

# THE CINEMA OF HONG KONG

HISTORY, ARTS, IDENTITY

*Edited by*

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# CONTENTS

<i>List of Contributors</i>	page vii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
POSHEK FU AND DAVID DESSER	
<i>Introduction</i>	1
POSHEK FU AND DAVID DESSER	
<i>Chronology of Hong Kong Cinema</i>	13
DAVID DESSER AND POSHEK FU	
PART I. HISTORY	
1. The Kung Fu Craze: Hong Kong Cinema's First American Reception	19
DAVID DESSER	
2. The American Connection in Early Hong Kong Cinema	44
LAW KAR	
3. The 1960s: Modernity, Youth Culture, and Hong Kong Cantonese Cinema	71
POSHEK FU	
4. The 1970s: Movement and Transition	90
STEPHEN TEO	
PART II. ARTS	
5. Richness through Imperfection: King Hu and the Glimpse	113
DAVID BORDWELL	
6. Space, Place, and Spectacle: The Crisis Cinema of John Woo	137
TONY WILLIAMS	
7. Besides Fists and Blood: Michael Hui and Cantonese Comedy	158
JENNY LAU	

8. The Film Work of Ann Hui PATRICIA BRETT ERENS	176
PART III. IDENTITY	
9. Between Nationalism and Colonialism: Mainland Émigrés, Marginal Culture, and Hong Kong Cinema 1937–1941 POSHEK FU	199
10. Urban Cinema and the Cultural Identity of Hong Kong LEUNG PING-KWAN	227
11. Rewriting History: Hong Kong Nostalgia Cinema and Its Social Practice NATALIA CHAN SUI HUNG	252
12. Filming Diaspora and Identity: Hong Kong and 1997 SHELDON LU	273
13. Buying American, Consuming Hong Kong: Cultural Commerce, Fantasies of Identity, and the Cinema GINA MARCHETTI	289
14. Hong Kong Electric Shadows: A Selected Bibliography of Studies in English H.C. LI	314
<i>Index</i>	327

# 1

## THE KUNG FU CRAZE: HONG KONG CINEMA'S FIRST AMERICAN RECEPTION

David Desser

### A SUDDEN STORM

When Jackie Chan's *Rumble in the Bronx* opened in February 1996 and quickly became the top box-office draw of the month, film fans over forty may have been forgiven for a nagging, if not ironic, sense of déjà vu. This was not the first time the American box-office had been taken by storm by a Hong Kong superstar; and not the first time a formulaic film, the product of an internationally popular and powerful foreign film industry heretofore under appreciated by U.S. audiences, caught most critics and audiences unawares. Twenty-three years earlier, in 1973, American audiences thrilled to the exploits of Bruce Lee – and Bruce Lee's films were not alone at the top of the charts. That May, perhaps for the first and only time in the history of the American cinema, not one, not two, but *three* foreign-made films took home the week's top box-office grosses. This unprecedented accomplishment seems to have gone unremarked at the time.<sup>1</sup>

Jackie Chan's popularity among mainstream U.S. audiences waned quickly. In a sad but consistent manner, each film released subsequent to *Rumble in the Bronx* performed less well: *Supercop* did less business than *Rumble* (*Rumble* grossed \$32.3 million; *Supercop*, \$16.25); *Jackie Chan's First Strike* earned less than *Supercop* (\$14.5 million), and *Operation Condor* earned even less than *First Strike* (\$10.4 million). Many factors might account for this, but it is not this chapter's intention to try.<sup>2</sup> Rather, I would like to examine the altogether more extraordinary success of Hong Kong films at the U.S. box office in the period starting in 1973. Bruce Lee's popularity is well remembered (and hardly tainted with the passage of time since his death). Comparisons between Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee are more than warranted. But while Chan's status as an international superstar (whose

I would like to thank Madeline Desser for helping with the research for this chapter and for forcing me to explain what I was doing and why.

celebrity in the United States is rather more late in coming than elsewhere) can help account for whatever box-office clout his films have managed, it wasn't Bruce Lee alone who represented Hong Kong cinema at the top of the United States charts in 1973. Indeed, Lee's ascension to superstardom was enabled by his films being part of a veritable wave of Hong Kong action movies. Although Hong Kong cinema would never again dominate U.S. ticket sales as it did in the summer and fall of 1973, for a number of years afterward dubbed action films from Hong Kong maintained a powerful presence on U.S. screens.

To a large extent, the kung fu craze seems to have come out of nowhere. Where never before had a single Hong Kong film shown on mainstream commercial screens, suddenly in 1973 a large handful of films simultaneously appeared. And, indeed, in thinking about the kung fu craze one is left with the impression that it *did* come out of nowhere. Obviously, the success of one film led to the release of another; the success of these first few led to the hurried dubbing and release of many more, often by fly-by-night companies hoping to capitalize on a craze that wouldn't, couldn't, last much longer. Obviously, Bruce Lee's stardom accounts for the spectacular ascension of kung fu, and, luckily for U.S. distributors, there was a huge backlog of films that could be brought into overseas distribution immediately, along with an industry able to produce, no less hurriedly, films to cater to this sudden fad. Still, it was a strange phenomenon, and as I try to trace its roots and thus try to prove that it didn't really just come out of nowhere, I am always left with the feeling that it came and went like a brief, but to me welcome, summer storm. First, though, the storm.

## THE HONG KONG CONNECTION

On May 16, 1973, *Fists of Fury*, *Deep Thrust – the Hand of Death*, and *Five Fingers of Death* were ranked 1, 2 and 3 respectively, on *Variety's* list of the week's top box-office draws. Both *Fists of Fury* and *Deep Thrust* were on the charts for the first time. *Five Fingers of Death*, however, was in its *seventh* week on the chart; it would stay on the charts for yet another few weeks (Fig. 1). On May 23, it was still in the top ten at 9; on May 30 it had dropped to 26; by June 13, it was finally gone. But from its opening in March, *Five Fingers of Death* had stayed on the charts for almost three months. The box-office performance of both *Fists of Fury* and *Deep Thrust* is no less impressive. After opening at 1 and 2 in their first week, both remained on the charts for the next few weeks. Distribution patterns and the vagaries of the charting procedure lead to some anomalies: *Deep Thrust* had fallen to 31 for the week of May 30, but a wider release in New York City on June 6 pushed the film back to 3 on June 13 – that is, one month after it debuted at 2, it was back at 3. Meanwhile, for the week of June 13, *Fists of Fury* was still on the charts at



Figure 1. Original movie poster, *5 Fingers of Death* (Warner Brothers, 1973). Author's personal collection.

31. On July 4, *Deep Thrust* was hanging in the top 50 at 49; *Fists of Fury* had fallen off the charts by then. Yet, almost without precedent, *Fists of Fury* was back on the charts at an impressive 21 during the week of August 29! There is an explanation for this, as we'll see in a moment, one that shows just how powerful a draw kung fu had become at the U.S. box office.

