

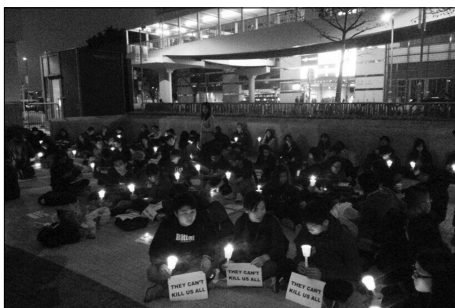
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A Question of Legacy: What is the Use of Kung Fu?

Deeply honoured as I am to contribute to *The Luminous Celluloid* series of reflections on the cinematic legacy, I must begin with an apology. I can't do celluloid. Having learned from Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Laleen Jayamanne just how seriously celluloid is a matter of historical and aesthetic substance¹, I am conscious that while many of the Hong Kong kung fu films I study indeed began life in the 'time of celluloid' (the frame of Rajadhyaksha's historiography), my experience of those films was shaped from the 1970s by the erratic, evanescent temporalities of transnational video and now electronic distribution². And while the deep study of cinematic 'material' that Jayamanne initiates in her work on the epic cinemas of Kumar Shahani and Baz Luhrmann is fascinating to me³, this line of thought lies, along with more conventional ideas of medium specificity, beyond my purview here. The following reflections on legacy do not begin in the cinema at all but rather with a worldly form of the luminous that is in part brought into being to solicit the creation of *images*, photographs as well as film and video, that are 'spreadable' across media from print to every available kind of screen, including smartphones and tablets⁴.

I am thinking of the mundane luminosity of the ‘candlelight vigil’. Images from two of these, held around the same time in places I think of as home, moved me deeply as I was thinking about this paper. One was from ‘#LightTheDark: Vigil for Asylum Seekers’, a protest organised by the campaign community *GetUp! Action for Australia* in all of our major cities on 23 February, 2014, following the murder of Reza Barati, a 23 year old Iranian asylum seeker held in an Australian-run detention centre on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. This national mass protest went largely unreported by Australian mainstream media but circulated widely as news in on-line social media. In this image, a high shot panoramically embraces a vast crowd of tiny pin-points of light sparkling against a horizon of drab urban towers in any city whatever (probably Melbourne)⁵. The other image was a more intimate shot by Yeung Tsz Kan taken at a protest held in Hong Kong on March 2, 2014, following a near-fatal ‘chopping’ attack on an investigative newspaper editor, *Ming Pao*’s Kelvin Lau, amidst fears for the future of a free press in Hong Kong⁶. Small clusters of dark-clad young Hong Kong people are sitting on the ground holding lights and white signs with black letters saying, ‘They Can’t Kill Us All’ (a slogan used by American protestors after the shooting of four students by the National Guard at Kent State University in March, 1970)⁷. The political systems of Australia and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China are quite different but in both places large numbers of people feeling helpless to move their government in any way are using aesthetic means to reach out to each other and to strangers through images created to proliferate on social media.



‘They Can’t Kill Us All’
(Reproduced by permission of Yeung Tzs Kan)

Wondering about the origins of this now globalized protest tradition, whereby masses of people come together in the dark bearing lights to affirm a shared feeling about a singular event, I went looking for a legacy. I found very little on-line except vigils from many countries and causes going back decades, along with articles about peace candles and the positive

significance of light in the great world religions. There was also a blog written in 2007 by a Christian who had, like me, asked the oracle (Google) about the origin of the candlelight vigil. He, too, found nothing save a small Islamic thread

tracing the custom back to the Druids in Celtic Britain, thus confirming his disquiet that a vigil has ‘a sort of pagan feel to it’⁸. Little is known with certainty about the Druids but to me it seems unlikely that a priestly elite would use light for protest purposes. However, such speculation suggests that, pagan or not, there is a universalising ‘feel’ to candlelight vigils as they invite us to join in resistance to our local forces of ‘darkness’—although not to the night itself, since that darkness makes the vigil an aesthetically *visible* event and thus plays a part in its design. This rhetoric of luminosity as a force in the service of the weak circulates around what the anthropologist Ulf Hannerz calls ‘the global ecumene’, an inter-connectedness of the world formed through densely local but relational interactions and networks whereby ‘Ben in [Nigerian] Kafanchan does the Kung Fu [and] a *fatwa* pronounced in Teheran becomes a matter of a street shouting-match in Manhattan’⁹.

