Re-Dreaming China:

Reflexivity, Revisionism, and Orientalism in the *Wuxia* Cinema of Chor Yuen

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ABSTRACT

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Zachariah Campbell

Although significant scholarship has been devoted to Hong Kong martial arts cinema in recent decades, with emphasis on King Hu and Change Cheh as key creative figures, relatively little attention has been devoted to Chor Yuen, who directed over forty-seven feature films for the Shaw Brothers studio between 1971 and 1985, most of them in the *wuxia* genre. In this paper I argue that a critical investigation of Chor Yuen's work through an auteurist lens reveals a director with a distinct vision and formal sensibility, and encourages a reconsideration of his role in shaping the development of the genre. Through a reading of Chor Yuen's directorial style and his ludic deployment of Chinese cultural tropes in his *wuxia* films, I will illustrate how these produce a form of reflexive and self-orientalizing cinema that both affirmed and subverted the 'dream of China' proffered by Shaw Brothers to the Chinese diaspora. By heightening the factitious, orientalist dimension of this nostalgic production, Chor interrupted its capacity to work in pure ideologically nationalistic terms. Communicating this transmuted 'dream' forward, influencing future directors and variations of the genre, Chor Yuen has contributed meaningfully both to the development of Hong Kong's cultural hybridity, and to promoting new, essentialized, mobile permutations of 'Chineseness.'

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 INTRODUCTION

During its glory days, Hong Kong's movie industry sat comfortably among the three largest film producers in the world, no mean feat when one pauses to consider its relative position as a tiny, congested British colonial port nestled on the cusp between the looming geopolitical presence of the Chinese Mainland, and the polyglot sphere of Southeast Asia. For nearly half a century, Hong Kong's Shaw Brothers studio held a centrifugal position in the culture of the entire region, reaching a height of film production and influence through the 1960s and 1970s under the direction of the celebrated media mogul Sir Run Run Shaw. Although Shaw Brothers was an intensely commercial enterprise dedicated to providing a broad array of populist entertainment, through its sheer volume of cinematic product, the studio was also an active, pervasive voice in the formation and distribution of Chinese cultural identity. This applied not only to Hong Kong and its local specificities, but also across transnational boundaries, speaking to global diasporic Chinese communities, and making forays into the non-Chinese world as well.

On the worldwide stage, the cinema of Hong Kong has been lauded for its exuberant physical performances, stylistic excesses, and cultural colour. During the 1990s, Hong Kong film enjoyed a global surge in both popularity and scholarly interest. Stars, stylistic influences, and creative talent were imported into the Hollywood film industry, and a host of English-language books and articles were published on the subject of Hong Kong movies. These were devoted in large part to the vibrant action spectacles and the cinematic martial arts traditions that had made these films so remarkable and sensational. In spite of this, only a handful of the directors from the sprawling Shaw Brothers studio era have attracted a significant degree of critical or scholarly attention in the international milieu. In this modest company we find seminal figures of genre cinema like King Hu, Chang Cheh[1], and Lau Kar-leung, but it has only been relatively recently that Chor Yuen[2] has emerged as a particular subject of interest.

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[1] Chang Cheh is also sometimes credited under the Mandarin version of his name as 'Zhang Che'. However, 'Chang Cheh' remains the most commonly recognized romanization of his name, and will be used in this thesis.

[2] Chor Yuen is also sometimes referred as 'Yuen Chor' following the western convention of given-name first. As well, he is frequently credited under the Mandarin transliteration of his name, 'Chu Yuan'. The Mandarin spelling is used on the English packaging for most of the Celestial DVD releases of his Shaw Brothers films. I have elected to retain the more common Cantonese variation 'Chor Yuen' throughout this thesis, as I feel it better reflects Chor's status as a Hong Kong artist and as a native Cantonese speaker.

Already a prolific figure in Hong Kong's Cantonese cinema of the 1960s, Chor Yuen came to work for Shaw Brothers in 1971, and quickly became one of their mainstay directors. Within the vertically-integrated framework of the Shaw studio system, rapid-fire production of popular, highly-formalized genre fare was the dominant mode of expression. The figure of the director could be easily overshadowed by the performers of the Shaw's glamorous star stable, and by the Shaw studio brand itself. Nevertheless, Chor Yuen's contributions to the Shaw canon are both substantive and distinctive. During his 15 years with the studio, he emerged as one of Shaw Brothers' most representative directors, helming a dizzying forty-seven features, and earning himself the epithet "the last heir to the studio system" from Hong Kong critic Sek Kei.[3]

Considering his sizable body of work as one of the last major directors of the Shaw era, the lack of scholarly attention devoted to Chor Yuen in the literature of the field is conspicuous and disheartening. Much of this discrepancy may be attributable to the fact that the massive Shaw Brothers film catalogue was relegated to storage when the studio dismantled its feature film apparatus in 1985. Minimally maintained, undistributed, and officially unreleased on home video formats, the access to the Shaw films remained extremely limited for nearly two decades. The legacy of the 'kung fu craze' of the 1970s ensured that martial arts films by Chor's Shaw contemporaries like Lau Kar-leung and Chang Cheh continued circulating in the form of aging English-dubbed prints and dubious pan & scan VHS tapes. However, very few of Chor Yuen's films were to be found in this genre collector demimonde. The reason for this is largely due to the fact that Chor Yuen's most characteristic martial arts works belonged to the Chinese swordplay film genre, or the *wuxia pian*.[4] The prevailing wisdom, both at Shaw Brothers and among international distributors, was that the *wuxia pian* was often 'too Chinese' in flavour to achieve mainstream success in Western markets, and so the genre was mostly limited to sinophone distribution. Like the bulk of the Shaw canon, prints of Chor Yuen's films languished unseen for the remainder of the twentieth century.

This changed in 2002 when the entire Shaw catalogue was acquired by the Malaysian-Hong Kong media company Celestial Pictures Ltd. The re-releases began later that same year, and by 2007, Celestial had made restored versions of over five hundred Shaw films available to digital media, and provided several new prints to theatrical venues. This granted scholars, genre

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[3] Cited in Kwok Ching-ling and Grace Ng's preface to *Director Chor Yuen* (9).

[4] '*Wuxia'* refers to the genre of martial chivalry and swordplay generally, and across all media. The term *'wuxia pian'* refers to the swordplay film genre specifically.

enthusiasts, and new audiences a far more comprehensive view of the studio output that defined a seminal era of Hong Kong cinema. Even amid the colourful array of Shaw spectacles, Chor Yuen's body of work distinguishes itself through a singular style and an artistic brio. Although he directed films across a spectrum of popular genres during this time at Shaw Brothers, the largest and most defining portion of his filmography with the studio undoubtedly belongs to the *wuxia pian* mode.

Wuxia stories occupy a place of special significance in the discourse of Chinese cultural identity. The genre emerged from literary roots set deeply into Chinese history and folklore, and has evolved into a historicized and often highly fanciful heroic fiction. Over the course of the twentieth century, the fabric of the *wuxia* genre has been thoroughly interwoven with threads of tradition, nation, and modernity. In the present moment, *wuxia* fiction – in print, television, cinema, and video games – remains popular with Chinese audiences around the world. *Wuxia* tales counted among the earliest subjects of the nascent Chinese cinema in Shanghai during the 1920s. In the postwar decades, with Hong Kong's ascendancy as the new nexus of Chinese-language film production, historical spectacles conjured mythic memories of the homeland for diasporic communities. When *wuxia* popular literature experienced a modern resurgence during the 1950s and 1960s, adaptations of these novels accounted for an impressive sixty percent of all films produced by Hong Kong's bustling film industry (Yu 103). Martial arts in cinema exploded in popularity and with the advent of the kung fu (unarmed fighting) movie genre in the early seventies, this sensation spilled over into the world at large. Later, in the eclectic mix of Hong Kong's film industry of the 1980s and 1990s, as the colony anticipated its repatriation to China, the *wuxia* film served as both a form of sensational commercial entertainment and, frequently, as a form of political allegory. Today, the iconography of the *wuxia pian* has become fully disseminated into the global milieu as a commodified and identifiably Chinese brand of national exhibition, bespeaking through cinematic form the political, economic, and technological potency of China.