As I noted before, the presence of three foreign films at the top of the U.S. box-office charts in May of 1973 was left unremarked. Indeed, the whole kung fu phenomenon certainly caught that industry-insider, *Variety*, by sur-

prise. Its review of *Five Fingers of Death* was prescient as regards its box-office appeal, stating the film had “Good prospects in U.S. action” and that it is “glossed with all the explosive trappings that make for a hit in its intended market.” The review is, in fact, extremely positive, the reviewer duly impressed with the fights and the film’s production values. It would be too much to expect the critic to predict the success of other kung fu films, of course, but aside from noting that the film was the first time its distributor, Warner Brothers, had “picked up one of these Oriental confections . . .” the review has nothing to say about the significance of such distribution in the first place.<sup>3</sup> A week later, when the film had reached the top of the box-office charts, *Variety* noted, “Appeal of the violent ‘martial arts’ meller seems to cut across all lines, getting the action-oriented fans, black and white, as well as camp followers who find the dubbing and excessive mayhem food for giggles . . . Warner’s gets lucky with pick-up and success of *Five Fingers* is recalling last year’s *Super Fly* phenomenon.”<sup>4</sup> This is astute analysis, acknowledging the appeal of the film to black audiences and noting Warner’s success not only with this Hong Kong import, but the studio’s success a year earlier with another pick up, *Super Fly*. As I will show, these factors are intimately related to the kung fu craze.

Yet if *Variety* understood the success of *Five Fingers* in March 1973, in November 1972, the reviewer of *Fist of Fury* (i.e., the film that would be released in the United States as *The Chinese Connection*) missed the boat completely. The review’s prognosis was that *Fist of Fury* is a “Naive Hong Kong-made meller, of little U.S. commercial potential, despite charm of Bruce Lee’s invincible heroics.” The reviewer felt the film to be little more than an “exuberant novelty act” unlikely to find occidental appeal, though Bruce Lee, with his “aggressive boyish charm . . . could prove appealing to U.S. femmes.” As it happens, the film’s box-office appeal was somewhat greater than the reviewer anticipated – and it wasn’t just “U.S. femmes” who made it a hit. But this success was not apparent until June 13 when *The Chinese Connection* was finally released in the United States. It debuted at thirty-nine on the *Variety* charts, joining *Deep Thrust* and *Fists of Fury*. But it went wide that week; on June 20 it was number one. On July 4, it was still in the top twenty-five, and on August 29 it was back in the top fifteen. On October 3, its last week on the charts, it was at forty-five. Though it had fallen off the charts for a couple of weeks in September, the film *Variety* felt had little U.S. commercial potential was on the charts for a total of twelve weeks.

Of course, before *The Chinese Connection* proved *Variety*’s reviewer wrong, U.S. audiences had seen Bruce Lee in *Fists of Fury* (a.k.a. *The Big Boss*), which performed as well as *The Chinese Connection* at the box office. Yet here, too, *Variety* had missed the boat, and missed it in such spectacular fashion as to seem positively conspiratorial. For although *Fists of Fury* had debuted at 1 on *Variety*’s box-office chart on May 16, the publication didn’t

even review the film until June 27. Its review then was “strictly for the record, since the National General pickup has already scored reasonably well in cross-country saturation bookings.” By that point the reviewer could only attribute the film’s success to “the current U.S. craze for kung fu,” not recognizing that in some sense, along with *Five Fingers of Death* and *Deep Thrust*, the kung fu craze had been *initiated* by this Bruce Lee film. Interestingly, the review also claims that *Fists of Fury* is better than Bruce Lee’s “first slaughter-ridden epic” *The Chinese Connection*. In fact, *Fists of Fury* (*The Big Boss*) was made before *The Chinese Connection*, so the *Variety* reviewer got it all wrong.<sup>5</sup>

This inability, which seems like a genuine unwillingness, to see the appeal of Hong Kong films may be witnessed most clearly in *Variety*’s review of *Deep Thrust – The Hand of Death*. As we saw earlier, *Deep Thrust* was 2 on the U.S. box-office charts for the week ending May 16. On May 23, however, it was 1. That was the week the review appeared; the prognosis was that the box-office response “should be standard for this type of Kung-Fu action.” Two things about this prediction are interesting: Since both *Five Fingers of Death* and *Fists of Fury* had reached 1 on the box-office chart (at least for one week), the review’s prediction of the “standard” box-office performance should have been more upbeat than the notion of “standard” for “this type of Kung-Fu action.” More to the point, what exactly was “this type of Kung-Fu action” when only two other films of that “type” had previously been released, and only two had been reviewed in *Variety*? The review goes on to place *Deep Thrust* within the “recent rash of Kung-Fu–karate imports . . .” but names no other films and has nothing good to say about this film or, indeed, the genre as a whole. For the irked reviewer, this recent rash of films indicated “that sheer violence remains as potent at the b.o. as . . . sheer sex.”<sup>6</sup> But for all the dismissal of the genre in its review pages, *Variety* could not ignore the genre’s box-office clout. Indeed by June 13, when *The Chinese Connection* went wide, the industry analysis of the film’s success prompted the paper to ask: “Are you listening Paul, Steve, Barbra, Sidney and Dustin?”<sup>7</sup>

The week of June 20, 1973 marks the high-point of the martial arts’ dominance of the U.S. box-office charts. That week no fewer than five Hong Kong kung fu films appeared in the Top 50. *The Chinese Connection*, *Deep Thrust*, and *Fists of Fury* were joined on the charts by *Duel of the Iron Fist* and *Kung Fu, The Invisible Fist*. That same week *The Hammer of God*, yet another Hong Kong film, opened; it was #1 for the week of June 27. Since the quiet release of *Five Fingers of Death* at the end of March, seven Hong Kong films had hit the US box-office charts. By the middle of August, two more films from Hong Kong, *Shanghai Killers* and *Fearless Fighters*, found box-office success. How much longer would it be until Hollywood – though not necessarily Paul, Steve, Barbra, Sidney and Dustin – would take notice?

Actually Hollywood had taken some slight notice. The success of *Fists of Fury* and *The Chinese Connection* in Hong Kong had led Warner Brothers to distribute *Five Fingers of Death* in Europe before releasing it in the States. Shortly thereafter the studio put *Enter the Dragon* into production. The success of *Fists of Fury* and *The Chinese Connection* in the United States could only mean good things for Hollywood's first-ever martial arts production and the stardom of Bruce Lee. But, as we have seen, even before *Dragon* entered, almost a dozen Hong Kong films had already made their mark.