Cinema has long played a transnationally powerful role in forming these ‘ecumenical’ conditions. In the global ecumene, legacy becomes a conjunctural field (rather than a genealogical line) of experiment, invention, hypothesis and contestation that *produces* ‘relations’. It follows that no particular politics inhabits the genre of a ‘designed-to-be-visible’ event. In Europe in 1930s the Nazis pioneered the melding of traditional ruling-class spectacle with the demotic new media of photography and, more famously, film (Leni Reifenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, 1935) while Joseph Goebbels staged torchlight parades¹⁰. Forgetting the German precedent, Umberto Eco traced a different legacy when he declared in 1978 that the radical left-wing activism then wracking the West with spectacular acts of self-immolation and news-making terrorist strikes was ‘spiritually heir’ to ‘the first genius who understood the possibilities available in a society of mass communication, i.e. Mahatma Gandhi’¹¹. Given the violence of Italy’s Red Brigades at that time, Eco’s choice of the term ‘heir’ may seem inappropriate. However, legacy-making is a tricky and shape-shifting business. Today it would be hard to deny the aesthetic force of Islamic State’s fascist recruitment images, the horrible death clips and the elegant marching shots of designer black-and-cream wrapped figures with matching flags alike, but to say what those images are ‘heir’ to in the global ecumene would be a challenging task. (I tend to see a British art school legacy in evidence). It is now very much a matter of context and perspective whether we think that any given instance of image activism participates in the ‘aestheticisation of politics’ that Walter Benjamin saw in capitalism and fascism, or whether we hope that it ‘politicizes art’ in a progressive spirit¹².

On a much smaller scale I want to outline just a few issues about the uses

of aesthetics in a film-making tradition that actively foregrounds questions and problems of legacy: Hong Kong kung fu cinema. These derive from a book I am writing with colleagues from Lingnan University, Stephen Chan Ching-kiu and Siu Leung Li. Provisionally entitled *Pedagogy and Modernity in Kung Fu Cinema*, this is a companion to a volume we edited together, *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*¹³. The hypothesis linking both projects is that Hong Kong's distinct worldly situation forged over several decades an ecumenical template for a cinema adept at generating stories about conflicts over legacy—for example, the 'rival schools' story adapted from Japan via Kurosawa's *Sugata Sanshiro (Judo Saga, 1943)* in Wang Yu's *The Chinese Boxer* (1970) and Lo Wei's film with Bruce Lee, *Fist of Fury* (1972)—and stories about people dealing with legacies of historical shock (the death of the teacher, the torn book of tradition, the mutilated hero). These are stories that people elsewhere could and still do adapt to tell their own local stories in transnationally intelligible ways. In the earlier book we emphasized diverse uptakes of kung fu film elements in Australian, French, Korean, Japanese, mainland Chinese, Telugu and Hindi cinemas, thus also modeling ways to think multilaterally about how templates work in cultural globalization rather than focusing on a singular set of centre-periphery relations. In the new book we are writing together, we want to consider how the insistence in kung fu cinema on teaching and learning processes and the modes of their transmission ('legacy') organizes exemplary ways of *responding* to conflict and shock—often, though not always, from an apparently helpless or hopeless position¹⁴.

Within this framework I am interested in the role played by 'cliché' and canons in cultural legacy production. I have written in detail elsewhere about theoretical problems posed to scholars of popular cinemas (particularly action cinemas) by the concept of cliché¹⁵. Let me just say briefly here that cliché is a modern concept, carrying an ambivalence about repetition and commonality that had no place in classical rhetorics for which, in the West as elsewhere, imitation and conformity to tradition was held to nurture rather than stifle 'creativity', or, to be less anachronistic, excellence in performance. As Ruth Amossy points out, clichés are 'reading effects' that emerge through an act of recognition that is historically and socially specific¹⁶. In any economy subject to modern market imperatives, these acts of recognition are fickle and open to diverse worldly pressures. The identification of a figure as clichéd rather than canonical is a context-dependent judgment about the value of a legacy; yesterday's unbearable 'cliché' or embarrassing heritage item is 'classic' again today and may revert to cliché tomorrow as the times and taste-makers

change. For industrial reasons, however, popular cinema (especially action blockbuster cinema) must always positively strive to attain the border-crossing recognizability that is the power and shame of cliché.

Here, I can only offer a few remarks about the recurrence of one specific ‘cliché’ of Hong Kong kung fu cinema, the figure of the teacher, and with a stock question that most kung fu films eventually ask and sometimes answer: what is the *use* of kung fu? Often posed in mid-narrative by a kung fu master having a reflective moment (Gordon Chan’s *Fist of Legend* 1994) or a sulky disciple frustrated with his training (Chang Cheh’s *Men from the Monastery*, 1974), this question, sometimes debated by a whole film such as Lau Kar-leung’s *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978), explicitly marks kung fu cinema as what Siu Leung Li calls ‘a continuous and paradoxical cultural intervention useful for problematizing “traditional heritage” in modern life’¹⁷. It could be called ‘the legacy question’ of Hong Kong kung fu cinema itself since the 1970s, and I will return to this shortly. However, it first attracted my attention many years ago in a more down-to-earth variant. When I told a Chinese scholar that one of my reasons for moving to Hong Kong in 2000 was to learn more about kung fu cinema (then widely unavailable except as a relatively small selection of dubbed tapes¹⁸), he snorted: “why are you interested in that feudal crap?!”