Historically, the development of the *wuxia* film is indelibly marked by its associations with Hong Kong's Shaw Brothers studio. Over three decades, the Shaws would reconfigure and redeploy the genre as a form of cultural capital, both as a 'dream of China'[5] addressed to the

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[5]   The 'dream of China' is my borrowing of the term coined by Sek Kei, in his 2004 article "Shaw Movie Town's China Dream and Hong Kong Sentiments" (Kei 2004, 37-39). Kei's term describes the romantic and nostalgic

nostalgic sensibilities of Chinese expatriate audiences, and for international markets as an assertion of Chinese industrial achievement and culturalist pride. While these productions advertised the studio's own technical and economic competitiveness, I suggest that the Shaw swordplay film may also be read as a cultural sign adapted to the purposes of brokering Hong Kong as an authoritative voice in building a larger sense of Chinese identity, one disentangled and distanced from the problematic modern history and locality of the Mainland, and redirected towards the project of Hong Kong's own self-definition as a global center. Of the many filmmakers who worked at Shaw Brothers in the *wuxia* genre, Chor Yuen was among the most prolific and the most defining, shifting the style and values of the genre at a critical point during the 1970s. In many ways, these works presage the assertive expressions of localized cultural identity that would characterize Hong Kong's 'New Wave' cinema over the two decades preceding the colony's 1997 handover to the People's Republic of China.

Even working within the tightly-controlled, patently commercial confines of the Shaw studio system, Chor Yuen's brand of *wuxia* cinema demonstrates a distinguished formal vibrancy and a coherent, individualized sensibility. In the following study, I propose that Chor Yuen's extensive corpus of *wuxia* films is reflective of an important historical moment in Hong Kong cinema. They initiated a stylistic shift in the swordplay genre of the 1970s, constituting a meaningful link to later formations of the genre, from the politicized parables of Hong Kong New Wave director Tsui Hark, to the sumptuous and exotic transnational showpieces of contemporary Mainland directors like Zhang Yimou. Approaching Chor Yuen as an auteur figure, I will discuss the key elements of genre and style in his films, and draw contrasts and comparisons with his important Shaw contemporaries, most significantly Chang Cheh, whose own *wuxia* films have long been considered a dominant paradigm for the genre. Further, through the analysis of Chor's formal style, and of his ludic deployment of Chinese artistic and cultural tropes in his swordplay movies, I hope to elucidate how these aesthetic tendencies produce a form of self-reflexive and self-orientalizing cinema, one that both affirms and subverts the Shaw Brothers 'dream of China'. By transmuting and communicating this dream forward, influencing future directors and variations of the genre, Chor Yuen has contributed meaningfully both to the

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cinematic construct of a historicized, yet wholly mythical China that was promoted by Shaw Brothers films, especially through the 1960s and 1970s. I have taken the Shaw 'China Dream' and extended its scope in order to describe a persistent motif that emerged in Hong Kong and diasporic Chinese cinema, and that may be further traced in the transnational film output from the Mainland People's Republic of China of the last two decades.

development of Hong Kong's cultural hybridity, and to the promotion of new, essentialized, mobile permutations of 'Chineseness'.

The structure of this thesis will be divided along two main, intersecting topics. The first portion will take a historical and theoretical approach, providing an overview of the Hong Kong film industry and of the *wuxia* film genre, and engaging with postcolonial theoretical concepts such as Edward Said's *Orientalism* in order to better understand how the Hong Kong swordplay film may be seen as a flexible and potentially subversive signification of Chinese identity. Chapter 1 will discuss the emergence of a 'quasi-national' self-identification in the colony, with particular focus on the role played by the Shaw Brothers studios and their 'dream of China' in this process. Chapter 2 will introduce the *wuxia* swordplay genre, from its roots in the culture of the Chinese Mainland, to its cinematic transformations in Hong Kong's film industry. Building on this discussion, the cultural and political valence of the *wuxia* film will be considered in the context of orientalism and Hong Kong's relationship to China.

The second half of this thesis will concern itself with Chor Yuen as an auteur, and as an influential figure within the *wuxia* genre. Chapter 3 will provide an overview of Chor's career; his prolific days in the Cantonese film industry up to the 1960s; his move to Mandarin filmmaking at Shaw Brothers, and his inventive Gu Long-based *wuxia* films of the seventies and eighties, which initiated a fresh cycle of the swordplay genre in Hong Kong. Chapter 4 will discuss Chor Yuen's position and influence as a genre innovator in the *wuxia* cinema. This will focus on the themes emerging in Chor's works and their intersections with questions of nationalism, gender, and cultural identity. Comparison will be drawn between Chor and other important directors of the Shaw 'New Style' *wuxia,* especially Chang Cheh, whose own influence on the *wuxia* genre was defining. Chapter 5 will investigate Chor's directorial approach and formal style, in order to identify how the elements of reflexivity and antirealist aestheticism contributed to a kind of self-orientalizing gaze towards China. Chapter 6 provides analyses of four of Chor Yuen's key films in the *wuxia* mode, selected from different stages in his career in order to illustrate the points brought forward in the earlier chapters of the thesis.

<u>CHAPTER 1</u>

Cinema and Hong Kong Identity

In order to set the stage for a discussion of Chor Yuen's work at Shaw Brothers, it is useful to provide first an overview of Hong Kong's development as a unique social and economic space between China and the rest of the world. The demographic composition of Hong Kong has typically been characterized in terms of transition and hybridity. Long before it was ceded to the United Kingdom by the 1842 Treaty of Nanking, the area was already a cultural space defined by migrations from other areas of China and lacking a strong sense of continuity with an indigenous presence. Over the course of time, generations of Chinese fleeing war, famine, or political strife on the Mainland (chiefly Cantonese speakers from Guangdong province), found themselves drawn to the sparsely populated reaches of Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories. Under British rule, the port city of Hong Kong served as the filter through which movements of people, capital, and culture would pass and accumulate in the framework of the colonial infrastructure. Throughout the twentieth century, the politics, economics, and social organizations of Hong Kong were formed and reformed in a state of perpetual suspension between the influences of the Chinese mainland, its diaspora, foreign colonial powers, and the socio-economic sphere of the rest of Southeast Asia. In this dynamic mix, the quintessential image of the Hong Kong character would emerge; informal, urban, fast-moving, and industrious; local in scope, yet global in affinity; culturally Chinese in affectation and tradition, yet aggressively modern in direction.

Due to Hong Kong's sense of specialized regional identity, discussions surrounding the development of the local film industry are often framed in terms of 'national' cinema. Here the question of a national cinema comes under scrutiny, as Hong Kong was itself a colonial holding of the United Kingdom, and China as a geopolitical entity had not only closed its doors, but was repudiating its ties to its own traditional past. As such, Yingchi Chu described Hong Kong as a *quasi-nation* formed in a shifting triangular relationship between the British colonizer and the Mainland, which depended on an "imagined community based on both the exclusion and the inclusion of China" (Chu Yingchi, xii). Following from Chu's characterization of Hong Kong as

a 'quasi-national' space, we may approach the topic of Hong Kong's identity formation in terms of an emerging 'national' culture.

Benedict Anderson proposed an alternative to the conventional rhetoric of national identity formation, which relies on self-conscious political or revolutionary action, and instead suggested that discrete groups and individual actors may foster a nationalizing impetus in the course of their own self-interested capitalist pursuits. Anderson supplies the example of the explosion of a vernacular "print-capitalism" in sixteenth century Europe, and its contributions to the development of language-communities and the roots of incipient nationalisms (Anderson 37–46). After Anderson, I offer that the cinema of Hong Kong, like other mass cultural production, is a form of self-representation that acts as a mediation of history, speaking both to and from the people that constitute its imagined community. Pushed forward by both individual agendas and capitalist drives, this impulse emerges from the extant senses of identity that linger from the past, and are reshaped by the immediacy of the present. Through the circulation of language and ethno-symbolic iconographies, film industries both reflect and impose coherency by cultivating a sense of mutual identity and belongingness. In the case of Hong Kong, this process must also accommodate the ruptures of time, geography, language, and politics as part of its renegotiation of 'Chineseness' outside of China proper.

Here Stuart Hall's understanding of national identity is helpful. Hall offers that national identities are not fixed as states of 'being', but rather exist in an ongoing process of 'becoming', subject to the variable forces of history, "always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall 222). Following from this, we may see Hong Kong cinema as an evocative example of this variegated process of identity formation *within representation*, subject to shifting and conflicting influences from professionals, artists, and institutions, who are themselves not outside this process.