## WARNER BROTHERS

The sudden storm, which seemed to come out of nowhere, and which took the industry by surprise (though this surprise was never acknowledged) did have some roots, the most important being Warner Brothers. Although many other studios would distribute kung fu films (National General, American International, and a host of smaller companies) no other U.S. studio was as intimately involved in production and distribution of martial arts movies as Warner Brothers. Interest in the martial arts in American films and at Warner Brothers was already apparent before *Five Fingers of Death* started the wave. Rescued from near-bankruptcy by the success of *Super Fly* (thus putting the studio in the forefront of blaxploitation as well), Warner Brothers had simultaneously produced the television series *Kung Fu*. First as a network made-for-TV movie that aired in August, 1972, then in an a once-monthly airing of new hour-long episodes in the fall of 1972 (interspersed with the TV western *Alias Smith and Jones*), and then finally as a weekly series, *Kung Fu*, starring David Carradine as a half-Chinese, half-American Shaolin priest wandering the Old West, brought the Asian martial arts to home screens on a regular and high-quality basis. It was at this time, in the spring of 1973, that Fred Weintraub was producing *Enter the Dragon* for Warner Brothers. The success of both the television series and the dubbed *Five Fingers of Death* showed how the martial arts genre could be marketed in the United States.

The first and most important factor was, of course, Bruce Lee, the biggest star in Hong Kong and on the Mandarin-language movie circuit. Lee's Hong Kong success had attracted attention back in the United States. His popularity from his previous Hollywood appearances certainly didn't hurt Warner Brothers' belief in his potential stardom, though this belief was belied the previous year when the studio was reluctant to cast Lee in *Kung Fu*. According to some sources it was this slight that caused Lee to return to Hong Kong in 1971. There are numerous and conflicting tales about Bruce Lee's involvement with *Kung Fu*, however. One story has it that Lee was sent the script of *Kung Fu* while shooting *Enter the Dragon*. According to Weintraub, the TV series was designed for Bruce Lee. When he didn't get the part he was stunned

and upset. Warner Brothers, this source claimed, wanted an American actor for the leading role.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, Warner Brothers did want an American actor for TV's *Kung Fu* and, for many of the same reasons, cast American actor John Saxon in the major supporting role in *Enter the Dragon*, aiming for crossover appeal. By the same token, Warner Brothers had recognized the powerful appeal of kung fu films for black audiences and so cast an up-and-coming black action star, Jim Kelly, in another major supporting role. Warner Brothers realized with particular clarity that the blaxploitation audience and the emerging martial arts audience were rather consonant. *Super Fly* had already introduced Asian martial arts into its narrative; we will see later how blaxploitation met the martial arts in consistent fashion after 1974, with Jim Kelly's movie career following the success of *Enter the Dragon* and the short-lived career of Tamara Dobson.

The martial arts' appeal to black youth audiences in the inner city and in the rural South, as well as to drive-in audiences, was a major factor both in keeping the kung fu craze alive as well as leading to its rather precipitous decline. Warner Brothers placed its films in downtown theatres, double-billed many of its martial arts offerings after 1973 with blaxploitation films (including re-releases), and advertised its product along familiar generic and exploitation lines. Other distributors followed suit. It was this audience-appeal/distribution pattern that I would argue led to the genre's almost immediate critical dismissal, especially by mainstream film critics who, aside from Bruce Lee's star power and phenomenal martial arts' skills, could see little of value in these films. The hastily dubbed versions of sometimes second-rate productions contributed to an image of shoddy production qualities, which was further exacerbated by the veritable saturation of kung fu films by fly-by-night distribution companies hoping to capitalize on the craze. Films were often shortened for distribution purposes, especially for drive-in theatres, thus rendering story and characterization almost meaningless, and certainly not helping the critical image of these films. Too, the situation of declining quality and the increasingly generic nature of the films produced in Hong Kong in the 1970s did not help the image and appeal of kung fu films, especially after 1974.

In producing and distributing kung fu and other martial arts films, Warner Brothers was prescient not only in noting the potential appeal of Bruce Lee to mainstream audiences and the consonance of the blaxploitation market with the emerging martial arts craze, but also in positioning the kung fu genre with already familiar patterns of American action films. The satisfying relationship between the kung fu film and the Western had already been demonstrated by TV's *Kung Fu*. Almost immediately after the success of Hong Kong films in American and European markets in 1973, a short-lived penchant for overseas

coproductions between HK and Euro-American film producers became apparent. The Italian-Spanish-Hong Kong *The Stranger and the Gunfighter* (1974) with *Five Fingers of Death's* Lo Lieh costarring with Lee Van Cleef, familiar to audiences from numerous spaghetti Westerns, was only one such offering. This film and others found U.S. distribution as part and parcel of the kung fu craze. A precedent for this sort of thing may be found in Hollywood's penchant for remaking Japanese martial arts films (i.e., Samurai films) as early as 1960 with *The Magnificent Seven*, adapted, of course, from Kurosawa Akira's *Shichinin no samurai* (*Seven Samurai*, 1954). Perhaps the pattern for multinational coproductions with a martial arts bent was set in 1971 with the Franco-American production of *Red Sun*, featuring American, Japanese, French, and Italian stars, with a British director and an Old West setting.<sup>9</sup> The Hollywood Western was in decline in the 1970s, but other action/exploitation forms could put its patterns and setting to good and sometimes new use, including the blaxploitation film and its black-themed Westerns (e.g., *The Legend of Nigger Charley*, *Buck and the Preacher*, both 1972). It is no surprise to find kung fu films double-billed with Spaghetti Westerns, for instance, in downtown theatres during this period.

Another genre with which the kung fu film was felt to be consonant was the horror film. A dreadful Hammer-Shaw Brothers coproduction, *The Legend of the Seven Golden Vampires* (1974), testifies to this, but more particularly was the frequent double-billing of a low-budget horror films and kung fu films. Obviously this was a matter of a distribution company having the rights to films that they could pair, but more particularly was the belief that the same audience was there for these films.<sup>10</sup> Although I can never remember a horror film being paired with a Western, I saw more than my fair share of mediocre Westerns and terrible horror films paired with the latest dubbed kung fu release.

Kung fu films also attempted to position themselves within the genres of the police or spy thriller, which provide obvious motivation for action, violence, stunts, and good guy/bad guy pairings. *Enter the Dragon* has obvious connections to James Bond films, themselves having used Asian martial arts, judo in particular, as well as Asian villains (Dr. No in the film of the same title) and heroes (Tiger Tanaka in *You Only Live Twice*). The spy thriller was initially a more popular way for the kung fu films to be positioned, given the largely fantasy elements of many plots. The police or crime thriller, however, did make an appearance with the marketing of Bruce Lee's *The Chinese Connection*, which was an obvious tie-in attempt with the wildly popular, Oscar-winning *The French Connection*. Ironically, however, it was Lee's *Fists of Fury* (a.k.a. *The Big Boss*) that was supposed to be called *The Chinese Connection*, given its tale of drug-smuggling and a hero who cracks a dope ring, but somehow Lee's Golden Harvest films had their titles switched.<sup>11</sup> Eventually, the force and popularity of the kung fu films themselves would

lead to a genre we might call “martial arts,” a genre that arose in the United States only after the kung fu craze had passed. And it was Warner Brothers in the final analysis, that had preceded, initiated, and developed the craze, and helped shift the whole thing toward more American productions and orientation. If Warner Brothers was on the cutting edge with *Kung Fu* and *Super Fly*, inaugurated the whole thing with *Five Fingers of Death*, produced the first major martial arts film, *Enter the Dragon*, and helped shift the genre with the likes of *Black Belt Jones*, yet one more film, in its way, had something to say in starting the whole thing. And here, too, Warner Brothers was in the thick of it.