The belatedness of my realization that there is a heavy layer of Chinese discourse about ‘feudal crap’ in relation to kung fu cinema startled me as much as my friend’s contemptuous reaction. It is easy to argue that since no generic zone of cultural production is ever uniformly crap (some kung fu films are superb, some are crap and most are simply average), it takes the ordinary scholarly labour of seeing many films to validate value judgements¹⁹. However, it took time before my awareness that the *wuxia* (‘martial heroism’) genre was banned in mainland China both before and after the revolution of 1949 was clarified by Stephen Teo’s account of this in *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition* (2009), and then by Petrus Liu’s illuminating account of the status vicissitudes of martial arts fiction in *Stateless Subjects: Chinese Martial Arts Literature and Postcolonial History* (2011)²⁰. Documenting the ‘invention of feudalism’ by May Fourth intellectuals in the 1920s, Liu’s history is fascinating about how martial arts narratives that were hitherto regarded as ‘part of China’s high literary canon’ (p. 9) and that required elite levels of literacy to read became recoded as ‘popular’ (‘crap’) as well as ‘feudal’ by the rise of modernization discourse and development thinking in China at this time.

Yet for all that, my friend’s question still troubles me. Why *do* I care about the cinematic legacy of kung fu, so much so that I shudder when some

hapless person says heartily, 'I love those bad old kung fu movies'? One reason involves the way that the cinematic question of the utility of kung fu raises issues (when it is a *problem* posed by a narrative and not just a genre-marking rhetorical moment) about more general worldly uses of art and aesthetics in social and political life, something I care a great deal about. In Cantonese, *kung fu* in fact means 'technique'. Cooking competitions can perfectly well be narrated as kung fu contests (see Stephen Chow's sublime *The God of Cookery* from 1996), and in Hollywood when the master hacker, 'Rat' (DJ Quall), successfully uses his skills to stop the American military detonating a nuclear bomb in Jon Amiel's *The Core* (2003), he speaks correctly when he whispers of his on-line opponents, 'your kung fu is not good'. Both on and off-screen, kung fu is understood primarily as a martial *art*. It is the name of a Southern Chinese art of 'empty hand' (in idiomatic English, 'hand to hand') fighting, an art which includes many 'styles' of which Wing Chun, associated with Bruce Lee's master Ip Man, is only one. At this level, Southern kung fu with its recurring claim to realism is contrasted both with Northern Chinese arts of hand-to-hand fighting and, especially, with 'swordplay' cinema that often has a fantasy dimension. Kung fu is then understood as a sub-category of the wider discourse of *wuxia*, martial chivalry, or 'martial art' (*wushu*) in the term used comprehensively in English. In film history the relationship between kung fu and *wuxia* is dynamic and we cannot safely use these terms descriptively as hard classifiers of different 'styles' in cinema²¹. However, Siu-leung Li succinctly formulates the distinction between them in these more abstract terms: *kung fu* is taken to be an art (a disciplined practice), but *wuxia*, more philosophically elaborated, is an aesthetic (a structured process of ethical and artistic enquiry as well as of experience)²².

In his magisterial work on *Chinese Martial Arts: From Antiquity to the Twenty-first Century*, the military historian Peter A. Lorge gives us another way to approach kung fu 'art' that is indirectly useful for thinking about its Hong Kong cinematic legacy:

I define 'martial arts' as the various skills and practices that originated as methods of combat. This definition therefore includes many performance, religious, or health-promoting activities that no longer have any direct combat applications but clearly originated in combat, while possibly excluding references to those techniques in dance, for example. In addition, what makes something a martial art rather than an action done by someone who is naturally good at fighting is that

the techniques are taught. Without the transmission of these skills through teaching, they do not constitute an 'art' in the sense of being a body of information or techniques that aim to reproduce certain knowledge or effects²³.