The Hong Kong Film Industry Before 1965

Hong Kong became a significant Chinese film center in the 1930s, after increasing strictures under the Kuomintang (KMT) nationalist government saw more film markets moving south. Filmmakers of the previously active Guangzhou film scene, frustrated by sanctions against Cantonese-dialect language films by the Mandarin-preferring nationalist government, pulled up stakes and moved to the British-controlled colony in order to take advantage of the larger

Cantonese market in the Southeast-Asian region. Even at this early stage, the Hong Kong film industry was divided between two separate and competing streams, Cantonese and Mandarin. Although not an ethnic distinction, these two dialects still carried strong northern and southern cultural associations, and the push-and-pull between these poles would continue to reflect the contested nature of the emerging Hong Kong identity for decades to come. Mandarin film production at that time was a smaller affair, but it was supported by the large numbers of northern Chinese flowing into Hong Kong who were fleeing political persecution and Imperial Japanese aggression. When the war with Japan spread through the Pacific region, business was interrupted by foreign occupation in both the North and the South, reduced to a carefully-monitored "captive cinema". In the immediate post-war period following the Japanese surrender, Hong Kong experienced a brief economic boom, with Mandarin studios like Shaw Brothers being quick to reconsolidate their positions. Meanwhile, the Chinese mainland had become freshly embroiled in the struggle between nationalist and communist factions. Shanghai's film industry had already been tightly regulated under the KMT and now the vagaries of political strife saw still more film professionals and performers relocating to Hong Kong, bringing with them their own expertise, politics, and aesthetics.

With the end of the Chinese Civil War and the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Mainland film industry was nationalized, and the flow of cultural product both to and from China was narrowed to a heavily-scrutinized trickle. For Hong Kong filmmakers this meant that Mainland audiences and markets were no longer as accessible to them, but it also placed them in a fortuitous situation. With limited competition from productions made inside China, an abrupt vacuum was created, leaving Hong Kong as the primary source for Chinese films distributed worldwide. The PRC had not only become more insular, but over the next decade it would grow progressively more hostile in its attitude towards many traditional aspects of Chinese culture that were viewed as backward or harmful to the project of industrial modernization following the communist model. The growing exile populace in Hong Kong and elsewhere naturally sought to retain any tenuous links to a sense of home, not simply one they had left behind, but one which might no longer exist in familiar terms due to the politically changed landscape. The Mandarin influx bolstered the local industry considerably, but as a result, the cinema of Hong Kong became increasingly permeated by a mood of homesickness. Chu Yingchi identified the cinema of the 1950s and 1960s as being diasporic in nature, exhibiting "a

loss of homeland, a nostalgia for the motherland, and the experience of exile" which "stressed ethnic cultural identification with the mainland and expressed a belief in the essence of racial or ethnic culture" (Chu Yingchi, xix). Some Mandarin films communicated this unease with attempts to recreate the image of Shanghai life on Hong Kong locations, while others expressed a fondness for idyllic, culturally-Chinese reveries, depicting a time untainted by those political and economic factors that had driven many to relocate. Although cultural touchstones like the Cantonese opera had long been the mainstay of the local market, Mandarin studios like Shaw Brothers now especially embraced China-centric nostalgia in the form of their 'China Forever' films, grand historical epics and musicals set against the splendor of a northern imperial China. These elaborate films allowed the Shaws in particular to fully deploy their studio facilities and budgetary advantages towards creating a rich and immersive fantasy, a 'dream of China'.

The arguably escapist tendencies of the Hong Kong movies through this period were not solely a reflection of a sentimental paralysis or cultural anxiety, but also a product of more pragmatic factors within Southeast Asia. As the film business flourished in the 1950s, the cultural and political liminality of the colony between the 'two Chinas' (the Communist mainland and the Chinese nationalist government-in-exile in Taiwan) was maintained under the stewardship of the United Kingdom, which professed its neutrality in Chinese affairs. This neutrality was echoed somewhat by the film industry, and reinforced by the colonial government's censorship practices which, beginning in 1950, strongly discouraged filmmakers from pursuing subjects with overt political messages (Lent 96). Many Hong Kong film studios still benefited from maintaining Right or Left affiliations, receiving financial backing and preferential distribution arrangements in Taiwan, the Mainland, and other associated regions.[6] For some time, there had been a strain of Left-leaning "social issue" films in the Cantonese industry, while the powerful mogul-driven Mandarin studios like Shaw and MP&GI tended to cleave towards the Right, with a sizeable stake in Taiwanese markets. However, rather than creating a divisive, ideologically embattled landscape, the actual result of this situation was a pragmatic co-existence that ultimately proved conducive to the development of a more unitary

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[6] The big four studios of Hong Kong during the 1960s were Shaw, Cathay (MP&GI), Feng Huang (Phoenix) Studio, and Great Wall. The first three were powerful commercial enterprises, accounting for over 300 films a year, while Great Wall was supported by the mainland-based Bank of China, and enjoyed favoured status in distributing films to Mainland markets. All of these studios marketed freely to diasporic Chinese communities, guided only by the political leanings of a given community, and the language spoken by the film (Leyda 275).

Hong Kong identity. Prosperity in the colony, after all, relied upon the mercantile exploitation of their advantageous position between such ideological dominions.

By and large, Hong Kong's culture industry held to the course of practiced impartiality between political extremes, dependant as they were upon outside markets for their product. According to Lo Kwai-cheung, filmmakers accepted this model due to economic and personal motivations, adding that it "strains credulity to consider Hong Kong cinema as carrying any principled political conviction" (Lo 80). Lo's remark, albeit cynical, does speak to the apolitical, business-conscious reputation of the colony. The objective merits of economic growth under the relatively light touch of the colonial administration were after all preferable to the strife associated with political struggle. For this reason the Hong Kong film subject rarely engaged with ideological specifics that might complicate its mobility across commercial borders. Entertainment spoke first and spoke loudest, while the guarded political dreams and apprehensions of the colony echoed more softly through subtext and allegory.

The political ambivalence of the film industry should not suggest that Hong Kong was altogether politically inert; by the mid-1960s, attitudes were changing in both the diaspora and on the Mainland. The period of decolonization in Southeast Asia that followed the Second World War was encouraging a proliferation of nationalisms. In Hong Kong, the sting of homesickness was becoming tempered by a burgeoning sense of a local community identity. The colony's population had surged to over three million people by 1961. For a large (and growing) portion of younger Chinese, Hong Kong was their touchstone, not their parents' memories of the Mainland. Generational drift, economic modernization, and the influence of Western education and culture were increasingly reflected in the cinema. This was seen especially in the Cantonese cinema, where studios like Kong Ngee bartered the attractive image of Hong Kong's own modern, youthful, and upwardly-mobile society in fashionably middle-class romantic dramas and urban crime thrillers.

The gulf between the real and the imagined homeland widened still further in 1965, with the Communist mainland defenestrating China's traditional past in intensifying measures during Mao's Cultural Revolution. These tensions reverberated in Hong Kong as well, where anti-British sentiment was high, increasing the Hong Kong people's sense of alienation on both fronts. In 1967, labour disputes, rampant corruption, pro-communist agitation, and frustration with the colonial administration all erupted into widespread strikes, severe rioting, militant violence, and

even political assassinations. The aftershock of these events seemed to solidify the rifts between the colony and the volatile politics of the Mainland, while at the same time asserting a more strident spirit of Chinese self-identity that was tailored to the colonial experience. For Hong Kong, caught between the advantages of a surging modern capitalist economy and the radical self-exorcisms of the PRC, the subject of China required an ever more romanticized and historicized distance to quell the aporia of political distress. Following the model of Anderson's print-capitalism, this demonstrates how the political aversion of Hong Kong cinema was still able to articulate an expression of a nationalizing impulse outside the centralized, historicized authority of the mother country. This speaks to the emergence of a 'cultural vernacular' that grew to represent the essence of the Hong Kong spirit; apolitical, non-traditional, and opportunistic. More generously, this can be stated as the desire of the Hong Kong people to flexibly assert their own interests and local concerns over the political entanglements of their ethnic homeland, without abnegating their sense of Chinese identity. It was in this context that Hong Kong studios, including those Mandarin institutions that had previously made their success catering to the nostalgia of northern emigres, began to adjust their focus toward the commercial needs of the changing milieu. Chinese martial arts films entered into an explosive new phase, driven by an increasing need to reshape the 'dream of China' towards younger, more rebellious generations of diasporic Chinese whose attachments to tradition were more abstract.