### OF BRUCE LEE AND BILLY JACK; OR “ME JUJITSU”

The Asian martial arts were no stranger to American films before *Five Fingers of Death* found its way from the Brothers Shaw to the Brothers Warner. As early as 1937, in *The Awful Truth*, of all places, Cary Grant, as Jerry Warriner, confronts his ex-wife’s Filipino houseboy. Attempting to enter a room barred to him, Jerry is thrown onto the ground. The houseboy looks at him and says, “Me jujitsu.” Jerry stands up, brushes himself off, and proceeds to execute a throw on the houseboy. He says, “Me jujitsu, too.” It’s an odd moment and nothing else in the film refers to jujitsu or indeed any other notion of the martial arts. Why Jerry Warriner would be familiar with an obscure Japanese martial art remains a bit of a mystery.

A decade later, a more sustained and more explicable application of the martial arts may be found in a Hollywood film. Edmond O’Brien, costarring in *White Heat* (1949; produced, coincidentally or not, at Warner Brothers) applies a number of judo throws to James Cagney’s gang about three-quarters of the way into the film. It’s an important moment in the movie, which, all along, is working toward a kind of implicit reconceptualization of postwar American masculinity. O’Brien, as Hank Fallon, has infiltrated the notorious Cody Jarrett gang. Hank’s a cop, a new kind of Fed, familiar with the latest in electronic equipment and armed with an understanding of the latest thinking in psychology – and judo. In this respect, he’s the kind of technocratic hero that would arise in the post-Vietnam era, special-forces-meets-the-computer-nerd. Fallon, we know, is a World War II veteran, but we know little else of his combat experience. Yet implicit in his use of an obscure but interesting martial art is that it was specifically his war-time experience, and thereby, *his encounter with Asia*, that led to his special knowledge.

Perhaps the most famous appearance of the martial arts early in the postwar era is to be found in *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955). Here, what I am calling the “encounter with Asia” is specific and crucial to the plot. Spencer Tracy portrays John Macreedy, a wounded war veteran who comes to the dusty town of Black Rock in search of a Japanese farmer whose son Macreedy befriended

during the war. The farmer had been murdered by a gang of local racist thugs who similarly try to dispense with Macreeedy. But his knowledge of judo saves him time and again. That Tracy, a man of average size, could defeat the likes of Robert Ryan, Lee Marvin, and Ernest Borgnine, together and separately, was a good trick for the martial arts to demonstrate. That Macreeedy had only one arm was the capper. It's hard to know whether Tracy got his Oscar-nomination for his performance, for the film's attempts to come to terms with the United States shameful behavior toward Japanese Americans during the war years, or for this demonstration of the mystery and mayhem of the Asian martial arts.<sup>12</sup>

While it would be impossible to trace, even perhaps to find, every instance of the Asian martial arts appearing on American screens, it is nevertheless important to continue to note some highlights, not only to demonstrate that the kung fu craze didn't quite come out of nowhere but to lay the foundation of an attempt to understand why Asian martial arts films had the impact they did at the time they did. Although I won't be able to explore that issue here (I think it is better the province of a separate essay), the predecessors to the kung fu craze should be noted now.

A few years following *Bad Day at Black Rock*, Sam Fuller released *The Crimson Kimono* (1959). A film perhaps little-known to contemporary audiences (though Sam Fuller's death in 1997 might help remedy that) it represents a continuation of the encounter with Asia and the imaging of Asian Americans begun in *Bad Day at Black Rock*. Fuller himself, of course, had filmed literal encounters with Asia in his famous Korean War combat films, *Fixed Bayonets* (1951) and *The Steel Helmet* (1951), and made one of the earliest Vietnam War films, *China Gate* (1957).<sup>13</sup> *The Crimson Kimono* plays out its vision of Asian America as, literally, part Asian/part American. Scenes filmed in Los Angeles's Little Tokyo section show this combination of Asian and American as quaint: people eating with chopsticks at a diner, little girls dressed in kimonos marching to a brass band.<sup>14</sup> A good deal of Japanese martial arts is on view in the film, karate and kendo in particular. To my knowledge, *The Crimson Kimono* boasts by far the most detailed imaging of both karate and kendo yet seen in American cinema. These things are presented as both exotic and deadly; mysterious weapons of the Orient, associated at one point in the film with geisha, thus linking the exotic with the erotic. In many ways, Fuller's film of 1959 looks ahead to the beginnings of the American martial arts genre that would solidify, by my reckoning, exactly twenty years later.

The 1960s saw a veritable explosion of interest in the martial arts as witnessed by the rise, for instance, of judo and karate schools in cities and towns, gyms, and Ys all across the country. Bruce Lee himself, before entering the world of film and television, had started martial arts schools on the West Coast, first at the University of Washington and, later, in Oakland,

California. By 1965, karate had become popular enough for entrepreneurs to stage karate demonstrations at large exhibition halls. Lee participated in one such event in Long Beach, California, in 1965 where he came to the attention of at least one Hollywood producer. Hollywood's continued interest in remaking Japanese samurai cinema, begun in 1960 with *The Magnificent Seven*, saw the spaghetti Western *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), which made a star of Clint Eastwood, and the ill-conceived remake of *Rashomon* in the form of *The Outrage* (1964). The martial arts more directly made their way most memorably in the James Bond films; one remembers the cult popularity, for instance, of the character of Odd Job in *Goldfinger* (1964). Bond-style spoofs, especially the "Our Man Flint" series (*Our Man Flint*, 1966, and *In Like Flint*, 1967), focused more strongly on the martial arts as part of the super-spy's repertoire.<sup>15</sup> Even the venerable gangster film found martial arts wending its way through the techniques of the always-popular hitman figure. Charles Bronson as *The Mechanic* (1972) added kung fu to his repertoire of sniper-scopes, plastique explosives, and old-fashioned handguns in performing his duties for the Mafia. But surely it was Lee himself who demonstrated the increasing appeal, if not overwhelming commercial clout, of the martial arts with his well-remembered supporting role as Kato on TV's *The Green Hornet*.