Given the importance of choreography in martial arts cinema and its formal 'origination' from the gestural legacy of Chinese opera traditions (that is, in camera movement and editing as well as facial and bodily expression)²⁴, the exclusion of dance is hard to sustain as a possibility in film contexts where combat is already, of course, a matter of performance. Lorge himself meticulously maps the history of 'displays of martial skills that did not serve a competitive purpose, but rather an aesthetic and spiritual one' (p. 26) from early times in China, and his pages on the gendering of entertainment during the Tang dynasty ('the purely aesthetic coupling of beautiful women and elegant martial arts', p. 104) are fascinating. Of primary importance here, though, is Lorge's emphasis on *teaching* as fundamental to an art involving techniques for reproducing 'certain knowledge or effects'.

Anyone who has seen Hong Kong kung fu films from the 1970s will be aware of the insistence of the figure of the teacher and related formal motifs (the training book lost or torn; the panoramic exercise field of bodies emulating a tutor out front; the remembered voice of a teacher that pedagogically intervenes 'off' in the nick of time to save the day for the hero). The opening scene of *Fist of Fury*, famous for its excess, has a funereally white-clad Chen Zhen (a fictional character played by Bruce Lee) disrupting a rain-soaked funeral by leaping into the open grave of his murdered teacher, Huo Yuanjia (a historical figure, 1857-1909), and screaming 'Sifu! SIFU!' while scrabbling dirt off the coffin until a grave-digger whacks him cold with a shovel. A little bundle of embryonic legacies in itself, this much-parodied scene was ecumenically familiar enough by the 1980s to generate a wonderful vignette in Keenen Ivory Wayan's Blaxpotation comedy, *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka* (1988). Auditioning for a 'black hero' crew, the character 'Kung Fu Joe' (Steve James) histrionically screams, 'They killed my teacher! Teacher! Teacher!' and pulls out a Bruce Lee pendant. When an awed contender asks, 'Master Lee was your kung fu teacher?' Joe proudly replies, 'No. Acting!'²⁵

However, the kung fu teachers of the 1970s already drew on a cinematic legacy, in particular on the legend of Wong Fei Hung, the Cantonese folk hero, *Hung Gar* master and 'bone-setter' (chiropractic and medical practitioner), who reportedly lived in Guangdong from 1847 to 1924. To Hong Kongers,

Wong was made legendary in the black and white Cantonese cinema of the 1950s and 1960s by the actor Kwan Tak-hing, who played Wong as a patriarchal Confucian figure in more than eighty films or 'episodes' between 1949 and 1970. Beyond Hong Kong, however, Wong Fei Hung is known to most people through the performances of two other actors: first, Jackie Chan's comic reinvention of Wong as a naughty student in early Republican times in Yuen Woo-ping's *Drunken Master* (1978), in which the teacher was based on another semi-mythical historical figure, 'Beggar So' (a drinker and a vagrant whose legend was antithetical to that of the sober Confucian Wong); second, Jet Li's heroic portrayal of Wong as an often puzzled but always principled cultural conservative confronting modernity and Western imperialism towards the end of the Qing Dynasty in Tsui Hark's *Once Upon a Time in China* series (1991-1997).

By far the simpler film, *Drunken Master* refined a powerfully generative narrative structure enfolding an experience of 'shock' at the core of a pedagogical *transmission* story, whereby an initially reluctant or rebellious student not only learns how and why to learn but eventually becomes a master in 'his' turn and the process begins again:

- 1. A reluctant student experiences 'cruel' teaching and learning
- 2. The unmotivated, angry student escapes
- 3. SHOCK: he undergoes humiliation at the hands of a villain, a better fighter who insults his father/family/school/style
- 4. Shamed, the motivated student returns to his teacher.
- 5. The student willingly undergoes 'hard' teaching and learning

Deeply conservative in tenor, this structure can incorporate many diverse materials; the village-based 'insult' episode in *Drunken Master* mutates easily to handle big geo-political themes about Japanese invasion and Western imperialism. More significant for my purposes is the way in which there is a doubling of pedagogy as internal (the good, harsh teacher) and external (the historic lesson dealt by an accomplished and cruel villain) to a community, such that the experience of shock for the student transforms his understanding of authority and thus his relationship to it. After learning from an outsider what cruelty really is, Jackie Chan's Wong Fei Hung sets out on his own path to mastery having grasped the difference between narratively competing modes of discipline and (self-)governance, bodily and ethical. Indeed, it is in the scene of pedagogy rather than in fighting that kung fu cinema locates contestation over the terms of 'contact ... between the technologies of domination of

others and those of the self' that Foucault called 'governmentality' in a late treatment of the subject²⁶.