At the forefront of this shift was the Shaw Brothers studio, along with its 'New Style' *wuxia* films which played a significant role in reconfiguring the Chinese cultural imaginary for a new generation. While still the product of a Mandarin studio, the Shaw 'dream of China' recast the homeland in steadily more localized terms. As one of the largest producers and distributors of Chinese cinema in the world, the Shaw vision spoke to Chinese communities around the globe, and jolted Hong Kong cinema onto a speedy new track that would define the next three decades.

The Rise of Shaw Brothers Studios

The Shaw Brothers studio was for over half a century one of the most potent and influential media institutions of Hong Kong[7]. Through cinema, the iconic Shaw brand became

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[7]   The periodization I offer here opens with the Shaws' expansion from their Singapore base to Hong Kong in 1934, and closes somewhat arbitrarily in 1985, when the studio's feature film production all but ceased. However, this does not take into account the persistence of the Shaw legacy and influence over local culture through the mighty TVB television network. Headed by Run Run Shaw himself, and making heavy use of many of the identifiable

emblematic of the particularities and excesses of the colony, at home and abroad. Much of this might be attributed to the ambition and shrewd stewardship of Sir Run Run Shaw, the primary architect and patriarchal figurehead at the helm of the greater Shaw enterprise from 1957 onward. Fully embodying the archetypal figure of the film industry mogul, he was noted for his commercial acumen, eye for talent, and pursuit of the latest trends on both a local and international scale. However, Run Run Shaw can also be seen as a prominent taste-maker, who sought to use cinema as a tool for shaping and promulgating Chinese culture according to his own personal vision. This vision was often articulated through Shaw Brothers' lavish period films in a highly stage-managed and essentialized fashion, constructed in contrast to (and perhaps even deliberate disassociation from) the modern geopolitical entity of communist Mainland China. This casts Run Run Shaw into the role of cultural broker, who reformulated Chinese identity in the crucible of Hong Kong's effervescent circumstances, redistributing this remediated brand of Chineseness to the Chinese diaspora and to the world.

Like so many other Hong Kong stories, the Shaw Brothers enterprise did not begin in the colony, but on the Mainland. In 1925, four brothers with the surname Shao[8] (of whom Run Run was the youngest) founded the Tianyi[9] Film Company in Shanghai, at that time the bustling center of Chinese film production. In 1928, the Shaos expanded beyond the Mainland's competitive local markets by moving their business to Singapore, where they first adopted the name "Shaw Brothers". In Singapore, they built a distribution hub for their own Tianyi productions and for those of other studios. In 1934, the port of Hong Kong was chosen as their new base of operations (as the Nan Yang Film Company) due to Hong Kong's "low taxes,

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Shaw Brothers studio lots, talent, and props, it could be argued that TVB was in many ways an extension of the Shaw era. Albeit relegated to the smaller screen, the TVB television serials (including many costume dramas and martial-arts epics) were broadcast across the Southeast Asian region and exported on videocassette and disk media to Chinatowns worldwide, continuing to re-fashion and unify experiences of Chineseness throughout the diaspora. Regardless of its uneven permeation into non-Chinese markets, the influence of Hong Kong television (TVB and otherwise) upon the shaping of Chinese cultural identity at home and abroad is itself an expansive topic bearing further study.

[8] The four Shao brothers went by the names Runje, Runde, Runme, and Run Run. Run Run was the last of six brothers overall, leading to his nickname "Uncle Six". He took several different names over his lifetime and career, but it is under the name Run Run Shaw (emblazoned across the screen credits in hundreds of Shaw Brothers films) that he became famous as the guiding force behind Shaw Brothers Studios.

[9] The translation of Tian ('sky') and Yi ('first') has led to variations in the English name of this studio, appearing variously as "Number One Film Company" or "Unique Film Company" (Chung 3). For clarity, 'Tianyi' is used here.

favorable labor conditions, political stability, (and) open access to Taiwan and other Chinese communities across the world" (Fu 5). Between their operations in Singapore and in Hong Kong, the Shaws were able to establish strong trade ties across all of Southeast Asia.

When Japanese forces occupied Hong Kong in 1941 and seized local business assets, the Shaw brothers were scattered. Only Run Run Shaw remained in Hong Kong, narrowly avoiding prison for screening "anti-Japanese" films (Chung 6). After the war, the Shaw enterprise was able to quickly reconstitute their operations due to a large sum of family money and jewels hidden from the Japanese during the war (literally, buried in a backyard). During this time Run Run was sent overseas to Europe to investigate new film technologies while his older brother Runde managed the business (ibid. 6). Beginning in the 1950s, the Shaws directed themselves exclusively to the production of Mandarin films in order to capitalize on the expatriate Shanghai talent on hand, and the increasing Mandarin-speaking markets in Southeast Asia. The studio made its mark with splendidly-produced costume dramas based on folklore and literary classics, the most famous of which were the lavish *huangmei* opera musicals that evoked a timeless, traditional, northern-flavoured Chinese spirit. Although performed in Mandarin, the *huangmei* opera films were themselves a fusion of both northern and southern cultural traditions. In this way, they played to mixed audiences of diverse Chinese regional origins, and enjoyed great popularity amidst Nationalist party exiles in the KMT-controlled Taiwan (Fu 14). Stylized and decorative, these productions were touched with an odd hybridity that made them into ersatz but recognizable Chinese dreams of simpler times.[10]

Through the 1950s, the Shaws expanded beyond theatre chains and film production, diversifying into theme parks, dance halls, and overseas film studios. They built lines of distribution stretching into markets as far away as India, Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The Shaw Studio swiftly became the dominant cultural institution of the Southeast Asian region. The field was not uncontested, of course; companies like the Motion Picture &

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[10] The *huangmei* opera was a traditional form that had been fostered by the Communists as part of an indigenous cultural policy, and performed in the official Mandarin language. However, in the hands of the commercial film industry in Hong Kong, *huangmei* performance lost many of its Mainland-specific qualities through a liberal blending with practices borrowed from other regional opera forms and folk performance traditions, North and South. Even at this early stage, the historical China of Hong Kong screens was a pastiche. For more on the *huangmei* productions from Shaw Brothers, see Edwin W. Chen's "Musical China, Classical Impressions: A Preliminary Study of Shaws' Huangmei Diao Film," in *The Shaw Screen* (Chen, E. pp.51–73).

General Investment Co. Ltd. (MP&GI)[11] and Great Wall Pictures Corporation all competed with the Shaws for a share of that market. At the same time, the prolific Cantonese film industry still chugged along, delivering lower-budget fare aimed at the traditional southern markets. In the period between 1952 and 1957, as many as 80 Mandarin language films were produced by the Shaws' Nan Yang Film Company,[12] but they were still following the same production models that had become the norm in Hong Kong, and needed a decisive edge to stay ahead of their rivals. In 1957, Run Run Shaw, recently returned to Hong Kong from running the Shaws' Singapore operations, convinced his older brother Runme to turn the reins of the studio over to him.

Run Run Shaw wasted little time in restructuring the studio with an increased emphasis on production. He bought 46 acres of land on Clearwater Bay and set about the ambitious project of streamlining and modernizing production, while spectacularly expanding their operation with new permanent studio facilities. He re-established the company as Shaw Brothers (HK) Ltd, and quickly became known for his top-down personal involvement in all the studio's workings. By the mid-1960s, Shaw Brothers was at the height of its power. It boasted over 1300 employees, and had constructed a sprawling production facility dubbed "Movietown" on the Clearwater Bay site. This included fifteen stages, two permanent outdoor sets, color film facilities, and the most current film equipment available from the U.S.A and Europe. Following a Fordist model, film production at the studio became a tightly-controlled, vertically-integrated assembly line, all in a clear imitation of the lustrous days of the Hollywood studio system. With Run Run Shaw's firm guiding hand on all aspects of production, Shaw Brothers became "the modernizing force that led the transformation of Hong Kong cinema from an age of traditional production into a new cinema of modern sensibility and cutting-edge technology" (Fu 5). Movietown was a veritable factory, capable of turning out large scale pictures with high production values at a dizzying pace. Production would start on a new film every nine days, with shooting around-the-clock, and as many as a dozen pictures on the go at a time. Most films would be wrapped after little more than a month of shooting (Kong 33). At this rate, the production of images representing Chinese identity from Shaw had become a constant media flow, travelling from Hong Kong into the shared consciousness of Chinese audiences around the world.

