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"You Just Kick Their Ass": Combating Chinese Stereotypes in the Golden Age of Kung Fu Cinema

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Abstract

The Chinese have always existed within Western culture as something alien, exotic and incapable of assimilation. Western film advanced the representation of the Chinese as alien through decades of evolving stereotypes. From the evil Fu Manchu, to the fortune cookie crime detective Charlie Chan, films created a stereotype of an emasculated Chinese male. Western cinema spent the last century emasculating the Chinese male on screen, creating a toxic stereotype that was not challenged until the globalization of Kung Fu cinema. The Golden Age of Kung Fu cinema sparked a change in the conditions of Chinese diasporic populations all over the world, representing a confirmation of masculinity for the Chinese population that had been historically devastated by Western cinema and media. These changes shaped an identity for the new generation of male Chinese who relied on these films for both access to Chinese culture in foreign conditions as well as a source of relief from the injustices many in the overseas Chinese communities experienced. This thesis examines the impact these stereotypes had on overseas Chinese males through interviews, as well as outlines a history of the stereotypes they were dealing with. Using the introduction of Bruce Lee into Hollywood, this thesis examines the pivot point in history where Chinese men, through Kung Fu cinema, challenged Western audiences' perceptions of what was an acceptable mass media portrayal of Chinese masculinity. In addition this thesis looks at the impact this pivot point had on the experiences of Chinese overseas and their conceptualization of their own masculinity as it was received by the majority of the population.

1. Body of Paper

In a dark screening room, with his vision failing from ill health, Mao Zedong sat back to watch a movie in 1974. He himself had banned these films, but while watching *Fist Of Fury* for the first time Mao broke down in tears, exclaiming, "Bruce Lee is a hero!" and watched the movie two more times.[1] Mao was not the only Chinese man in the 1970s to be inspired by the first ever Chinese man to become an international film star. Western cinema had spent the last century emasculating the Chinese male on screen, creating a toxic stereotype that was not challenged until the globalization of Kung Fu cinema. The Golden Age of Kung Fu cinema sparked a change in the conditions of Chinese diasporic populations all over the world, representing a confirmation of masculinity for the Chinese population. These changes shaped an identity for the new generation of male Chinese who relied on these films for both access to Chinese culture in foreign conditions as well as a source of relief from the injustices many in the overseas Chinese communities experienced.

Western scholarship on the subject of Kung Fu cinema's globalization and its effect on Chinese male stereotypes has been vague and often only addressed by scholars in the Asian filmmaker community. As a result, the best resources on the subject are found in documentaries. Director Jeff Adachi's film *The Slanted Screen* presents a chronological history of the portrayal of Asian men in Western cinema, starting with the first sex symbol from the silent era, a Japanese man.[2] It also shows how during the silent era the Chinese were portrayed as mystic asexual evil entities, demonstrating that Hollywood wasn't necessarily emasculating all Asians, but that it was specifically

stereotyping the Chinese. In addition, director Hunt Hoe's documentary *Who Is Albert Woo* explores the effect of the media on the Asian male, with a stronger emphasis on the social ramifications stereotyping in cinema has had on the Asian community.

These directors interview well-known Chinese males and ask how these stereotypes have affected them. From these interviews, the directors conclude that the emasculation of Asian males in cinema has created stereotypes that Asian men are struggling to break free from. Jeff Adachi's interviews also include a psychologist, Lois Salisbury, who has studied the effects of media stereotypes on school-age children with a special emphasis on Asian stereotypes. What is still lacking is a scholarly analysis on the subject outside the documentary medium.

Other social scientists have also addressed this subject through surveys of Chinese males who lived in overseas communities. In "The Relationship of Kung-Fu Movie Viewing to Acculturation Among Chinese-American Men", Henry Jung surveyed young Chinese-American men from Boston's greater metropolitan area during the early 1980s. Jung found that it was young English-speaking men who watched Kung Fu films the most. They used these films to create a sense of cultural identity in their own personal multicultural environment. Jung's survey found that the stereotypes these young men were subjected to created an internal identity crisis that stemmed from the lack of strong Asian male role models in the media. Jung found through the survey that it was through Kung Fu films that these young men found a confirmation of their masculinity as well as a media source that portrayed role models they could ethnically identify with.[3] A brief history of the Chinese Diaspora and the portrayals of Chinese men in media was provided, but it was only for background information to introduce the study.