Given their varying discourses about artistry ('technique') on the one hand and the demands of worldly institutions (schools, the patriarchal family, rulers domestic and foreign) on the other hand, kung fu pedagogy films allow us to explore how this cinematic legacy envisions the usefulness of art



The Master's Book; *Drunken Master*

and aesthetics in the very midst of contestation over modes of governance, whether 'feudal' (the village order of *Drunken Master*) or populist (the down-at-heel world of the Shanghai poor in Stephen Chow's *Shaolin Soccer*, 2001), Chinese or foreign (the *Once Upon a Time in China* series), Taoist (Lau Kar-lung's *Executioners from Shaolin*, 1977), post-Maoist (Ronny Yu's *Fearless*, 2006) patriarchally authoritarian (too numerous to mention) or, occasionally, feminist in implication (Yuen Woo-ping's *Wing Chun*, 1994, and Peter Chan Ho-sun's superb *Wuxia*, 2011)²⁷. Focussing on this contestation as a *dynamic* working through the films is a way of displacing without erasing the stale binaries of tradition and modernity, East and West, that have dominated English-language discussion of kung fu culture. Ackbar Abbas calls these 'mouldy chestnuts'²⁸ that obscure more than they clarify because they deny the historical conditions of cultural imbrication in which Hong Kong people live (and films are made) today. This is surely true, and yet as well as being analytical categories 'tradition' and 'modernity' are *situations* of encounter and *experiences* predicated by the discourse of so many Hong Kong films that we cannot altogether wish them away for reasons of theoretical fatigue.

As Li has argued in detail, these situations and experiences are most explicitly at issue when the question of the usefulness of kung fu is asked in relation to Western technology, in particular by 'a stock scene that has been ridiculed in many parodies: i.e. the depiction of an indomitable Chinese kung fu fighter killed by western firearms' (Li, p. 523). This parodically 'stock' or cliché legacy scene also travels ecumenically: Kung Fu Joe (temporarily) meets his end at the hands of heavily armed American police in *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka*, and it is extended to a new situation in Stephen Chow's *From Beijing with Love* (1994) when a flying kung fu master is blown out of the sky by the guns of the People's Liberation Army. As Li points out, however, the question is most

troubling when it ‘returns intermittently to haunt us’ (p. 520) in serious form. He cites an anecdote according to which the classic version is posed by Huo Yuanjia himself (‘with today’s advanced technology and firearms, what’s the use of martial arts and heroic courage?’), receiving in response from a friend the national self-strengthening message: ‘I hope that you’ll make the most of your skills and turn sick men into heroes’ (p. 520).

Predictably, the historian Peter Lorge is contemptuous of martial arts cinema for thus fabricating a myth:

The notion, often promoted in Chinese martial arts films, that guns were foreign or unknown to the Chinese before the arrival of the West, is baseless nonsense. The Chinese martial arts have flourished as effective fighting skills in the presence of guns for over seven centuries. (Lorge, p. 121).

Of course, we know this. Why and how, then, does the cliché recur? What is the imaginative force of this ‘nonsense’? In recent decades the ‘gun’ myth of the shock of Western modernity in Qing China was most insistent in what Li calls a ‘redemptively sober manner’ in Tsui Hark’s films, where it functions as a ‘self-dismantling’ device for masculinist Chinese nationalism (Li, p.523). At the same time, the reiteration of a question about the usefulness of kung fu ‘art’ has spread to a global ecumenical audience, shaping not only film experiments worldwide with its emphasis on the teaching and learning of bodily, aesthetic and ethical ‘techniques’ of self-strengthening and self-cultivation but informing whole therapeutic industries and practices with a pedagogy for ordinary people living in times of social and political upheaval, or facing pressures for cultural change (not least within the neo-liberal restructuring of Western social democracies), or simply enduring deep personal stress.

In this expanded context, ‘what is the use of kung fu?’ poses an imaginative challenge to which we are invited to respond. Our ‘kung fu’ in whatever mode we hold dear must initially seem useless, as we must at first feel ‘sick’ or helpless, for a creative response to a shock or threat to take shape in a disciplined way. Entailing something like a *pragmatics of uselessness*, or of the non-instrumental, this approaches the terrain of European theories of the sublime²⁹. In a larger version of this argument I would link the themes of self-cultivation and governance conflict that I have touched on here to recent work in Cultural Studies that revisits the ‘classical’ Western aesthetics of the 17th and 18th century. These were preoccupied, as Ben Highmore puts it in an eloquent study, with ‘the intersection of passions, tastes, sentiments and morality’ at

a time when the dualistic division of Beauty and the Sublime (subsequently, Art and History) that would come to dominate thought in the 19th century had not decisively taken place³⁰. Art and beauty are part of the action at this intersection, but for Highmore much more is involved: ‘this is a dynamic world view, where passions provoke actions, where sympathy attaches us to feelings, and where our most “internal” feelings turn out to be part of a public culture’ (p.xi). In the global ecumene today kung fu circulates, I believe, not only as exactly this sort of aesthetic but also as a technique for both training and rendering ‘public’ those ‘internal’ feelings of initially inchoate helplessness.