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[11] MP&GI was established in Hong Kong as a branch of the Singapore-based Cathay Organization, which owned a theatre circuit and produced films in Mandarin, Cantonese, and Malay. In 1965 MG&GI would be renamed the Cathay Organization (HK) (Teo 2009, 107). It was at Cathay that Chor Yuen would direct his first *wuxia* film *Cold Blade / Long Muxiang* (1970).

[12] Source: *The Shaw Screen: A Preliminary Study* (pp.352–356)

Run Run Shaw's vision was two-pronged. On one side, he encouraged active involvement with the international film scene as a means of keeping Shaw productions current in terms of both technology and global movie trends. On the other side, he kept the majority of Shaw Brothers output firmly oriented toward Chinese subjects and content. Fu Poshek has argued that this was not uniquely a decision based upon commercial exploitation, but that Run Run Shaw was motivated by a commonly held sense of Chinese cultural nationalism, one that expressed itself in a desire to see Chinese film become a world-class concern, much like the cinemas of Hollywood or Japan. Thus, Shaw's aspirations were not solely oriented to the diasporic markets that sustained Mandarin film production, but also toward a transnational degree of success that accorded Chinese culture its rightful place in the world, leading Chinese cinema "out of the racial ghetto of Chinatowns into the global market . . . as a way to declare the entry of China into the global community of national cinemas" (Fu 7).

Looking to the profile of Japanese cinema on the international scene, Shaw attributed its success to its production of an exotic "Oriental flavor" (*dong-fang secai*) (ibid. 9) that created an atmosphere of antiquity and mysticism for Western audiences. To this end, Shaw Brothers shopped their most magnificent historical productions to prestigious foreign film festivals like those in Cannes and San Francisco, hoping to draw critical acclaim on the world scene. According to Fu, the reasoning at Shaw Brothers was that "because the origin of Eastern civilizations was in China . . . Chinese cinema should reach out to the audience as the purest and most authentic representation of Oriental flavor" (ibid. 7). In these showy productions, Shaw Brothers engaged in what might be seen as a contradictory play between assertions of cultural authenticity, and a self-aware construction of an effusive 'Oriental flavour' for foreign consumption, all in service to a competitive desire to assert the historical primacy of Chinese culture among Asian nations. The old-fashioned grandeur of the *huangmei* operas and history epics of the fifties and sixties served this need by exploiting an ornate iconography of China's folklore, both appealing to the nostalgic pride of Chinese audiences, and crafting an enticing cultural exoticism to sell to foreign markets. By sharp contrast, the Mainland – the 'real' China – represented a much different dream from the one proposed by the Shaws, one shaped by its insularity, its social and economic controls, its adoption of 'Western-style' socialism, and its emphatic ruptures with its own cultural history. Acknowledging this discontinuity, Shaw's 'dream of China' was one complicated not only by its intersections with global capitalism, cultural

nationalism, and self-orientalism, but also by its attempt to speak for an authentic China, while in fact speaking from a colonized diaspora via an iconography of hazy cultural fantasy.

Chief among the studio's assets in building the Shaw 'dream of China' at this time was director Li Han-hsiang.[13] Through a series of 'palace films' through the 1950s and '60s, Li presented a dazzling vision of an imperial China. He covered the vast Shaw studio sets with a dense layer of antiques and ornamentation, recreated fanciful landscapes out of classical paintings, and dressed (and sometimes undressed) his actresses in costumes drenched in dynastic splendour. As was customary, the films almost invariably centered on female leads, strong-willed if not always virtuous women portrayed by the screen goddesses of the era. Li excelled at tales of history's most famous seductresses, with films such as *The Magnificent Concubine / Yang Kwei Fei* (1960) and *The Empress Wu Tse-Tien / Wu ze tian* (1963). Li's films received some recognition abroad; *Enchanting Shadow / Ching Nu Yu Hun* (1960) was nominated for a Palme d'Or at Cannes, while *Magnificent Concubine* won a technical award when it was shown at Cannes in 1962. However, even as these films were great commercial successes in Asian film markets, Run Run Shaw's desire to reach beyond the diaspora and win prestige on the global scene were never fully realized. Li Han-hsiang's resplendent *huangmei* opera folk-tale *The Love Eterne / Liang Shanbo Yu Zhu Yingtai* (1963) was one such showpiece, crafted to convey precisely the Chinese flavour that Shaw was banking on. Although smashing box-office records at home, it failed to make the hoped-for inroads into western markets, with very few screenings in gateway American cities like New York or San Francisco (Fu 10). As such, the elements of essentialist cultural exoticism in the Shaw period films of this time present an ironic entanglement; despite being conceived in part as enticements to a foreign film establishment, the Shaw Brothers 'dream of China' remained a largely sinophone phenomenon, consumed, processed, and recirculated in diasporic Chinese circumstances.

Shaw Brothers had undeniably dominated the Chinese-language film industry through the post-war years. During the 1960s, they adjusted the focus of their output towards the youth market, with a new approach to the 'dream of China'. Action films, in the form of their New Style swordplay cinema (discussed in more detail in Chapter Three) paved the way for the Shaws' Mandarin conquest of Chinese dialect cinema (as brief as this would turn out to be). Still, by the end of the decade it was discerned that with the generational shift in Hong Kong, and the

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[13]   Li Han –hsiang is also sometimes credited as Li Hanxiang, following the pinyin romanization style.

increasing sense of a local identity, the Shaws needed to keep step with the changing times. At the outset of the 1970s, Shaw Brothers undertook a 'localization' initiative in order to cultivate their growing local markets. Spearheaded by Chang Cheh, this process involved the recruitment of a new stable of fresh young Hong Kong actors, and the hiring of more Cantonese directors (many fleeing the declining Cantonese film industry, a collapse that had been hastened in no small way by the Shaws' competitive tactics). In spite of these changes, one might argue that Shaw Brothers was still too slow to respond to the conditions in Hong Kong. The new Golden Harvest[14] studio had established itself as a potent rival for the Shaws, with a seemingly cannier grasp of what local audiences really wanted. Meanwhile, as suggested by Fu Poshek, in response to the localization of Hong Kong culture, Shaw Brothers simply attempted to "localize China" instead (Fu 18) by exhibiting a persistent fixation on a mystical China as the unitary point of cultural identification.

With period martial-arts films as the studio's mainstay at the time, the Shaws stayed the course; the new crop of 'localized' action films retained the escapist flavour and ancient settings that had earned Shaw Brothers their reputation. However, as a form of "limited accommodation" for local audiences (ibid. 19), the new stories often incorporated the martial-arts traditions, folklore, and historical trappings of China's South, rather than the North. Despite the new focus on local talents, Mandarin still remained the primary language of production at Shaw. Fu observes that the localization was largely "a strategy of repackaging and reformulating its products to re-enhance the relevance of their pan-Chinese vision and values" (ibid. 19).

It was through the 1970s that Shaw Brothers, while still a major producer of Chinese cinema, began to gradually lose its near-monopoly over Hong Kong culture. By the mid-1980s, the 'dream of China' had effectively passed out of their hands, and into those of a new generation of Cantonese filmmakers, who possessed a different outlook and understanding of their relationship with the Mainland and its history. Nonetheless, it can be said that this process was, at least in some measure, informed and encouraged by the works of standout Cantonese directors at Shaw Brothers during this period, most notably the vibrant southern-style kung fu films of Lau Kar-leung and, of course, Chor Yuen's revisionist cycle of phantasmagorical *wuxia* swordplay films. By introducing new stylistic modalities into these traditional genres, they managed to

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[14]   Then enmity between Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest was personal as well as professional. Run Run Shaw's right-hand man Raymond Chow left the Shaws in 1970. Shortly thereafter he purchased the Cathay Organisation's remaining production facilities and formed the Golden Harvest company.

appeal to the changing sensibilities of markets in Hong Kong and in Taiwan. Both transitional and defining of their moment, these films sustained Shaw Brothers through the twilight of the Mandarin industry, and helped to shape Hong Kong cinema as it moved into one of its most iconic eras.