Historian Jenny Clegg created a published lesson plan entitled *Fu Manchu And The "Yellow Peril": The Making Of A Racist Myth* where she uses primary sources to demonstrate to students how racist ideologies are created. By chronicling the introduction and promotion of the Fu Manchu series alongside newspaper articles, Clegg shows how the diabolically evil character of Fu Manchu was created in response to the media's "yellow peril" frenzies.[4] While this only relates to the subject of the creation of Chinese stereotypes and not to the transformation of them by the globalization of Kung Fu cinema, it does provide for a systematic approach for any scholarship on the subject of the creation of stereotypes in cinema.

Beyond these sources on the subject of Chinese masculinity and the globalization of Kung Fu cinema, relevant scholarship includes short articles on broader subjects relating to either Kung Fu cinema or masculinity. "Kung Fu Knight Errant: Globalized/Localized Chinese American Heroic Culture" by Joe Chung Fong from the *Amerasia Journal* is a great article by a Chinese-American that explores the impact of the globalization of Kung Fu and Kung Fu films. Fong first explains that for the Chinese, Kung Fu is more than a martial art; it is a religious and cultural medium that expresses "Chineseness". He also outlines a brief history of the Kung Fu school in the United States. It is his analysis of the importance of Kung Fu films for young Chinese that is the most noteworthy for this thesis. Fong states:

> To a large extent, from the outside looking in, the Chinese language films and TV drama series reflect many aspects of Chinese culture. The importance of Chinese films, as with heroic cultural models, is less obvious to the large portion of the public. Let's put it another way: Without Chinese films, Hollywood movies would be unchallenged. Chinese films, at their most basic level, provide Chinese-Americans' cultural identity; Chinese films touch on the Chinese-American social and cultural world in a way Hollywood films cannot. Most importantly, Kung Fu Chinese films expose and socialize Chinese-American youth to the heroic aspect of Chinese culture.[5]

As a Chinese-American and Kung Fu practitioner himself, Fong expresses the sentiment of the demographic this thesis addresses, but in formal scholarly form.

Fong's article does not address the history of Hollywood that needed to be challenged by the Kung Fu genre. In itself, Fong's article can be considered a reflection of Chinese-American reaction to the globalization of Kung Fu cinema. Beyond his own remarks, he doesn't explore the reaction of the overseas community to Western audiences' recognition of Chinese masculinity in Kung Fu cinema.

Kam Louie's book, *Theorizing Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*, addressed the subject of the relationship of Kung Fu cinema and masculinity in the article entitled "Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan and Chow Yun Fat: Internationalizing Wu Masculinity." In this article Kam also addresses the absence of "serious" academic discussion on the subject of the internationalization of Kung Fu films and its relation to the global perception of Asian masculinity. While the article goes beyond the time period of the 1970s that this thesis will be focusing on, it does create a background on representations of Chinese men through Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan, and the *Kung Fu* TV series that aired following the introduction of Bruce Lee's Kung Fu Western cinema.[6]

Kam's article discusses how the plot lines of Bruce Lee's Kung Fu films addressed the toxic stereotypes that were devastating to the self-image of Chinese men, as this thesis will do. It does not synthesize the history of emasculation and the subsequent shift following Bruce Lee's internationalization with the individuals' personal experiences of Chinese masculinity's international revitalization. It is this synthesis of history and the Chinese male's self-image that makes the goal of this thesis unique. Scholarship has addressed the emasculation of Chinese men in cinema as well as the shift in the masculine portrayal of Chinese men following the globalization of Kung Fu films. There has not been a real discussion on how the diasporic Chinese male audience reacted to this globalization in the 1970s except in the unpublished study carried out by Jung.

The emasculated stereotyped Chinese male that is portrayed in Hollywood can be dated back to the beginning of commercial film itself. Silent films such as *The Massacre of the Christians by the Chinese* (1900) and *The Heathen Chinese and the Sunday School Teachers* (1904), were the first glimpses of the Chinese that most Westerners had ever seen. The Boxer Rebellion was major news during this time and in combination with these films and the sensationalized media coverage of the rebellion, the general Western public formed in their minds an image of the Chinese as violent and inhuman, incapable of integrating into the West's civilized society. Later, early exploitative films about the Tong war's internal fights over opium smuggling and prostitution rings emphasized a belief that these immigrant heathen Chinese of Chinatown could not assimilate.[7] James Hong, a Chinese-American actor since the 1950s, felt that it was these films from the early days that made "people think that Chinese are great mystics hiding in the streets just smoking Opium and killing each other with hatchets."[8] With an increasing number of immigrants fleeing the turmoil of China, Chinatowns began growing in major cites. The public grew more curious and cautious while Hollywood began cashing in on their fears.