Though it lasted only one season (26 episodes), *The Green Hornet* was important for a number of reasons. It was the first time an Asian man had been given a significant, ongoing supporting role in a dramatic television series in the United States. Lee's martial arts outshone the gadgets and gizmos of the Green Hornet himself and introduced the martial arts on a weekly, if not realistic, basis. The cancellation of *The Green Hornet* was, in retrospect, a positive thing for Lee and for the development of martial arts films, though in the immediate aftermath it might not have seemed so. To be sure, Lee worked consistently in Hollywood for the next few years. In 1969, he worked as technical advisor on *The Wrecking Crew*, latest in a long, if forgettable, line of Matt Helm movies inspired by the James Bond cycle starring Dean Martin.<sup>16</sup> Also in 1969, he appeared on screen in *Marlowe*, with James Garner as Raymond Chandler's popular private eye. Most memorably of all, he appeared in three episodes of *Longstreet*, the made-for-TV pilot entitled "The Way of the Fist" (1971; a partial translation of Lee's own martial arts style, Jeet Kune Do), and in two of the hour-long episodes.<sup>17</sup> The pilot, in essence, introduced Jeet Kune Do not only to Mike Longstreet (James Franciscus) but to American television audiences. It provided Lee with a genuinely dramatic role in addition to a role as a serious martial artist. The cancellation of *Longstreet* in 1972 after one year and Lee's disappointment at not getting the lead in *Kung Fu* sent him back to Hong Kong, scene of his childhood stardom and his subsequent rise to a stardom unknown by any Asian man before him in the West. Although Lee had made an impact on American audiences with

his televisual and filmic appearances before he returned to Hong Kong in 1971, another movie featuring martial arts, among other things, had the kind of impact in the United States that Lee's Hong Kong films would have there.

If we don't remember Tom Laughlin as a martial artist comparable to Lee, we do remember him as Billy Jack. The character, modestly introduced in 1967's *Born Losers*, part of the "motorcycle cycle" of the mid-1960s (e.g., *The Wild Angels*, *Hell's Angels on Wheels*), returned in Laughlin's independently produced *Billy Jack* in 1972. It was, by any standard, the most successful independent production of the era. After it was self-distributed (four-walled) by Laughlin to great success in the South (oddly enough given its counterculture themes), it was picked up by Warner Brothers, fittingly enough, which turned it into a bigger hit even than sister-studio Columbia Pictures had been able to do with the motorcycle-themed *Easy Rider* three years earlier. *Billy Jack* struck a nerve with less-sophisticated younger audiences with its combination of the action-film formula (crusading loner with special skills fights for the underdog) and its counterculture trappings, including the use of Native American culture, the New Left, and anti-Vietnam War sentiments. Laughlin also presaged the cycle of Hollywood films focusing on Vietnam Vets as dangerously alienated but sympathetic loners taught to kill in an amoral war (a direct line can be traced from Billy Jack to Martin Scorsese's Travis Bickle). Among the special skills Billy Jack had learned in that unpopular overseas excursion was karate – Billy Jack, the special forces killer as direct antecedent of everyone's favorite Vietnam Vet, Rambo. Billy Jack wielded a particularly effective karate style known as hapkido, whose importance to the film may be gauged by the fact that its opening credits list Bong Soo Han as technical advisor for the fight scenes.<sup>18</sup> Billy's special-forces hapkido and the film's superficial but effective counterculture politics proved a potent force at the box office and paved the way for a genuine martial arts superstar: Bruce Lee.

## MANDARIN MOVIES TO THE WORLD

When Bruce Lee returned to Hong Kong in 1971 he found a film industry in the midst of an incredible period of productivity. This island state, a colony of Great Britain, with a population of only five million, had a film industry more active and successful than the colonial power's own. Indeed, it was at that time the fourth most active film industry in the world behind India, the United States, and Japan. Per capita, Hong Kong had the most active film industry in the world by far. It was an industry in the throes of some significant changes, to be sure, but it had solidified into the most dominant film exporter in Asia and had three decades of direct filmmaking experience behind it and two more decades before that of influence and struggle.

Although the Hong Kong cinema is a varied and interesting one, there is

no question that it remains best-known for its martial arts movies (and, after 1985, its gangster films). Invented as a genre in Shanghai in the 1920s, martial arts cinema has a long pedigree.<sup>19</sup> It grows out of the historical existence of the martial arts, especially the famed Shaolin Temple, and out of a popular martial arts literature. It is fair to characterize the genre as possessing two main strands: kung fu and swordplay. The latter, almost without exception, are period films, historical epics, mythological tales of magic, or action-spectaculars with colorful costumes. Indeed, fantastic, magical swordplay films are credited with the genre's appearance. Swordplay films appeared as early as 1926 and 1927. The genre's first masterpiece is generally regarded as the *Burning of the Red Lotus Monastery* (1928). Adapted from a martial arts novel, *Legend of Strange Heroes*, the film produced eighteen sequels within three years.

From 1928 to 1931, about 250 sword fantasies were made, or about 60 percent of the total production of films in Shanghai in that period (400 films total). Film censorship codes passed in 1931 saw the decline of these movies in the claim that they were promoting superstition and the supernatural. In addition, the political situation in Manchuria and increasing Japanese encroachment generally led to the rise of patriotic and left-wing filmmaking, which saw these types of films as worse than useless.

In 1938, due to emigration of filmmakers and the different situation in Hong Kong, the Cantonese industry took up martial arts movies. This is to say, Hong Kong martial arts productions were made in the Cantonese dialect (as opposed to the Mandarin dialect of mainland films), and their popularity outshone every other Cantonese genre from 1938 to 1970. It was Mandarin-speaking émigrés who made many of these martial arts films, however, bringing skills and technical know-how to the fledgling, second-rate Hong Kong industry. Apparently, thirty-six martial arts films were produced during this period, the majority of them literary adaptations or adaptations of previously popular Shanghai productions.<sup>20</sup> Of course, local production all but ceased when Japan occupied Hong Kong in 1941.

Cantonese-language production resumed in 1949, and in the next decade 145 martial arts movies were made. A burgeoning overseas market in Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the United States (in Chinatown theatres) led to almost risk-free production with preproduction budgets often supplied by overseas buyers. At this same time, a shift away from the swordplay film was detectable with a specifically Hong-Kong, Cantonese twist. The introduction of the Wong Fei-hung series, which featured unarmed combat and was based on the exploits of an actual historical figure who was a martial artist and doctor, lent specificity to the Hong Kong cinema and in its own way planted the seeds for the kung fu craze that hit the United States in the 1970s. In 1949, star Kwan Tak-hing appeared in *The True Story of Wong Fei-hung*. Sixty-seven films followed over the next decade.

If Wong Fei-hung dominated the Cantonese cinema of the 1950s, the 1960s nevertheless was something of a golden age for Cantonese sword films. With the overseas markets of Singapore and Malaysia going great guns (and the PRC cinema almost entirely moribund), more than 300 Cantonese martial arts films were made in the 1960s, the majority of them sword films. Many of the technical innovations and plot formulae we associate with the masterpieces of the martial arts films of the 1970s arose in the Cantonese cinema of this period, including and especially the use of trampolines to produce those magical mid-air fights and flights.<sup>21</sup> But there was a fly in the ointment. A new force in the Hong Kong cinema was beginning to be felt, under the impetus of a powerful studio using a different dialect.