Here, I must conclude by noting that the Hong Kong ‘legacy question’ of the use of kung fu has returned in a recent run of popular films about another historical teacher, Ip Man (1893-1972), a Wing Chun practitioner now known internationally for having taught Bruce Lee’s teachers³¹, but admired and remembered in Hong Kong in his own right. No less than five full features about Ip Man’s life have appeared in Hong Kong in the 2008-2013 period in the midst of the territory’s increasingly difficult adjustments to the ‘shock’ of becoming integrated with the People’s Republic of China³². Governance conflicts are at the heart of these films in a new way, and we see two very different negotiations of this by Wong Kar Wai in *The Grandmaster* (2013, an art cinema product made in different versions for international marketing purposes³³), and by Herman Yau Lai-to’s affirmation of Hong Kong popular community and local political struggle (specifically class struggle) in *Ip Man: The Final Fight* (2013). Not the least interesting aspect of both these productions of kung fu legacy is that both had to negotiate the governmental requirements of release in mainland China. The most obvious mark of this is that Ip Man is portrayed as escaping to Hong Kong in 1950 in a vaguely prolonged aftermath of the 1938 Japanese invasion and occupation of his home town of Foshan. Tragic as that period was for his family, Ip in fact fled Communism after the revolution of 1949, having himself been an officer in the Kuomintang.

Long in the making, *The Grandmaster* for me forms a curious doublet with Stephen Chow’s brilliant, twisted comedy *Shaolin Soccer*, which posed the question of the use of kung fu in the heady times of Chinese economic take-off in 2001. Chow and his ramshackle crew of superannuated kung fu fighters roam Shanghai eagerly trying to teach everyone they meet in the emergent hyper-modern capitalist city that traditional Chinese kung fu is ‘really good’. In the end, while their kung fu ultimately helps them personally become world champion soccer players and thus to help ‘self-strengthen’ the nation, their greatest success is to produce a cultural revival of kung fu on the mainland

through lifestyle aids for the new rich: mastery of Buddha's Palm helps with parking a car in a crowded street, skill at weightless leaping lets businessmen hop quickly on to a moving bus, and an elegant woman can somersault as lightly as any Shaolin veteran when she slips on a banana skin in designer high heeled shoes. Intricate and artistically self-conscious in comparison, *The Grandmaster* is a chiaroscuro film for darker times and yet it ends with a similar realization that the 'future' for kung fu (here fictionally construed from the early 1950s) is all about survival in a relentlessly commercial world: gazing at the Hong Kong 'street of schools' in which he will make his name as a teacher, Wong Kar Wai's Ip Man asks mournfully, 'is this all the martial world has come to be?'



The Grandmaster

What interests me most about this film is the way it follows the shocking murder of a teacher, Gong Yutian (Wang Qingxiang), a *Wudan* Grandmaster and reconciliatory leader from the North, with two stories of the slow dessication

of teaching as a practice and a means of transmitting legacy in itself. *The Grandmaster* is very much about the death of certain legacies and in this film there seem to be two ways for a tradition to die. One is the way of revenge, interestingly pursued here by a woman, Gong Er (Zhang Ziyi); to avenge the murder of her father at the hands of his student Ma San (Zhang Jin), she vows never to marry, to teach, or have children. Thus doomed to barrenness in every possible way, paradoxically she herself condemns the legacy of her father when his signature '64 Hands' style must now die with her. At the end she regrets having been unable to pass on her knowledge and urges Ip Man to 'pass on the torch, keep the light burning'. He does so, and a shot of a little boy (by implication Bruce Lee) in a final photo-taking moment at Ip's Hong Kong school accompanies a voice-over assurance that Ip Man would go on to spread kung fu knowledge to the world. Yet Ip is a reluctant and unenthusiastic teacher, regretting (having grown up wealthy in a time when no-one asked what kung fu was good for) that he is now forced to use kung fu to make a living. Indeed, the opening voiceover of the film gives us the disabused answer of this grandmaster to the legacy question: 'Kung fu, two words: one horizontal, one vertical. Make a mistake—horizontal. Stay standing and you win'³⁴.