From these early films, a characterization of Chinese men as evil, violent, drug smugglers was further exaggerated in the following decades. From Sax Rohmer's highly successful Fu Manchu series came a decades-long devastation of the imagined Chinese male in Western cinema. Sax Rohmer was a free-lance journalist in Britain who got the inspiration for the Fu Manchu series in 1911 while covering a crime in the Limehouse district in London. The Limehouse district was London's Chinatown at the time and a gambling house was suspected of being involved in opium smuggling. The suspicions turned out to be false, but seeking something to give the magazine that had commissioned the story, Rohmer started the Fu Manchu series.[9] The series projected many of the concerns the British had following the Boxer Rebellion and the collapse of Imperial China. Stephen Gong, executive director of Center for Asian American Media and Chinese film historian, states the Fu Manchu series was about "the British reflecting back the fears that the people they subjected would do their best to take them down."[10] Rohmer's stories played a key role in creating the image of the Chinese male as something emasculate and inhuman.

Although Rohmer never visited Asia or even spent more than a week in the Limehouse district, it is from his series that most of the Westerners decided in their minds what the Chinese and Chinese culture was like. Rohmer describes Fu Manchu as a member of the Imperial family that secretly sparked the Boxer Rebellion from behind the scenes. He instilled in this character all the fears and insecurities the British had about the Chinese in his description of Fu Manchu,

> Imagine a person, tall, lean and feline, high-shouldered, with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long, magnetic eyes of the true cat-green. Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources of science past and present, with all the resources, if you will, of a wealthy government—which, however, already has denied all knowledge of his existence. Imagine that awful being, and you have a mental picture of Dr. Fu-Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man.[11]

First published in 1911, this became the most popular image of the Chinese male in the West. An inhuman "feline" became the referenced conceptualization of the Chinese male for Western society. The fears that the Chinese were secretly conspiring to take revenge on the British were encapsulated in this one character. There were over a hundred different films featuring Dr. Fu Manchu, all who were portrayed by white actors such as Boris Karloff, Christopher Lee, and most recently Nicolas Cage.[12] Darrell Hamamoto , professor of Asian Studies at UC Davis says that these images on film created the image of the Chinese male as having preternatural powers such as Asian mind control. Understandably, these images negatively impacted the ability of diasporic Chinese males to assimilate into their new overseas societies.[13]

Because of films like the Fu Manchu series, Chinese males faced persecution and sometimes even violent outburst from the societies they lived in. Tzi Ma, a Chinese-American who grew up in the mid-west, describes how after a Fu Manchu film or other negative characterization of a Chinese man was seen in the media he would end up in fights at

school, sometimes the very next day. Children who would see these images in the media, would come to school and project these images on him. He frequently was beaten up and still has scars from those fights. According to him,

> ...the consequences of all of these negative images on television and on the screen you know, really affected me growin' up because every time I've seen it on TV, the same time as all my classmates did. And they all started coming into the classroom and started talking like the guy I just saw the night before that didn't really talk like me. You know, and they started to employ that kind of language to me. And I'm not like a person that's gonna sit back and let them say it to me. And I got beaten up a lot. So I started fightin' a lot. You know, I mean that's why it think these images in in in uh film and television how it affects society. Yeah, it affects us because we have been, or I have been you know, the receiving end of that.[14]

When talking about how these images affect the way Asian men feel about themselves, Ma felt that it is also these images that have prevented Asian men from having authority roles or even romantic relationships.[15] Indeed, the portrayal of Chinese men in Western cinema during this time was of characters that almost never exhibited any romantic tendencies. Chinese men never had any on-screen romantic relations, resulting in a perception of Chinese men as a negatively impacting society's perceptions of Chinese masculinity.

Films such as the Fu Manchu series and *Captured in Chinatown* (1935) portrayed Chinese men as violent subjugators of women while at the same time presenting them as uninterested in the opposite sex. Herb Lim, a WWII veteran of the Canadian military felt that it was these portrayals of Chinese men as "mean tightwads, as domineering" that deterred women, including Asian women, from having relationships with Asian men. In addition, he said that the fact that in the films Asian women always have relationships with white men created in society an idea that it was only acceptable for Asian women to have inter-racial relationships.[16] For the Chinese male growing up in the West it was impossible to find positive role models in the media, making it difficult to accept their Chinese identity. As the turmoil from the Boxer Rebellion eased, an American ally in China, the Guomindang, took control, leading to a shift in the creation of the imagined Chinese male in the US.