By the middle of the 1960s, though the health of Cantonese-language production was decent, the powerful Shaw Brothers studio began to assert itself with the production of Mandarin-language films. The films seen in America and in Europe during the kung fu craze were all dubbed into the language of the distributor. To Euro-American audiences, therefore, there might seem to be a fine distinction between whether a Hong Kong film was made in Cantonese or in Mandarin, but it made a world of difference to actors, directors, writers, producers, and, most of all, distributors. The overseas Chinese audience in Vietnam, which spoke Cantonese, was cut off from Hong Kong distributors by the escalation of the Vietnam War and the support lent to Vietnam by the PRC. Similarly, North American Chinatowns, though still largely Cantonese speaking, continued to experience an influx of émigrés from the mainland as China's disastrous economic and political policies proved fruitless and, starting with the Cultural Revolution, dangerous. More to the point, the Shaw Brothers were the dominant distributor to Asian markets, and once they entered Mandarin-language production, they closed their distribution arm to the Cantonese cinema produced by other studios. Moreover, and perhaps most significantly, the Mandarin-language films produced by the burgeoning Shaw studios were by all accounts superior to the Cantonese films. With directors like Chang Che and King Hu under contract, how could it be otherwise?

The death knell of the Cantonese martial arts film was sounded in 1965 as King Hu began his martial arts career with Shaw Brothers and made the influential *Come Drink With Me*. A year later saw the release of *The One-Armed Swordsman*, which solidified the career of a major director, Chang Che, and launched the career of a major star, Wang Yu. In 1970, thirty-five Cantonese-dialect films were released in Hong Kong, many of them martial arts films. In 1971, only one film was made in Cantonese; in 1972, not a single Cantonese film was released in Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong.

But if the Cantonese dialect was seldom heard on movie sets, Mandarin was everywhere with Shaw Brothers cranking out films at a pace not seen before in Hong Kong and not seen in the film world since the glory days of

Warner Brothers. Shaw Brothers released about a film a week, the majority of them martial arts. Although the production of neo-mythological or vaguely historical sword films continued (with their relatively high budgets and standing sets, the Shaw Brothers could, and often did, produce spectacular period films with glorious costumes and well-groomed fighters), Shaw Brothers did begin to shift from magical sword films to films featuring unarmed combat in more contemporary settings. Although it is possible to see the influence of the Cantonese Wong Fei-hung series at work here, most critics insist that these new-style films were very different in style and tone from the more strictly Confucian values of the earlier films.<sup>22</sup>

In 1970, the island nation of Hong Kong produced 118 films. As we have seen only 35 of those were in Cantonese. In 1971, with Cantonese production virtually at a halt, the local industry released 86 films, and virtually the same number were released in 1972. Throughout the 1970s, in fact, Mandarin-language production was markedly stable; the small growth of the industry in the late 1970s is attributable to the slow but steady return of Cantonese films to the local production scene. (By 1979, the industry released 109 films, with a distinctive shift back toward Cantonese.<sup>23</sup> By this time, however, overseas distribution patterns saw Hong Kong films released in Hong Kong in Cantonese, with export films dubbed into Mandarin, the situation that obtains today.) Martial arts films dominated the Mandarin-language cinema in the early 1970s; indeed from 1970 until 1972 every film in the year's Top Ten Grossing Hong Kong films was martial-arts related. It was into this volatile, successful, martial-arts dominated cinema that Bruce Lee came.

Lee was already something of a celebrity when he returned to Hong Kong following his disappointments in Hollywood in 1971. He had been a child star in postwar Cantonese cinema, but, more important, he was a celebrity in Hong Kong based on the popularity of *The Green Hornet*, which in Hong Kong was known as *The Kato Show*. Lee had been approached late in 1970 by Run Run Shaw to star in Hong Kong movies, but apparently Sir Run Run offered only the standard contract of \$200 per week for seven years. (In this respect, too, Shaw Brothers has much in common with the Warners of old.) When Bruce returned to Hong Kong in 1971, he worked out a more favorable deal with Raymond Chow and his Golden Harvest Productions. Chow, a former executive at Shaw Brothers, was a new-style producer, with greater flexibility than the more rigid, assembly-line Shaw Brothers and a better eye and ear for the local and international market.<sup>24</sup> With lower budgets than the Shaws could muster, Chow relied on star power. And with Bruce Lee he had found the most powerful star of all. *The Big Boss* (*Tangshan da xiong*; 1971) was an immediate smash and became the biggest grossing Hong Kong film of 1971, more than doubling the take of its nearest competitor. In 1972, Lee made *Fist of Fury* (*Jing wu men*), another smash, and followed it up with his directorial debut, *Way of the Dragon* (*Meng long guo jiang*), which performed

even better. *Way of the Dragon* and *Fist of Fury* placed 1 and 2 at the box office, each of them outgrossing Lee's *The Big Boss* of the year before. He began work on *Game of Death* at this time, but when the call came from Warner's to start work on *Enter the Dragon*, Lee returned to Hollywood and entered the pages of American film history.

### THE STORM SUBSIDES

*Enter the Dragon* opened to mixed reviews on August 22, 1973. *Variety* understood the film as the culmination of the "rising popularity of the Chinese martial arts as screen entertainment." The show-biz bible believed that "there's still enough novelty and excitement attached to films dealing with the martial arts to entice enthusiastic reception. . . ." However, in its survey of the New York film critics' opinions, *Variety* noted only one favorable and four unfavorable reviews of Lee's first starring role in a Hollywood film. Of course, martial arts was a critic-proof genre, and *Enter the Dragon* proved the most commercially successful martial arts film of them all. In limited release starting on August 22, it placed 17 for the week ending August 29. In wide release that week, it hit 1 on September 5 and stayed at 1 on September 12 (where its grosses were higher than the previous week). On September 19 it was at 3; on September 26 it was still in the Top 5. On October 3, it had fallen to 10; for the week of October 10, it was back at 9. For six weeks, then, it had stayed in the Top 10. Then on October 17 it hit 1 again, and on October 24 it was still doing big business at 2. By November 7 it was still in the Top 20. In all, *Enter the Dragon* spent eleven weeks in the Top 20, nine of those weeks in the Top 10. The fact that the film was an American production with high production values, a decent supporting cast, and Warner's solidly behind it (as both producer and distributor) surely accounts for the film's popularity.