A New Cantonese Cinema

The particularities of the Mandarin and Cantonese cinemas have always lent themselves to different sensibilities and associations. While other dialects and ethnicities within China offer interruptions to the binary reading of Chinese culture, the predominant divide has historically been articulated through axioms of North and South, with language as the primary signifier of difference. Mandarin, the 'imperial language' of the Mainland, carried with it all the authority of China's glorious past as the 'Middle Kingdom' of antiquity. By contrast, Cantonese was the language of the southern, the folkish, the peripheral, and worse – in the case of Hong Kong – the colonized.

During the first half of the century the Cantonese cinema in Hong Kong was dogged by a reputation for shoddy production values and lowbrow content when compared to the output of the Mandarin studio giants. The Mandarin cinema, mostly driven by Shanghai businessmen like the Shaws, "embraced the capitalist system and its lifestyles . . . looked more sophisticated than its Cantonese counterparts with more luxurious sets and more glamorous stars, revelling in fantasy, myths, historical legends, and musicals" (Teo 1997, 49). Cantonese cinema, on the other hand, lingered between Confucian traditionalism, with its emphasis on family values, and a Left-informed interest in social reforms and working-class life. Southern traditions also persisted on Cantonese screens in the form of Cantonese opera films and the early kung fu serials, which featured southern martial arts styles, lion dances, and Guangdong folk heroes like Wong Fei-Hong.

However, while the Cantonese cinema spoke to local sensibilities, it was the culture of the North that provided a thread linking Chinese peoples around the world to a sense of ancient identity and belonging; a collective unconscious memory of a China perhaps never experienced, but hinted at in the richness of history. It evoked pleasant thoughts of an old, established empire and a society rich in artistic and literary tradition – and tradition on that grand scale spoke Mandarin. It is little wonder then, that Mandarin was the language deployed towards the project

of building a sense of Chinese cultural nationalism by Shaw Brothers. The local Cantonese population of Hong Kong at that time was not large enough to sustain the larger studios, but around the world there were Chinatowns still looking for that taste of the homeland, and the Mandarin enclave of Taiwan was a vital market. Through the 1950s and 1960s, the Chineseness promoted by the Shaws belonged emphatically to old China, at its most essential and indivisible. The Shaw productions expressed this spirit in the form of epic period pieces, and later through their re-branded versions of the Mandarin swordplay genre.

Nonetheless, Cantonese was still the shared language of the colonial experience. Through its break with the historical and political continuity of the Mainland, and its long colonial suffusion with Western culture, Hong Kong over time gestated a more autonomous sense of its difference. By making a practice of adapting Western genres to the Hong Kong setting, and finding their own manner of sinicizing content with a localized outlook, Cantonese cinema began to increasingly reflect and reinforce Hong Kong's growing hybridity. This was driven by surges in the economy and in the local population, especially young blue-collar and middle-class locals with a colonial education, no firsthand memory of China, and no nostalgic attachments. For them Hong Kong was not simply a refuge or transitional stepping stone; it was home.

In many ways, the Hong Kong culture can be seen as a chronicle of the encounter between tradition, 'Western-ness', and industrial capitalist modernity. As such, the Cantonese film market was less likely to ground its appeal in the erudite, retrospective pillars of Chinese classicism, but instead address itself to an urban, working-class, entertainment-seeking sensibility, one invested in the project of its own contemporality and drive towards status defined in Western, cosmopolitan terms. By the end of the 1970s, this process of localized identity formation had become even more pronounced, manifest in an increased mood of self-examination and self-definition. The emergence of a 'New Wave' of Cantonese cinema seemed to offer a postmodern consolidation of Hong Kong's history, binding the shared memory of the Mandarin and Cantonese cinemas together with Western influences into a new complex, a Hong Kong identity "as a separate cultural, social, and political entity not to be confused with China (Teo 1997, 112).

The New Wave sensibility of the Hong Kong film industry that carried through the 1980s and 1990s drew heavily upon its cinematic sense of past, revisiting genre and history in syncretic terms. In this way, the transitional phase in the late 1970s during which Chor Yuen produced the

majority of his Shaw Brothers films may be seen as a crucial stage. As a Cantonese director working in a predominantly Mandarin studio system, and in a tacitly Mandarin genre, Chor Yuen's films provide a site for exploring Hong Kong's renegotiation of its Chineseness and its local past, through the ethno-symbolic construct of the *wuxia* film. Here we may see how the Hong Kong *wuxia* genre produces a China-as-Other, as part of a nostalgic reconstruction of an ahistorical Self.

CHAPTER 2

The Wuxia Genre

As it is now understood, the term *wuxia* refers generically to tales of martial-arts adventure and chivalric swordplay, set in a bygone age and often mixing in elements of magic and superstition. The Chinese word '*wu*' in this context indicates the domain of military pursuits, while '*xia*' denotes qualities of gallantry possessed by a type of hero (*or* heroine, as *xia* is not a gender-specific term) that may be seen as roughly analogous to a wandering knight or adventurer. Hence, the expressions "knight-errant" or "swordplay" may be seen as approximate but acceptable corollaries (Teo 2009, 3). The term *wuxia pian* refers to the cinematic form of *wuxia* fiction and its categorization as a medium-specific genre. Although relying upon older folkloric traditions, and a deep repository of historical texts and classical literature, the modern *wuxia* genre only became truly codified under that name in the early twentieth century[15], predominantly in the form of serialized adventure novels (which were themselves quickly adapted to the needs of early Chinese filmmakers). Since then, the modern *wuxia* novel has become one of the most ubiquitous forms of Chinese popular fiction, sustaining various movements and revivals, and branching into other media like comic books and video games.

In studying the generic conventions and historical antecedents of *wuxia*, it is useful to recall Stephen Neale's discussion of genres as being "processes of systematization" that rely on both repetition and difference (Neale 1980, 51). Viewing genres as processes allows them to be constructed historically, and defined retrospectively (Chandler 4). As such, *wuxia* literature and film have been shaped into various stages and 'schools' by historical developments and socio-cultural shifts, but the most significant categorizations are based on what are now referred to as the literary "Old School" which originated in northerly Shanghai, and the self-identified "New School" that emerged in Hong Kong in the South during the 1950s. The cinematic *wuxia pian*

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[15] The term *wuxia* actually finds its origin in Japan, stemming from a related Japanese literary term, *bukyo*, which combines associations of the samurai tradition with a 'manly character'. In the late nineteenth century, this expression was imported to China and translated as *wuxia*. By the early twentieth century, Chinese authors were using *wuxia* as a replacement for the earlier expression *'xiayi'* ('wandering chivalry'). Stephen Teo notes that the shift from *xiayi* fiction to '*wuxia'* – with its added emphasis on militarism (*wu*) – can be seen as indicative of a nationalist impulse to remold China as a modern, military world power like Japan. (Teo 2009, 2-3)

follows a path informed by both the old and new literary schools, by oscillating socio-linguistic associations with Cantonese and Mandarin culture, and by its transnational inter-pollinations with other film industries and genres. Martial arts action cinema as a broad form has become a progressively globalized phenomenon, if always retaining implicit and ambiguously 'oriental' associations. The *wuxia* imaginary, however carries with it a specific charge of cultural Chineseness. The swordplay genre has proved itself mutable even while remaining inherently historicist, speaking of China through an abstract and essentialized past, although not in all cases speaking *to* China. As such, the *wuxia* film can be seen as being closely intertwined with historical transformations of Chinese identity.

The 'Old School' *wuxia* literature covers a period stretching from 1911 to 1949, roughly corresponding to the Republican era in China, but as a genre it draws upon much older origins. Historically, the word '*xia*' simply describes an informal, usually itinerant class of warrior, not affiliated with any particular armatures of state. Stories of the *xia* recurred in Chinese historical records and folklore throughout history, emerging especially during periods of political strife. Elements of this '*xiayi*' tradition (or "wandering chivalry") date back to antiquity through literature, poetry, and theatre, with origins possibly as old as the Spring and Autumn period (722–481 BCE) (Teo 2009, 17). Historically speaking, the *xia* were often mercenaries, outlaws, assassins, or other types of troublemakers. Nonetheless in the eyes of some Chinese historians,[16] they retained a mystique predicated on their independence, personal loyalty, and sense of righteousness. The *xia* first appeared in novel form during the Ming and Qing dynasties, and many of the traits that are now considered standards within the genre emerged out of the works of this period. Through romantic fiction, these figures were idealized as individualist heroes who adhered to a code of honour and fought for the oppressed. Models for what would become the *wuxia* style may be found among the pillars of Chinese classical literature. For example, the stalwart soldiers and shrewd generals from *San guo yanyi (The Romance of Three Kingdoms[17])*, with their boundless fighting skills and noble bonds of personal honour, would be further canonized within *wuxia* tales and films, while the motley crew of outlaws found in *Shuihu zhuan (The Water Margin[18]),* who rebelled against corrupt officials and chose to live on the fringes of

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[16] Notably, the estimable Han Dynasty historian Sima Qian, who between 104–91 BCE, wrote sympathetically of the *xia* in his *Si ji (Records of History)* (see Teo 2009, pp17–19).