As more Chinese immigrants settled and the press shifted its view of China as a result of the US support of the GMD, a new Chinese male image was presented. The Charlie Chan novels, written by Earl Der Biggers, about a Chinese-American detective in Hawaii were highly successful in the US. Their transition to screen, however, was met with resistance as studios still only felt comfortable portraying the Chinese as either evil or servants. The first Charlie Chan film, *The House Without A Key* (1926), named for the novel, didn't even star Charlie Chan as the leading character, only as a minor servant. The industry was "cautious in springing an Oriental 'good guy' on audiences in large doses."[17] Even as Charlie Chan became a popular icon in American cinema, he was still played by a Caucasian man in yellow face makeup.

Warner Oland, who is most famous for playing Charlie Chan, along with the writers, transitioned the evil asexual Chinese man into a standardized representation of the Chinese man as harmless and comical. Except for the abundant number of children Charlie Chan had, he was still portrayed as having no sexual appeal. Indeed his portrayal still represented a Chinese male stereotype that negatively impacted the image of Chinese masculinity. The movie posters for Charlie Chan, for instance, describe him as, "Slant eyes, soft speech, sly smile, wise guile...finesse of Scotland Yard."[18] These films became the most popular series of films for Fox Studios at the time. Stephen Gong sees a parallel between the Charlie Chan films and the gradual change in the integration of the Chinese community into Western society. Charlie Chan's sons are college-educated, can speak both Chinese and English, and his Number One Son is on the US Olympic swim team.[19] Yet the Charlie Chan stereotype still presents a problematic representation of the Western Chinese male that keeps them characterized as the "other."

The portrayal of the Chinese male in cinema has always presented them as something that is not a part of society, whether they were born within the society or not. David Henry Hwang, a Chinese-American playwright, sees the representation of Chinatown and Chinese-American culture in movies as a reinforcement of the cultural categorization of the the Chinese as "other." For him,

> Chinatown has always represented something within the country, within American cities which is 'other'. A different set of morés, different people, different food...the whole idea of trying to grasp the notion that someone can be both Asian and American seems to be a difficult conundrum, both for American culture as a whole and then reflected within movies.[20]

The Charlie Chan films continued the categorization of other that had been perpetuated by Fu Manchu and other films about Chinatown. As Tsai Chan reflects, Charlie Chan is just a stereotype of another type.[21] For instance, as

Chinese-American director Wayne Wang comments, "He spoke in fortune cookie terms. Why can't he speak in a little more normal terms? I don't know any Chinese who speak like that unless they are trying to act like Charlie Chan."[22] For decades the films' formulaic detective plots provided a prolonged vehicle for popularizing the Chinese as an emasculated model minority.

Watching a Charlie Chan film today, it is obvious to see the stereotypes that were being created. For many Westerners during the 1930s-50s, though, Charlie Chan was their only exposure to Chinese-Americans. In one of the more successful films, *Charlie Chan's Secret* (from 1936), Charlie Chan helps solve the murder of a wealthy heir. An elite white business family spend the film accidentally crushing Chan's delicate hand during handshakes, while Chan spends the film constantly thanking everyone.[23] This formulaic stereotype of Chan stayed consistent for all the Charlie Chan films. The alliance with the Guomindang and the aid of overseas Chinese men in the war helped shift the representation of Chinese as friend instead of villain, however, the emasculating agenda was maintained in other media outlets.

After WWII the American alliance with China and the service of the Chinese in the Allied forces helped lift many of the immigration exclusion laws that prevented many Chinese from settling abroad with their families. During the war, news outlets such as *Time Magazine* promoted the Chinese as "placid" and "kindly" compared to the "dogmatic" and "arrogant" Japanese in an article called "How To Tell Your Friends From The Japs."[24] While this shift in the representation of Chinese men in media paved an easier way for social assimilation, it still emasculated the Chinese and continued a categorization of the Chinese-American as the "other." After the war many Chinese men who served in the war came back with the ability to vote as well as find jobs that were previously not open to them.

Herb Lim, who served on behalf of Canada, recounted an experience of typical Chinese men during and after the war. Growing up Herb Lim experienced the abjection of his cultural and ethnic identity as a result of the media's portrayal of the Chinese. His own school's principal touted the inferiority of the Chinese and the Chinese language "as the most stupid in the world" to the whole school during an assembly. Later, while going to university, he was recruited for his Chinese language skills to serve as translator during WWII. He wasn't considered a Canadian citizen by the Canadian government, though he considered himself one since he was born and raised in Canada. As a result, he was sent to various allied armies and served under the British and American armies. Lim remembered that before the war they were considered second if not third-class citizens who couldn't get jobs even if they were college educated. He said, "you gotta be either grocery store or laundry man or restaurant." After he returned from the war in 1947 he finally got citizenship as well as the right to buy property and "everything started to open up."[25] The Chinese started to leave Chinatown and move into suburban neighborhoods to raise families. It is this next generation that Lim suggested would be able to assimilate more; however assimilation would also lead to a cultural identity crisis for that generation.