For all the success of *Enter the Dragon*, imports from Hong Kong continued to make their presence known. When *Enter the Dragon* was 3 for the week of September 19, *Lady Kung Fu* held the top spot. As *Dragon* clung to the 5 spot for the week of September 26, *Shanghai Killers* (which had first hit the chart on August 29) was at 1. As *Dragon* held onto 9 the week of October 10, *Deadly China Doll* held the top spot. Hong Kong imports such as *Fists of the Double K*, *Seven Blows of the Dragon*, *The Thunder Kick*, and *Queen Boxer* also found their way onto the Top 50 charts, while *Enter the Dragon* dominated the grosses. Thus, from late March 1973 until mid-October of that same year, an incredible six films from Hong Kong had reached 1, at least for one week; during the same period, no less than fifteen dubbed imports had hit the Top 50. That is to say, that during the height of U.S. movie-going, the spring and summer season, Hong Kong imports performed not only far better than films from any other country by far, but for about one-fifth of the season Hong Kong films outperformed Hollywood's own product. If you factor in

*Enter the Dragon*, half the time during this peak season a kung fu film was 1 at the U.S. box-office.

It didn't last. The death knell of kung fu had sounded by late November 1973 when *Variety*, reviewing *The Sacred Knives of Vengeance*, wondered if "the cycle may well be on its way out."<sup>25</sup> It was. Although throughout the rest of 1973, one could typically find five Hong Kong films in the weekly Top 50 (though rarely near the top), on January 2, 1974, there was only one such film. A month later, in mid-February, no Hong Kong films could be found on the charts. By the time Lee's Hong-Kong made *Return of the Dragon* (a.k.a. *Way of the Dragon*) was released almost one year to the day after the release of *Enter the Dragon*, its powerful box-office performance (more than \$1 million in New York City alone in its first five days) was unique among Hong Kong imports.

Though Hong Kong films continued to be released in the United States throughout the rest of the 1970s, it was almost always through minor distributors. By this time martial arts movies were exclusively the province of inner-city theatres, second-run houses, small-town double-bills, and drive-ins.<sup>26</sup> To attract inner-city audiences in Los Angeles, it was not uncommon to find English-dubbed kung fu films with Spanish subtitles in neighborhood or downtown theatres. If *Variety* wondered if the kung fu craze was on its way out in November of 1973, by November of 1975 it wondered whether there was a market at all for *The One-Armed Boxer vs. The Flying Guillotine*, which was, according to the review, "one of the better Kung fu films."<sup>27</sup>

Martial arts films did not die, however, as American producers, including Warner Brothers, began adapting the genre for American formulae. But Hong Kong imports had certainly faded. This fading of the genre by 1975 had some unfortunate consequences. When *Touch of Zen* showed at the Cannes Film Festival to great acclaim, there were no takers for overseas distribution. Indeed, it would be two years before the film would be shown in the United States, but even with resultant festival acclaim here it never found a U.S. distributor, showing up only occasionally over the next few years at art houses for single showings.<sup>28</sup> Of course, if kung fu films lost their theatrical clout, they maintained a presence on American television screens, with both local channels and at least one national satellite service (the USA network) devoting at least once-weekly showings under the rubric "Martial Arts Theatre" or some similar title.<sup>29</sup> This continued presence on television screens eventually worked its way into such hybrid shows as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (and a series of feature films spun off from that) and *The Power Rangers*, subjects left for others to decode.<sup>30</sup>

## EVOLUTION/DEVOLUTION

The major commercial impact of the kung fu genre on theatrical screens would be felt again, after 1973, only when Hollywood discovered an accept-

able formula for more mainstream American audiences. This was done in two phases. The first was in the mid-1970s, when the genre migrated to the blaxploitation film (notwithstanding the occasional Hong Kong release and the two remaining Bruce Lee films, *Return of the Dragon* and *Game of Death*.) Blaxploitation, which reached an apotheosis in 1972, began to level off in terms of ticket sales in 1973. Also contributing to a decline in blaxploitation was the rising tide of black voices against the perceived overly violent, sex-driven narratives. Mainstream, high-budget films of this period sought “crossover” audiences and shied away from all-black casts.<sup>31</sup> Those which worked more closely within blaxploitation and lower budgets sought refuge in the kung fu genre. *Back Belt Jones* (1974, directed by Robert Clouse, who had helmed *Enter the Dragon*) was the first of these kung fu/karate blaxploitation films, felt by *Variety* to be “minor exploitation . . . for what’s left of the kung-fu market.”<sup>32</sup> More forgettable entries in this genre included films like *Black Karate* and *Black Kung-Fu*. Jim Kelley, still wielding his karate, took third billing in the last big-budget blaxploitation action film, *Three the Hard Way*, released in June 1974. Even the women stars of blaxploitation participated in the kung fu craze, as Ed Guerrero notes vis-à-vis the short-lived career of Tamara Dobson: “As an indication of a shift of Blaxploitation’s youth audience toward Kung-Fu action movies, in . . . *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* 1975), Cleopatra Jones travels to Hong Kong to team up with Mi Ling (Tammy) and shares much of the camera and action with her Chinese counterpart.”<sup>33</sup> In fact, the first *Cleopatra Jones* film (1973) had already featured martial arts, with Bong Soo Han listed as action choreographer. Although *Variety* liked the original in the two-film series, they had less use for the sequel, claiming it “[ran] the gamut of clichés in both chop socky and blaxploitation . . .”<sup>34</sup> Perhaps *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* was the death knell of both kung fu and blaxploitation, at least for a few years, as the film never rose above 25 on *Variety*’s weekly box-office charts (though it stayed on the charts for two months, between mid-July and mid-September 1975). *The Man from Hong Kong*, an Australian-Hong Kong coproduction featuring Wang Yu and George Lazenby, released in the summer of 1975, never even made *Variety*’s Top 50 for a single week. Truly, Hong Kong had had it, at least until Jackie Chan and John Woo came along. Blaxploitation, too, was over.

But the martial arts was not. In 1977, Chuck Norris, memorable in his own way in Lee’s *Return of the Dragon*, appeared in *Breaker, Breaker*, part of the short-lived cycle of trucker/CB films. *Variety* recognized that Norris was “the latest to lay claim to the title of martial arts king vacated by the late Bruce Lee” and that the film should do all right if the distributor “pitches the chop-socky elements as heavily as the trucking . . .”<sup>35</sup> In fact, the film didn’t do particularly well at the box-office (rising no higher than 26 the week of May 4), but in 1978, Norris found the right combination of martial arts and

mise-en scène in *Good Guys Wear Black*. *Variety* wondered about this “late-in-the-cycle attempt to cash in on the audience appeal for karate champion and former Bruce Lee film star” but concluded that the film is in fact “a well-made yarn of government corruption.”<sup>36</sup> Here, playing a Special Forces veteran of the Vietnam War, Norris found a persona he would essentially maintain over the course of his career, including many films in which he again played a Vietnam vet (*A Force of One*, 1979, and the *Missing in Action* cycle, 1984–1988). *The Octagon* (1980) proved the viability of a less politically charged kung fu saga and thus solidified the place of a martial arts genre in the American cinema, a genre which is obviously owed to the kung fu craze that preceded it.