[17] Attributed to Luo Guanzhong, written sometime during the 14th century

[18] Attributed to Shi Nai'an, with possible contributions from Luo Guanzhong, also in the 14th century

society, also became bound into the *wuxia* subject, helping to foster the idiosyncratic and anti-establishment underpinnings of the knight-errant hero.

Another influence can be found in the popular nineteenth century *gongan*[19] novels, which usually centered on swordplay heroes who served as detective figures (either official or unsanctioned), and who were moved by their inherent sense of justice to unravel mysteries, uncover conspiracies, and punish the guilty parties. It was also in the nineteenth century that the *xiayi*[20] style of fiction emerged, which emphasized a still more romantic view of martial escapades, often featuring fighting heroines (known as *xianü,*[21]) or oddly de-sexed effete male heroes[22]. These *xia* inhabited a world of magical possibilities, and were gifted with mystical martial arts disciplines that were amplified to superhuman levels, and which allowed them to strike at things at great distances, to leap tremendous heights, or even to fly. Also at this time, *shenguai* stories (tales of the supernatural, including ghosts, monsters, and deities) contributed to the make-up of the *wuxia* imaginary, lending it additional aspects of both the fantastic and the macabre. This tendency for the *wuxia* genre to retrospectively accumulate older genres into itself speaks to the "inherent historicity" and "inherent mutability" of genre (Neale 1990, 56), but also provides some insight into later permutations of the swordplay form, and its readiness to borrow or emulate characteristics of other genres, cultures, or media.

One of the most important generic conventions of the *wuxia* mode lies in the concept of the *jianghu*. Directly translated as 'rivers and lakes', the *jianghu* refers not to a concrete geographical space, but more metaphorically to the abstract social environment through which martial heroes move and interact with one another. As implied by the translation, it functions as an interconnected fringe composed of drifters, martial-artists, thieves, hermits, gamblers, and beggars, who move in hidden circles and who inhabit the "the complex of inns, highways and waterways, deserted temples, bandits' lairs, and stretches of wilderness at the geographic and

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[19] Stephen Teo supplies the translation of "public case" to describe the *gongan* detective style (Teo 2009, 20)

[20] Also from Teo, "chivalric righteousness" or "altruism" (Teo 2009, 18)

[21] The term *xianü* – meaning "female knight" – is also sometimes romanized as two separate words, as in the title of King Hu's film *Touch of Zen / Xia Nü* (1971). The form *xianü* will be used in this paper, excepting instances that directly reference Hu's film.

[22] Teo describes *xiayi* fiction as "a blend of action and romance, revolving around either female knight-errant figures or feminised or semi-feminised male heroes who proved irresistible to women" (Teo 2009, 21). The effete or 'feminized' male hero was a common romantic masculine ideal in Chinese culture, constructed along the model of the Confucian gentleman or the scholar. This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

moral margins of settled society" (Hamm 17). Within the *jianghu* exists the *wulin*, which translates literally as 'martial forest' (Teo 2009, 89). The *wulin* is often used as a corollary term to *jianghu,* but more accurately it relates specifically to the associations between martial artists, including their group ties, leadership, and relative standing amongst each other. In this sense the *wulin* is the field of *xia* that exists within the larger network of the *jianghu.* Both terms however may be used interchangeably to describe the 'world of martial arts' as it is found in the *wuxia* genre.

Although there is occasionally some crossover with representatives of civil authority (including constables, officials, nobles, or government spies), the *jianghu* is depicted as largely separate from normal society, shaped by its own internal laws, beliefs, and associations. Clan loyalties, obligation to one's master, and the honour bonds between the *xia* themselves are paramount. Here, a person's name carries special weight, attached to a strong performative identity. Denizens of the socio-political demimonde of the *jianghu* often identify each other based purely on reputation, as evinced by a unique weapon technique, exceptional skills, or a personal motif. This drives home the physicalized social capital of the *xia*, where one's sense of self effectively becomes distilled into their sword, their fighting style, or their idiosyncrasies. By this description, an obvious parallel may be drawn between the *jianghu* and the concept of the criminal underworld commonly attached to the gangster genre. Ng Ho referred to the *jianghu* of historical record when he outlined a rigid social stratum, ranging from legitimate officials, scholars, functionaries, and tradesmen, all the way down to common vagrants and criminals. This arrangement reinforces the historical China's strong focus on education and literacy as a passport to social status and an upper-class life, in direct opposition to physical and martial cultivation. For Ng, this indicates a "polarization of the mental and physical" that gives lie to the gentlemanly knights found in romantic *wuxia* literature (Ng 1996, 74). The *jianghu* of popular fiction and cinema, however, is mostly unconcerned with such logical and cultural inconsistencies. This realm is less a shadowy mirror reflection of the mundane world of history, than a colourful, historicized *refraction* of it, with its own inherent and conventionalized distortions.

In the emergent Shanghai film scene of the 1920s, the *wuxia* serial novels offered ideal material to stoke the commercial demands of the industry; with their emphasis on action and their prolonged, twisting narratives, they were rich in visual storytelling opportunities and

identifiable Chinese cultural flavour. At the same time, *wuxia* novels often carried an anti-traditionalist charge, with stories that depicted individualist young heroes acting out and pursuing adventures outside the confines of the family order. This tension between historical imagery and youthful spirit made for a dynamic combination. Filmmakers of the time were also drawing on a variety of influences, both local and foreign in nature. Chinese opera performances, swashbuckling adventure films with Douglas Fairbanks, period costume dramas, martial-arts displays, titillating erotic films, and *shenguai* ghost stories all contributed the development of what Stephen Teo suggests is the "schizophrenic" nature of the *wuxia* cinema (Teo 2009, 11), which blended a variety of cultural influences into a historicized image of an old China that never quite existed.

It was the especial incorporation of the mythological elements from the *shenguai* genre that lent the early *wuxia* films their spectacular appeal. Among the most famous of the early *wuxia* film serials was *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple / Huoshao Honglian si* which began in 1928, adapted from the 1922 serial novel *Jianghu qixia zhuan* (*Legend of the Strange Swordsman*) by Pingjiang Buxiaosheng. The use of early filmic special effects, such as animation drawn directly on the negatives, reverse photography, fast motion, and double exposures allowed filmmakers to depict the special powers of the *xia* described on the page. Heroes could routinely fly through the skies, turn invisible, or shoot laser-like "inner energy" from their palms, abilities that, as visualized through cinema, became major selling points for the films. This emphasis on flashy cinematic techniques in turn often overshadowed the more conventional physical displays of sword-fighting and authentic martial arts. At the same time, this new visual iconography provided by special effects could also find itself recycled into the descriptive language of the *wuxia* stories in print form. In one sense, this underscores the inherent modernity of the *wuxia pian*, despite its reliance on historical models and mythic imaginaries. According to Teo, the endurance of the genre derives from how it "exhibits a natural correlation with the film medium – that through the medium of film, it makes the impossible real" (ibid. 11). In this dynamic, it becomes important to recognize the relationship between the literary and cinematic *wuxia* as being largely coeval and intertwined, with each exerting reciprocal pressures upon each other.[23] Unfurling through the new medium of film, the

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[23] This process of cross-pollination is discussed at length in Liu Damu's article "From Chivalric Fiction to Martial Arts Film" (from *A Study of the Hong Kong Swordplay Film*). By way of example Liu observes how "Jin Yong's

heroic swordplay genre developed a stylistic élan in an intertextual feedback loop between the technological means of its expression, and the interjections of its contemporary literary counterpart.