A new generation of Chinese emerged in the decades after WWII. This generation had never seen China, and some didn't even speak Chinese as English became the common language spoken at home. In Darcy Coover's unpublished masters thesis on the subject, she outlines the conflict within this generation, which:

> is forced to forge a uniquely Chinese-American identity. During the 1950s, 60s, and 70s they attempted to incorporate both their American and Chinese cultural heritages into that identity, and to reconcile their dedication to their parents' native China...all the while battling popular images often tinged with racial and cultural prejudice.[26]

Western films were still churning out fortune cookie Charlie Chans alongside racially vengeful Fu Manchu films, as well as emasculated characters like Mr. Yunioshi from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, all of whom were still being played in yellow face. In order to find characters with whom this generation of Chinese could identify with, many turned to the Kung-Fu theaters in Chinatown.

Finding authentic Chinese culture on screen in the West was limited to Chinatown's Kung Fu theaters and Kung Fu schools. Henry Jung's study on "The Relationship of Kung-Fu Movie Viewing to Acculturation Among Chinese-American Men" created a profile of the demographic that frequented the Kung-Fu theater most often during the early 1980s. After a detailed study he found that it was young American-born Chinese who watched these films the most.[27] Additionally he found it was those with post-secondary education and strong English fluency who were more frequent viewers. His survey results suggested that a high assimilation rate correlated to a higher viewing rate of Kung Fu movies.[28] He concludes that,

> It is my basic contention that the popularity of Kung Fu movies among Chinese-American men is an

> attempt to maintain a bi-cultural or multi-cultural perspective on social reality, to foster a psychological sense of control, however vicarious...The Kung Fu movies allow the Chinese-American male to see Chinese men presented in a more heroic and romantic image than is normally available through the American mass media.[29]

Outside of these films Chinese men found a society that did not recognize their masculine ideals or even consider them masculine. These films provided an escape from the negative images created as a result of the hegemony of the European masculine ideal. Chinese-American director Justin Lin felt it was because these films came from Hong Kong that the characters were more empowered in their own environment. He said Chinese-Americans "really attached to that and kinda [were] proud of it because they kick ass."[30] However, one Chinese-American man would break through Western media to become a cultural icon of masculinity.

Before Bruce Lee became a Western cultural icon he was like many Chinese-Americans who struggled to find an identity within Western culture. Lee was born in San Francisco in 1940 while his mother and father were there touring with a Cantonese Opera group. They returned to Hong Kong less than a year later with the intention of Lee returning to America when he was older. Lee grew up in the film business, as his father worked in the Hong Kong film industry. Lee played a variety of roles as a kid, where he gained some experience working in front of the camera.[31] He did not start studying Kung Fu until the age of 10, when he started fighting in street gangs in Hong Kong. After getting kicked out of school multiple times, his family became worried, and when he was 17 years old sent him to America to keep him out of trouble. Lee worked in a family friend's Chinese restaurant until he teamed up with Taka Kimura, a karate instructor, to start his own school.[32] It was initially Lee's plan to open up a series of Kung Fu schools to introduce the West to China's martial art, however, it became clear that television and film would be a more effective medium.

Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* was the first Hollywood film to star a Chinese male lead, but his road to stardom was repeatedly sabotaged by the stereotypes of Chinese men that had been built up over the last century. The beginnings of Bruce Lee's career in film reflect a transitional period in the representation of Chinese men in Western media. Prior to the introduction of Bruce Lee into mainstream Western media, Kung Fu didn't even exist in the lexicon of the average Westerner. Martial arts and Karate were the initial terms used to describe Bruce Lee's on screen demonstrations of Kung Fu.[33] The West's exposure to Asian martial arts was primarily because of the transnational success of Akira Kurosawa's Samurai films.[34] The popularity of Karate had resulted in a explosion of Karate schools and competitions featuring white practitioners as well as an incorporation of the art in films like the successful James Bond series. It was at one of these competitions that an agent observed the incredible skills of Bruce Lee and recruited him for a screen test for *The Green Hornet*.[35] In his screen test he made the distinction of Karate being a younger off shoot of Kung Fu while outlining the superiority of the Chinese art.[36] *The Green Hornet*, however, began to repulse Lee as he began to experience how the studio's racism repressed his aspirations of bringing an authentic Chinese male to the screen.