It's a *tour de force* in bitter-sweet melancholy cinema and one rich in legacy. But as a Hong Konger of sorts I find myself exceptionally more stirred by the warm social realism (not usually my thing) and the genre creativity of Herman Yau's *Ip Man: The Final Fight* starring the great Anthony Wong Chau-sun in the title role. Covering roughly the same historical period as the second half of Wong Kar-wai's film, but using sets that evoke a recognizably modern urban Hong Kong rather than *The Grandmaster's* nostalgic Oriental dream, *The Final Fight* gives us a modest, dignified, soft-hearted and slightly vulnerable Ip Man who late in life becomes involved in the everyday problems and struggles of the Hong Kong 'grass root' people who take him in and give him a new start. It is startling in this film to see a kung fu master enjoy discovering hybrid Hong Kong dishes in a *dai pai dong*, calming tempers at a quarrel in a union meeting, counselling a young policeman who is sliding into corruption, defending a beautiful singer from sexual harassment in a nightclub, suffering from severe stomach illness and cuddling up under the covers in bed with his wife. The domestic ordinariness of these scenes is startling because, since the time of Kwan Tak-hing's *Wong Fei Hung* located in an idealised, orderly world in the lost home city of Canton, so much aesthetic energy in the past has gone into purifying kung fu imaginaries of the mundane Hong Kong social life that has shaped and produced them.



Ip Man: The Final Fight

Warning a journalist not to make the comparison with *The Grandmaster* that I just have, Anthony Wong puts his finger directly on what matters most in *Ip Man: The Final Fight*:

Why make the comparison? You can't compare anyway, it's not like we are making the same script. Although I haven't seen the Wong Kar Wai directed *The Grandmaster* (*Yut Doi Jing Si*), I believe Wai Jai's Ip Man is certainly different. [Donnie] Yen Chi Tan's is about fighting the Japanese in Guangzhou, my Ip Man is more real. The movie talks about labor union and the police and how to interact and survive in this social environment. *Ip Man The Final Fight* is worth watching because in the film is the value of people³⁵.

This sense of 'value' haunts one of this film's two responses to the explicit

question of the use of kung fu. The first is a classical genre-marking moment when Ip Man rebukes a hot-headed young student ('Kung fu is pointless if I can't use it!') for misusing his skills by brawling. The second moment, however, involves an eruption of real doubt for the master. After learning in an embarrassingly public way that a friend has been forced to sell his infant daughter in order to feed his other children, the anguished Ip Man asks, 'If a man can't even make ends meet, what good is kung fu to him?' Where Wong Kar-wai's Ip resorts to teaching to 'make ends meet' for himself, Herman Yau's Ip is thinking about the 'value of people' and what becomes of humane values in Hong Kong's merciless economy. He has no answer to his own question, sitting silently on his rooftop in the dark, and this poignant silence about the legacy question to me is what fills this film with the reality of Hong Kong's uncertain struggles to survive ('they can't kill us all') today.

Notes:

¹ See Ashish Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid: From Bollywood to the Emergency* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009) and Laleen Jayamanne, *The Epic Cinema of Kumar Shahani* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

² A note on usage: since the term 'kung fu' is fully lexicalized as an ordinary term in English, I do not italicize it as 'foreign' except when making reference to Cantonese usage situations.

³ The comparison between Shahani and Luhrmann is made closely in relation to celluloid in Laleen Jayamanne, 'The drover's wives and camp couture: Baz Luhrmann's preposterous national epic', *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 4.2 (2010): 131–143.

⁴ See Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

⁵ '#Light the dark', GetUp!, <https://www.getup.org.au/campaigns/refugees/manus-vigils/light-the-dark>, 23 February 2014, accessed 11 February 2015.

⁶ Tanna Chong and Lo Wei, 'They can't kill us all': Thousands protest chopper attack on *Ming Pao* editor Kevin Lau', *South China Morning Post*, March 2, 2014.

⁷ The image appeared in an on-line independent news site, www.inmediahk.net

⁸ JunkMale, 'Origin of the Candlelight Vigil?', *Thou and Thou Only*, August 23, 2007, accessed 10 February, 2015. <http://thou-and-thou-only.blogspot.com.au/2007/08/origin-of-candlelight-vigil.html>

⁹ Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, people, places* (London and New York: Routledge 1996), p. 7. For a detailed discussion of the concept of global ecumene, see Ulf Hannerz, 'Notes on the Global Ecumene', *Public Culture* 1.2 (1989): 66-75.

¹⁰ See the image gallery, 'Nazi Terror begins—Photograph', *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, United

States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed 17 February 2015. <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/gallery.php?ModuleId=10005686&MediaType=PH>

¹¹ Umberto Eco, 'Silence is L(e)aden', trans. Gino Moliterno, in Paul Foss and Meaghan Morris, eds, *Language, Sexuality and Subversion* (Sydney: Feral Publications, 1978), pp. 77-80. First published as 'Il silenzio et di piombo', *L'Espresso* (2 April 1978), pp. 13-15.

¹² Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations*, trans. by H. Zohn, ed. with intro. by Hannah Arendt, NY: Schocken, 1969.