## CONCLUSION

The legend of Bruce Lee lingered on well after his death in the summer of 1973; so, too, did Hong Kong martial arts movies. Numerous Bruce-Lee look-alikes and sound-alikes (Bruce Li, Bruce Le, Bruce Rhe (!), etc.) were trumpeted forth from low-budget filmmakers in Hong Kong and fly-by-night distributors in the United States. As we have seen, Lee’s *Return of the Dragon* (a.k.a. *Way of the Dragon*) was released a year after his death; *Game of Death* appeared five years later. In 1979, a film Lee cowrote with Stirling Silliphant achieved some minor success, *The Silent Flute* (a.k.a. *Circle of Steel*. Ironically it starred David Carradine in the roles Lee envisioned for himself). Films about Lee appeared both in Hong Kong and the United States. At least one serious, respected film emerged out of that genre, *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* (1993), starring the perhaps coincidentally named Jason Scott Lee. It did respectable box-office business, showing that twenty years after his death, Lee maintains a real presence still.

Hong Kong film stars like Lo Lieh, Wang Yu, and David Chiang became involved in international coproductions, but none achieved a stardom outside of Hong Kong even remotely comparable to Lee, and none could match Lee in Hong Kong. Even the biggest star after Lee in Hong Kong, Alexander Fu Sheng, could not find an overseas audience. Only in the 1980s would the Hong Kong cinema find an action star who could match Lee’s appeal and that, of course, would be Jackie Chan. But we should recall that 1980s attempts to introduce Chan as a U.S. star failed, and failed rather dismally.<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, as the 1970s wore on, and Hollywood studios began adapting the martial arts genre for American movies, such as the previously mentioned *Black Belt Jones* and the successful slew of Chuck Norris films starting in the late 1970s and since. Hong Kong imports also made their way to television where, interestingly, they would in some instances replace other sorts of exploitation films, like horror, in weekly, daytime or late-night slots. If nothing else, this enabled the genre to maintain a hold, however slight, on the

youth audience, for it was always the youth audience that had been the heart of kung fu's fandom, white working-class and middle-class boys, side-by-side with black urban and rural audiences.

The appeal of the genre for black audiences is not hard to gauge. Outside of the blaxploitation genre it largely replaced, kung fu films offered the only nonwhite heroes, men and women, to audiences alienated by mainstream film and often by mainstream culture. This was the genre of the underdog, the underdog of color, often fighting against colonialist enemies, white culture, or the Japanese.<sup>38</sup> The lone, often unarmed combatant fighting a foe with greater economic clout who represented the status quo provides an obvious but nonetheless real connection between kung fu films and black audiences. The same may be said, more generally, for young audiences, a characteristic of youth being alienated from the mainstream, seeking images of rebels with or without causes. Many kung fu films portrayed a rather anarchic world view, routinely a nihilistic one, with violent death a way of life and continued and continual trial-by-combat the typical narrative drive. Such filmic values and motifs clearly mirror the psychosociological states of young people. And the sheer kinetics of the films – rapid-fire editing, trick photography, and the unbridled athleticism of the young stars – mirrored the states, physical and psychological, of its audience.

But something else is occurring here, a particular moment in U.S. social history when the time is ripe, for multiple reasons, for the kung fu craze. It might be coincidental that the kung fu craze of 1973 is the year that the United States withdrew its troops from Vietnam, but surely it is not coincidental that interest in the Asian martial arts increased with continued, ongoing, and intense exposure to Asia, what I termed the “encounter with Asia” earlier. From the Pacific War to the Korean War to ongoing and shifting U.S. attitudes toward and struggles with the PRC; from the American occupation of Japan, the use of Japan for R&R for American soldiers in Korea and Vietnam, the stationing of U.S. Army and Navy troops in Japan, and, most particularly, the problematic and troubling Vietnam war itself forced the United States into veritable encounters with Asian cultures and societies that offered sometimes different, troubling, challenging, or intriguing (usually all at the same time) alternatives to American culture and values. Increased immigration of Asians to the United States (from Japan, Korea, China, and later, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) along with the assimilation of long-standing Japanese and Chinese communities into the middle class also meant that Americans at home were becoming both more exposed to and familiar with Asian and Asian-American cultures. Thus the kung fu craze is consonant with and comes just after a long-standing and increasing encounter with Asia, especially the traumatic, seemingly inexplicable debacle of the Vietnam war.

P. Flanigan, in a rather tendentious attempt to understand the Kung fu

craze, makes the good point that the cinematic aspect of the craze was not a singular event. Flanigan writes: “What must be understood is that any analysis we make of the Kung fu craze is at best superficial if we attempt to constrain it only to the cinema. The meteoric rise of the martial arts madness is a classic example of the ‘total propaganda’ concept, for it was not film alone that caused the boom. It was capitalist opportunism and marketing.” Examples of this dastardly capitalist conspiracy include, kung fu comics, TV shows (Flanigan notes *Men of the Dragon*, a 1974 made-for-TV movie, in addition to *Kung Fu*), magazines, martial arts schools, and cheap paperback novels.<sup>39</sup> If this is the best the international capitalist conspiracy could muster, it’s a miracle that capitalism survived. Rather, what Flanigan is noting is, on the one hand, the rather more innocent interest in things Asian. Martial arts schools, novels, comic books, magazines, films, and television shows were part of the same phenomenon, the same undercurrent. On the other hand, however, something less innocent is afoot. It is not the capitalist conspiracy that is responsible for the kung fu craze, but rather the traumatic stock-taking that the Vietnam War engendered. The kung fu craze is just one cinematic signifier of a post-Vietnam stress disorder on the cultural level. Other signifiers include the spate of films focusing on troubled returning Vietnam vets (of which *Billy Jack* was the martial-arts paradigm), the Vietnam War films themselves of the late 1970s and, more precisely, the rise of white male martial arts stars who, in a sense, co-opt the Asian martial arts for the American action hero, for the American movie star, for the American man.<sup>40</sup> It is no coincidence that the kung fu craze could be critically dismissed as long as it consisted of badly dubbed foreign films, remained the province of black and youth audiences, and as long as it was confined, afterward, to blaxploitation. But it is no coincidence that the genre takes hold in American cinema precisely when a white star not only enters the genre but situates his persona within an Asian context: Vietnam and the Vietnam War. The kung fu craze of the 1970s is a deceptively complex moment in American cultural history, when a foreign cinema grabs hold of the box-office as never before and eventually gives rise to a new and significant genre in American cinema.

## NOTES

1. One possible reason for the lack of attention focused on this first wave of Hong Kong action films may very well have been the attention focused on an exploitation genre of a different sort: hard core pornography. Consonant with the release of Bruce Lee’s films and others to be discussed, *Deep Throat* appeared, and the U.S. box office and the U.S. courts were never quite the same again.
2. In speculating briefly one might imagine that the U.S. setting of *Rumble* (though it is clearly *not* the Bronx where the film was shot!) might help account for this. Sadly, too, *Supercop*, *First Strike*, and *Operation Condor* do not represent Chan at