Lee played Kato in the series *The Green Hornet* but was presented as the houseboy to the Green Hornet. As Chinese-American critic and playwright Frank Chin observed, "if he wants to perform here, he has to wear a mask, drive a white man's car, and wash it. And only gets to attack on command. The white man says, 'Sic em, Bruce' No, if he wants to take off his clothes and be a man, he has to go to China, he has to go to Hong Kong and do it."[37]

Lee had fully intended to use his presence on *The Green Hornet* to reshape the way the West viewed the Chinese male. In a news interview in 1966 he told reporters that this character was not going to be the servant everybody was used to seeing because he was intent on showing the world that a Chinese man could be on "equal footing" with his white counterparts on screen.[38] However, the series ended up having almost no dialogue for the Kato character. Mid-way through the series Lee wrote a letter to the producer suggesting that an "active partnership" instead of "mute follower" would help improve the show's diminishing viewership.[39] His theory was right; the popularity of the show was due almost entirely to the Kato's Kung Fu performance.

The *Green Hornet* series was created to capture some of the viewership of the *Batman* series with Lee as the Hornet's Robin. In an interview with Van Williams, who played the Hornet, he recalls how at promotional shows that also had the *Batman* cast, kids would want Robin to do Kato moves and acknowledged that it was indeed Lee's character that brought in the audience.[40] When the show was later aired in Hong Kong it would be called *The Kato Show*, demonstrating just who was the most popular in the series.[41]

The executive producer did not take Lee or his suggestions seriously and when the show was canceled he let Lee know with a note saying, "Confucius say, The Hornet buzz no more."[42] Frustrated, Lee decided to create his own show and present it to producers. It would be about a Chinese man in the West fighting injustice while presenting a strong masculine character. The concept was like an old Western, but presented in the modern day with a Chinese

hero.[43] Warner Brothers loved the idea. Japanese American actor and producer Mako remembered, "I recall having a meeting with executives of Warner Bros. about David Carradine portraying a Chinese character in *Kung Fu*. And I remember this vice president, in charge of production I suppose, said if we put a yellow man on the tube, audience would turn the switch off in 5, less than 5 minutes."[44] The Western studio executives' racism finally convinced Lee that he had to first go back to Hong Kong to make a name for himself. Lee incorporated the frustrations that he and other overseas Chinese were experiencing into the plots of his films.

The trend in Hong Kong Kung Fu films had begun to shift in the mid 1960s from the fantasy sword fighting style to more realistic Chinese boxing. Raymond Chow, executive producer of Golden Harvest, sought out Lee to make films for the new upstart company he had started after leaving Shaw Brothers studios.[45] Chow gave Lee full discretion in making the films, allowing Lee to create his own unique sub-genre in Kung Fu films of Chinese nationalism. His first film *The Big Boss,* released in 1971, broke box office records when it grossed over $2 million dollars in two days, it was also the first film ever to have a full house for all seven shows a day on a consistent basis. The previous record was held by *The Sound of Music* and his swift defeat of that film signaled a recurring theme of Lee beating out the West.[46]

The Big Boss's success can be attributed to the themes found in the struggles of the Chinese diaspora as well as the charismatic presence of Lee. Set in and filmed in Thailand, Bruce Lee goes to work in a factory with other Chinese workers only to discover that they are severely mistreated. When Lee discovers that the factory is only a front for drug smuggling, and he becomes threatened by the "big boss" of the operation, he proceeds to take down the entire operation with Chinese Kung Fu.[47] Lee felt that it was because his character was a "simple, straightforward guy" projecting this image of the quite soft-spoken Chinese man who then "goes animal."[48] The audience could identify with the simple guy who can at the same time fulfill their fantasy of going "animal," defeating the injustices they were experiencing. Lee's next film would break his own record, and he utilized the theme of nationalism in a story about a man fighting the injustices of the occupying Japanese during WWII.

Fist of Fury is filled with the anger that many overseas Chinese felt but were unable to express. In M.T. Kato's book *From Kung Fu to Hip Hop* he suggests that the anti-Japanese sentiment in *Fist of Fury* doubles as an anti-Western Imperialism theme that carried over to the feelings of oppression felt by the Chinese in the West. He writes that,

> Whereas most films of the Kung Fu cultural revolution suffer from an elusive contextualization, *Fist of Fury* is packed with historical and social references providing a definitive historical theme of Japanese villainy...the symbolism and allegory in *Fist of Fury* not only link the film with the historical instances that betray the reality of Japanese Imperialism but also the symbolic kernel of imperialist culture.[49]

Scenes such as Lee's character destroying a sign outside a public park in Hong Kong that said "No dogs or Chinese allowed" replicated that same fantasy of being able to combat racism while releasing the anger built up because of it.[50] That release can be seen in the emotional responses Chinese audiences had viewing the film.