¹³ Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu, eds, *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema* (Hong Kong and Durham: Hong Kong UP and Duke UP, 2005).

¹⁴ On a complex topic that I cannot broach here, the role of hope in Hong Kong *wuxia* films made in the 'inter-regnum' between the Sino-British Agreement of 1985 and the enclave's return to China in 1997, see Stephen Ching-kiu Chan, "Figures of Hope and the Filmic Imaginary of *Jianghu* in Contemporary Hong Kong Cinema", *Cultural Studies* 15: 3/4 (2001) pp. 486-514.

¹⁵ See my "Transnational Glamour, National Allure: Community, Change and Cliché in Baz Luhrmann's *Australia*", in *Storytelling: Critical and Creative Approaches* ed. Jan Shaw, Philippa Kelly, L. E. Semler (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), pp. 83-113. Also available on <https://sydney.academia.edu/MeaghanMorris/Papers>

¹⁶ Ruth Amossy, 'The Cliché in the Reading Process' trans. Terese Lyons, *SubStance* 11.2 (1982): 34-45.

¹⁷ Siu Leung Li, 'Kung Fu: Negotiating Nationalism and Modernity', *Cultural Studies* 15(3/4) 2001, p. 516.

¹⁸ The Hong Kong Film Archive opened in 2001. Celestial Pictures began restoring Shaw brothers films made between the 1950s and 1990s for digitally remastered DVD release in 2002. Before that time it was practically impossible to see the vast majority of their films and to hear Chinese soundtracks was rare indeed.

¹⁹ I discuss this in 'Truth and Beauty in Our Times', in John Bigelow, ed., *Our Cultural Heritage* (Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1998), pp. 75-87.

²⁰ Stephen Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 38-57; Petrus Liu, *Stateless Subjects: Chinese Martial Arts Literature and Postcolonial History* (Ithaca; Cornell University Press, 2011), pp. 8-9 and pp. 40-44.

²¹ See Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema*, pp. 58-85.

²² Personal conversation.

²³ Peter A. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts: From Antiquity to the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 3-4.

²⁴ Yung, Sai-Shing, 'Moving Body: The Interactions between Chinese Opera and Action Cinema' in Morris, Li and Chan, eds, *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action*

Cinema, pp. 21-34.

²⁵ This scene is available on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0deISNTH0Kw>

²⁶ Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick Martin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 19. In a longer version of this argument I would want to take up Petrus Liu's thesis that the Chinese martial arts literary tradition itself was a 'thought experiment' in political philosophy, imagining what public responsibility might be in a stateless society (Liu, *Stateless Subjects*, p. 6). The 'martial world' or *jianghu* is for Liu a collectively produced imaginary of a general condition of statelessness (p. 51).

²⁷ I have argued elsewhere that when taken up in US martial arts cinema, this scenario of conflicting modes of governance mutates in conditions of liberal aporia into a problem of knowing the difference between fascism and a 'good' form of authority and discipline. This is often played out as a contest between a good martial arts teacher and an evil one in the setting of an American high school. See my 'Learning from Bruce Lee: Pedagogy and Political Correctness in Martial Arts Cinema', in Matthew Tinckcom and Amy Villarejo (eds), *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies* (London and New York, Routledge, 2001), pp.171-186.

²⁸ Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.11.

²⁹ On the sublime as a narrative of shock and recovery, see my 'White Panic, or *Mad Max* and the Sublime' in *Identity Anecdotes: Translation and Media Culture* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), pp. 80-104.

³⁰ Ben Highmore, *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge 2011), p. xi.

³¹ See Paul Bowman, *Beyond Bruce Lee: Chasing the Dragon through Film, Philosophy and Popular Culture* (New York and Chichester: Wallflower Press, 2013), p. 167.

³² Along with the two films mentioned in the text, see also Wilson Yip's *Ip Man* (2008) and *Ip Man 2* (2010), great popular successes featuring Donnie Yen, and Herman Yau Lai-to's *The Legend is Born: Ip Man* (2010).

³³ See David Bordwell's blog on the differences between the versions: 'The Grandmaster: Moving Forward, Turning Back', *David Bordwell's Website on Cinema*, 23 September 2013, accessed 14 March 2015, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2013/09/23/the-grandmaster-moving-forward-turning-back/>

³⁴ This reductive response is also traditional, with both Huo Yuanjia and Bruce Lee being associated with the view that the meaning of kung fu should ultimately not be over-elaborated.

³⁵ 'Anthony Wong: Ip Man new Style', *AFspot Forum*, 30 March 2013, accessed 31 August 2014, <http://afspot.net/forum/topic/781133-anthony-wong-ip-man-new-style/>