong Kong has not fully developed but that a connection to Chinese identity is not very strong either.³⁹

The themes of betrayal and the small person standing up against the government could also be part of this palpable reality of Hong Kongese in the mid-late twentieth century. There was a great deal of frustration over the state of things in 1970's Hong Kong. The "trust crisis" and the subsequent formation of various grassroots organizations clearly shows that the people of Hong Kong saw the government as inefficient and unable to meet the needs of the average person in Hong Kong. Frustration and distrust with the government was a definite thread throughout Hong Kong in the 1970's.

The most important theme which connects to the culture of Hong Kong is the youth coming-of-age. Hong Kong was experiencing a boom of youth moving into the 1970's. In 1971, a large portion of the population was between the ages of 5-29.⁴⁰ Women, on average, were getting married at a later age and more and more individuals were never married.⁴¹ In addition to that, many of the prominent stars of the 1970's Shaw Brothers kung fu movies were local individuals.⁴² At the beginning of the 1970's, Hong Kong also experienced a high level of economic inactivity status amongst its population, reaching up to two thirds of the population. A large portion of the economically inactive were young people, mostly students, but also generally unemployed as well.⁴³ Though Tak-Sing Cheung argues that the research shows there is no real connection to a Hong Kong identity among students and that there is a risk of "moral crisis" as these young students become older, Butenhoff's examples of student associations gathering together to protest for improving their community argues otherwise.⁴⁴

When connected to the social and political issues of Hong Kong during the late 1960's and 1970's, the Shaolin-based films from the Shaw Brothers represent the issues and portray them in idealized format of identity. However, in talking about the nationalistic aspect, Stephen Teo argues that "kung fu heroes and martial arts cinema...gives to these diasporic audiences the possibility for identification with a China that exists only in the imagination...This *imagined* nationalism has a transnational reach since it binds together ethnic Chinese who do not live in

³⁸ Lin Yuan, "倪匡談共產黨本質未變" (Ni Kuang has not changed on the nature of the Communist Party), *Epoch Times*, October 13, 2006, accessed May 9, 2016, <http://www.epochtimes.com/b5/6/10/13/n1485710.htm>.

³⁹ Tak-Sing Cheng, "'The Socially Malnourished Generation': An Anatomy of the Self-Image of a Student Population in Hong Kong," in *Hong Kong: Economic, Social and Political Studies in Development*, ed. Tzong-Biau Lin, Rance P.L. Lee, and Udo-Ernst Simonis (White Plains: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1979), 136-137.

⁴⁰ Ching, *The Population of Hong Kong*, 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 5, 16.

⁴² Fu, "Introduction," 16.

⁴³ Ching, *The Population of Hong Kong*, 35-36.

⁴⁴ Cheung, "'The Socially Malnourished Generation,'" 140; Butenhoff, *Social Movements*, 25.

China...but who nevertheless imagines [sic] a certain vision of China as a 'mother country'."⁴⁵ But how does this translate to a society in which the connection to China as a "mother country" is more and more tenuous? The main difference lies in the presentation of various attitudes and characters within the movie. Aside from simply being young, they are not necessarily the stalwart paragons of Buddhist and Confucian discipline like Wong Fei-Hung. They do not turn the other cheek nor do they constantly conquer their emotions; they get angry, they lash out, they seek revenge. They are not learned scholars or doctors. They are young men, wanting to improve themselves, happy in their kung fu Camelot until something comes and disrupts their world. The protagonists often join up with wild groups of rebels, typically young and poor like themselves, seeking to undo the wrongs and assert their independence in the face of a foreign run government. They also do not hold to the celibate restraint that is seen in Wong Fei-Hung or other *wuxia* genre characters. Li and Chen from *Shaolin Martial Arts* find themselves in flirtations with their master's nieces, even though it often frustrates them. Hong Xiguan is married and has a child. These films do not present the audience with the fully developed, traditional heroes of the classical Chinese *wuxia* style.