Not only did *Fist of Fury* break box office records, but the passionate reactions to the film reflected the degree to which these films resonated with the Chinese audience. Robert Clouse, director of *Enter the Dragon,* recalled in his book *The Making of Enter the Dragon* that when he went to visit Lee in Hong Kong, the film *Fist of Fury* was still playing. Lee took him to a showing to demonstrate the power of his films on Chinese audiences. He said that the audience was "the most physical audience he had ever witnessed."[51] Clouse remembered the audience would gesture and yell at various characters, sometimes jumping up on the seats, but at other times such as when the Japanese toughs hung the "sick people of Asia" sign in the Chinese school that the audience was so silent he could hear the bus traffic outside. He could feel that they were hurt. It was when Lee's character laid waste to the entire Japanese dojo that had hung the sign that the audience lost control,

> As Chen Chen was about to leave the Japanese compound and go out the door, he turned to look back at the bodies and carnage of the few Japanese left who were still alive. Following a dramatic pause he said, "The Chinese are not the sick people of Asia." Pandemonium! Everyone rose to his feet. Wave upon wave of earsplitting sound rolled up the balcony. The seats were humming and the floor of the balcony was shaking!...Indeed, Bruce was the biggest hero anyone in Hong Kong had ever known and their pride in his being Chinese was extremely visible."[52]

This reaction was repeated throughout the world in Chinese communities. In Singapore the debut of the film shut down the city in the country's first ever film traffic jam.[53] When the films made it to the West, many Chinese-

Americans had already seen it by way of overseas families, but the impact on American box offices broke even more records.

In May 1973, for the first and only time in history, three foreign films filled the top three spots on American box office at the same time. The films were *The Big Boss, Fist of Fury,* and *Five Fingers of Death* in that order.[54] While some critics, such as Alex Josey of *New Nation* initially reviewed the film as a comedy, and *Variety* felt they lacked plot, Lee told the *New Nation* that they "were viewing a Chinese film with a Western mind...To the Chinese, the humiliation felt in those years was very real."[55] However, it seemed the American public had dramatically embraced the idea of a strong masculine Chinese man on screen.

For Chinese-American actor Jason Scott Lee, who would later play Bruce Lee in his bio-pic, going to see Bruce Lee's movies as a kid he thought, "Wow, man, I mean this guy is like God."[56] Sammo Hung Kam-Bo, Hong Kong film actor, says it was Lee's pride in his expression of his "Chineseness" that was inspirational:

> I think he has an effect on each of us who are Chinese... his ethnic identity is very strong and makes everyone excited. He stands out from a crowd and is being proud of being Chinese, his sense of identity, of being Chinese, is really strong...His most special quality is that he had his own identity. He combined Chinese ways with Western styles. His style is not purely Chinese but he included the Westernized ingredients while expressing his loyalty to his country and race. Watching him is not only seeing an actor but more and very special.[57]

Ang Lee expressed a similar sentiment when he said that it was Lee's spirit of fighting and charismatic "gung ho" attitude that were very Western and inspired the repressed Chinese attitude.[58] The ability to create this hybridization of Eastern and Western identities appealed strongly to those Chinese men who were trying to assimilate into Western society. Lee's next film, which he would also write and direct, highlighted the insecurities of overseas Chinese with some of his own experiences.

Way of the Dragon would be Lee's last Hong Kong film before teaming up with Warner Brothers Studios for *Enter the Dragon. Way of the Dragon* is about a Chinese Boxing master who goes to Italy to defend his cousin's restaurant from a string of thugs who are trying to push the restaurant out of business. When Lee defeats all of the gang's thugs, the leader hires two Karate champions to defeat Lee. Lee not only portrays the recurring theme of Kung Fu being superior to the Japanese martial art, but also goes further. This time a character named Colt is played by Chuck Norris, a real World Karate Champion. Lee fights the insecurities of the Chinese male's masculinity by pitting a fight between him and a much taller, much hairier, Caucasian male who has adopted a Japanese style. To further the symbolic fight against imperialism that M. T. Kato mentioned, Lee fights Chuck Norris in the Coliseum of Rome. With a backdrop of the most famous symbol of the Romans and the fall of Western civilization, Lee defeats the white Karate champion. At one point, as if to suggest the inferiority of the supposed Western symbol of masculinity, Lee rips of some of Chuck Norris's chest hair.[59] As Jason Scott Lee suggested when asked how to combat stereotypes, "You just kick their ass!"[60] *Way of the Dragon* represented an outlet to express the ideas of Chinese masculinity, a theme that has shown to be lost in translation as it moved toward Western audiences.

The making and reception of *Enter the Dragon* also represented this clash of masculine ideals. For instance, Robert Clouse said that his first impression of Bruce Lee's films was that he had to "kick the strut" out of him. Clouse felt that the confidence of Lee came off as too cocky. His body language, such as the way he slid his thumb across his nose in fights, was a point of contention. Clouse, like many other Westerners, had difficulty accepting a confident, aggressive Chinese man. While Clouse was emasculating Lee, Lee was concerned that his countrymen would not receive his Westernized hero, and he was right. Despite the global success of *Enter the Dragon,* the film never did as well in Hong Kong as Lee's first three films.[61] However, the film's success created a precedent for the Chinese male's representation in the media. As Mako pointed out when referencing the success of *Enter the Dragon,* "It became kind of a household name, 'Have you seen *Enter the Dragon?* No, I saw it twice."[62] Korean-American Will Yun Lee commenting on the film said Lee had "become the epitome of cool like James Dean, Michael Jordan...I just felt proud to be Asian because I saw someone up there on the screen doing what he did."[63] Bruce Lee's success and dramatic impact on the presentation of Chinese men on screen changed the way Asians came to be perceived in society as well as how they perceived themselves.

Prior to *Enter the Dragon* and the box office success of Lee's and other Kung Fu films, the lack of masculine Chinese representations the media had created insecurities among overseas Chinese. After the success of Kung Fu films in the 1970s the perception of Chinese men by Western society evolved to present a stronger Chinese male. Korean-American Phillip Rhee remembers growing up idolizing figures like Clint Eastwood, but realizing that "something was missing" because all of his heroes were Caucasian. He felt he didn't have a strong role model until

Bruce Lee broke the Chinese hero barrier. He said of Bruce Lee's breakthrough in the 1970s, "We have to be proud of the legend, Bruce Lee. It gave a lot of Asian male pride. We are able to walk down the street with our heads up."[64] In addition, he could see the influence on Caucasian action heroes, taking pride in the fact that they have to adopt martial arts now to be action heroes.

The globalization of the Kung Fu film genre and the films' success in box offices shifted the stereotype of the Chinese male. The days of the popularization of Fu Manchu or Charlie Chan are over. Instead, the Chinese male faces a new stereotype as the assumed Kung Fu master. While, as Ang Lee put it, "the machoness itself is a positive thing" it has led to the creation of a new stereotype.[65] Wayne Wang feels that the Bruce Lee male image has hyper-masculinzed the Chinese male, leading to a new set of insecurities for Chinese men who feel Western society now holds that expectation of them.[66]

The chaos and violence that China experienced during the 20th century resulted in the Chinese diaspora that created sometimes oppressive environments for the families of Chinese immigrants. The media's portrayal of the Chinese contributed to negative perceptions that were not disputed until the success of Kung Fu cinema in the West. Bruce Lee would usher in this change with his hybridization of East and West, but his early death left some, like Mako, to wonder what changes to the presentation of the Chinese male could have occurred had the momentum of Bruce Lee's challenge to Western media been sustained.[67]

By opening a scholarly dialogue on the history of the portrayal of Chinese men in media this thesis aims to change the way the reader watches a TV show or goes to the movies. Additionally, this thesis seeks to change the way Westerners view Kung Fu films both from the Golden Era of Kung Fu cinema as well as Kung Fu films since then. With a knowledge of the stereotypes Chinese men were subjected to and an understanding of the impact the globalization Kung Fu films had on Chinese men, the Western viewer may find Bruce Lee's and other Kung Fu films to be more inspiring. For overseas Chinese these films were more than action films, they were where injustices were righted by someone who was Chinese while exhibiting a strong cultural ethnicity. Bruce Lee forged a powerful new identity for Chinese males in cinema, and his shadow still dominates our expectations from Chinese male characters in the media. With nobody pushing the boundaries, as Hunt Hoe asks in *Who is Albert Woo*, who are the Chinese male role models?[68] It would seem as though the presentation of the Chinese male has stagnated since the globalization of Kung Fu cinema, leaving another stereotype unchallenged.

2. Endnotes

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