The legendary Hong Kong film director King Hu once said that the idea of "kung fu" was a fabrication.⁴⁶ In a similar vein, Stephen Chan Ching-kiu muses that, "Politically Hong Kong is rather intangible."⁴⁷ What these kung fu films of the 1970's have accomplished is a form of representation towards the burgeoning action of Hong Kongese negotiating their own political and social position throughout the 1970's. Building on the cultural representation idea of Marilyn Mintz, Stephen Chan Ching-kiu reflects on the "dreams" presented within martial arts genre films and that "the ambivalent reproduction of the national-local here is an important factor to consider amid historical and political differences over the strengths and weaknesses of the postcolonial nation-state."⁴⁸ Even though Ching-kiu is using these films to question the position of the *wuxia* ideal in the martial arts films of Hong Kong towards the end of colonial rule, the concept seems to speak more to the reproduction of experience than the reproduction of cultural ideals. This would better explain the transition within the narratives of Hong Kong martial arts films.

The Shaolin kung fu films are not representative because they reproduce pre-established beliefs and ideals through idyllic figures à la Wong Fei-Hung. Instead, they are representative because they reproduce experiential themes and understandings. They metaphorically represent a break from the past (though not a complete dismissal from it) and the creation of something new. The characters are not wanderers who have chosen to dismiss themselves from the greater world in the way of the *wuxia* hero, they are forced out into a world not of their choosing by violence and oppression. They are not the stable figures of classical Chinese Buddhist and Confucian values, they are young, emotional and imperfect. The situations the characters find themselves in are not moments designed simply to illustrate their character or being, they are situations which challenge the characters and force them to change based on their experience.

⁴⁵ Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema*, 65.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴⁷ Stephen Chan Ching-kiu, "The Fighting Condition in Hong Kong Cinema: Local Icons and Cultural Antidotes for the Global Popular," in *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*, ed. Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li, and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 63.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

In looking at kung fu films in this way, King Hu's statement seems less abrasive. These films are not simply progeny, they are progenitor.

CONCLUSION

That films are representative of their respective cultures and societies has become an axiom. The Shaolin narrative kung fu films which came out of the 1970's are part of that axiom. The films were influenced by the historical position of Hong Kong and its people, particularly in the mid-twentieth century. Hong Kong in the 1950's and 1960's was a land that was still deeply connected to its mainland roots, despite a particular level of isolation that came through being owned by the British and the communist takeover of the mainland. The cinema of the time reflected this similar position as the narratives reflected traditional Chinese stories and aesthetics, but started to shift with the introduction of foreign cinematic styles. However, upon reaching the 1970's, shifts in the political and social situation of Hong Kong changed the way Hong Kong reflected itself. In the real world, this was expressed by frustration with the government, protests and grassroots movements designed to support the local community. In the film world, this was reflected by the shift in narratives presented by the action films. The kung fu genre presented stories which eschewed the traditionalist and nationalistic narratives of the *wuxia* genre and Wong Fei-Hung films, and replaced them with stories which were reflective of the experience of Hong Kongese during the mid to late-twentieth century. The films presented a particular break from a direct connection back to China and Chinese culture and began to present a picture of a new sort of identity.

In this analysis, there have been things which have gone overlooked in thinking about identity conceptualization in 1970's kung fu films. First, no major work on analyzing any cultural or social aspect of Hong Kong can be complete without a discussion of language. The Cantonese and Mandarin language based films were represented by different production companies, different actors, and different goals. In addition to that, the Shaolin narrative films from Shaw Brothers Studios represents only a piece of the kung fu wave during the 1970's. No discussion of the kung fu wave can really be complete without mentioning the international effect of Bruce Lee and the rise of the Golden Harvest production company (started by former Shaw Brothers employee Raymond Chow) which would overtake Shaw Brothers by the beginning of the 1980's. Many of these films also represent the working-class troubles of the average person (i.e. Bruce Lee's debut film *The Big Boss* a.k.a. *Fist of Fury*, 1970) and the subversion of the traditional Chinese characters and narratives (i.e. Jackie Chan's irreverent interpretation of Wong Fei-Hung in *Drunken Master*, 1978). However, as the purpose of this analysis was focused on the Shaolin narrative films which came out of the Mandarin-focused Shaw Brothers Studios, these two issues have been left aside.

These missing pieces aside, the analysis presented here tackles a substantially important moment in the history of Hong Kong cinema which needs further elucidation. As time goes on and the markets of Asian cinema, particularly Mainland China and Taiwan, expand to even greater heights, it should not be forgot that the humble origins of the craze which swept the world and reshaped the way the West saw the East began in the Hong Kong experience.

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