In a way, the popularity of the supernatural *wuxia shenguai* contributed to its own downfall, at least in the Mainland markets of the early twentieth century. The Kuomintang government and the reformist thinkers of the May Fourth movement took a dim view of the swordplay-fantasy films produced in Shanghai in the twenties and thirties. The genre's often essential, unitary Chineseness and the social activism of the *xia* code notwithstanding, the feudal values, individualism, and escapism promoted in the *wuxia* films were worrying to Nationalist thinkers[24]. Social realism was the preferred mode to inspire collective change, while the *wuxia pian* was seen as "an abstraction from reality which also served to cast a light on social reality" (Teo 2009, 9), a philosophically incompatible concept for the more conservative intellectuals at that time. The combined culturalism and iconoclasm of the mystical swordplay genre formed an awkward contrast, one that uncomfortably mirrored the inherent contradictions in the Nationalists' need to foster a collective and historical Chinese identity, and the May Fourth movement's modernizing agenda that rejected tradition and 'old-fashioned' thinking. The *wuxia* was seen to betray "a basic inconsistency between modernity and tradition, between the outlaw-rebel status of its heroes and the conformist tendencies of the old world Confucian societies they were meant to protect" (ibid. 10).

As a result of these tensions, the screening of *wuxia shenguai* films was banned on the Mainland by the KMT, at first unofficially in 1931, and then more proscriptively in 1934. This decision was taken under the reasoning that the films promoted superstition, loose morals, feudalism, and even that they fostered low standards in Chinese filmmaking. The real motivation behind this ban was more likely to keep a firm hand on the many Leftist professionals working in

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imagery and literary style contain the equivalents to cinematic devices, such as long, medium and close shots, and sound effects in its articulation of character and action. Although Jin Yong's work lends itself easily to cinematic adaptation, the novels are nevertheless filled with detail and develop along non-linear narrative lines" (Liu Damu 57).

[24] The *wuxia* genre was not the only popular fiction to earn the ire of the May Fourth intellectuals at this time. Period melodramas about romantic courtships and tragic lovers, themselves modeled after classical Chinese romances, constituted what came to be known as the *yuanyang hudie* ('Butterfly and Mandarin Duck') genre. Like *wuxia* fiction, Butterfly and Mandarin Duck stories were also widely circulated, spilling over from print media to popular film. This alarmed the Nationalist critics of the time, who tended to treat both genres as extensions of the same dangerously escapist and regressive tendencies in popular entertainment. Consequently, *wuxia* and 'Butterfly' fiction were often seen as closely related low-brow genres, and unfriendly to the rhetoric of a modernizing Mainland. For more on this relationship, and the KMT's objections, see Teo 2009, pp22–41.

the Shanghai film industry at that time, but the effect was stifling on the local industry (Teo 2009, 44). Mainland filmmakers were forced to rely instead upon Hong Kong and diasporic audiences to support their product, and began to follow the markets south. The outbreak of war with Japan in 1937 only accelerated this migration, and by the close of the Pacific War, the Chinese film industry had set down new roots in Hong Kong.

The immediate postwar years witnessed a boom in the Hong Kong economy and an increase in cinematic production, facilitated by the surge in émigré film workers and audiences from the North. While the big Mandarin studios mounted ostentatious full-colour operas and historical dramas, the smaller Cantonese studios were among the first to revive the swordplay genre. Despite low budgets and aging effects, old-fashioned black & white Cantonese *wuxia shenguai* productions were cranked out for hungry local audiences[25]. Around the same time, the Cantonese cinema also ushered in a new southern-styled variation on the martial-arts form: the kung fu picture. As exemplified by the long-running series of films featuring the famed Cantonese folk hero Wong Fei-Hung, the kung fu film was initially seen as a sub-genre of the *wuxia* form. Set in the late Qing Dynasty, these stories focused on wise civic-minded martial-arts masters who used their hand-to-hand skills to resolve conflicts in their communities, evoking the upright *xia* of the older traditions. However, the kung fu genre gradually became identified as a mode of martial-arts fiction unto itself, with the primary delineation resting on its claim of presenting realistic authentic fighting skills (or "real kung fu") and athleticism, as performed by trained martial-artists. In actuality, many of the players were Chinese opera performers or acrobats (colloquially known as *longhu wushi* or "Dragon-Tiger Martial Masters") and the "realistic" fighting onscreen was often captured in stagey long takes, after the operatic mode (Teo 2009, 72). Even so, this performative aspect created a specialized distance from the special-effects trickery and magical antics seen in the *wuxia shenguai* films.

During the period of re-establishment through the 1950s, both the *wuxia* and kung fu films exhibited a conservative ethos, wherein "the Confucian code was pervasive" (Lau 4). The importance of filial bonds, classical ethical cultivation, and the master-student relationship were omnipresent. On the literary scene, however, things were about to change. While the adventures

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[25] Despite its mainly local appeal of the Cantonese martial arts film, overseas investment from Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, the USA, and other countries contributed to the upswing in production during the 1950s. Interestingly, as many as half of these films were paid for by the Nan Yang Film Company, which was a Shaw-owned subsidiary before it was restructured into Shaw Brothers (HK) by Run Run Shaw in 1957 (Yu 101).

of Wong Fei-Hung were served up in Cantonese theatres again and again through the fifties, a new generation of southern-based *wuxia* writers were gaining popularity through serialized stories published in Hong Kong newspapers. Led by luminaries like Jin Yong, Gu Long, and Liang Yusheng, the New School of *wuxia* literature putatively represented a stylistic departure from the traditional roots of the more northerly Shanghai school. These authors placed a stronger emphasis on winding, narratively-complicated plots, psychological realism, and the cultivation of the individual over the group (through the material acquisition of riches or supreme weapons, the pursuit of fame and glory, or simply the personal improvement of the self through martial techniques). Rather than being portrayed as semi-divine beings steeped in Confucian values, the characters of the New School were often portrayed as more rebellious, with internal conflicts, human weaknesses, worldly desires, and tragic romantic entanglements. In the books of these new authors, particularly Jin Yong, "the distinction between good and evil is blurred; the heroes exhibit a more eclectic style of martial arts derived from several *sifu* and in general there is a de-emphasis on loyalty towards any one particular school" (Liu Damu 57). The modernity of the form was asserted by a sense of cultural and geographic hybridity, including elements of local Cantonese vernacular and borrowed influences from Western books and movies (Teo 2009, 23). Whether these traits truly constituted a qualitative break with earlier forms of *wuxia* writing may be debatable,[26] but the most common perception of the New School was that it captured a younger, edgier spirit that was less traditional and more worldly. The explosive popularity of these stories brought fresh vitality to martial arts fiction, and seemingly redeemed the literary credibility of the *wuxia* form after the years of proscription and critical flogging it had suffered at the hands of intellectuals since the days of the May Fourth movement.

Cantonese filmmakers were quick to seize upon the trend, stepping up their production of swordplay films and remaking old standards like *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* in 1963 or adapting recent newspaper series into film serials such as *Buddha's Palm / Rulai shenzhang* (1964). Despite the more contemporary edge of the new *wuxia* novelists, the Cantonese swordplay serials of the early 1960s still held tight to the spirit of the *xiayi* and *shenguai* classics, infusing the stories with pronounced fantasy elements and trading heavily on cliffhanger

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[26] Stephen Teo interrogates the assumption that the Old and New Schools represented so dramatic a shift, noting how difficult it is to assign exclusive tendencies to one and not the other. Rather, he suggests that it is more productive to view these movements in continuity with one another, contributing to an overall developmental process (Teo 2009, 23).

structures and updated variations on the old magical special-effects tropes. While not always strongly reflecting the thematic tone of the New School literature, the Cantonese *wuxia* productions still sustained themselves as a vital (if not quite respectable) genre in the shadow of the larger Mandarin studios. Relying on photographic tricks, garish make-up effects, wire-gags, and lots of hand-painted animation, the Cantonese *wuxia* serials provided light escapism. They often portrayed an array of imaginary landscapes, fanciful powers, and mythical beasts, all with a cartoonish degree of exaggeration that was heavily offset by their shallow sets and shoddy production values. Stephen Teo located the appeal of these films in an unapologetic, childlike sense of abandon, "conceptual fantasy worlds, abstract works of art that are to be enjoyed as naïve fairy tales with its [sic] own internal logic of reality" (Teo 2009, 90). When not deferring to animated magic effects, the fight staging and physical action in these films followed a theatrical "symbolic mode" that emphasized large artificial gestures and stagey acrobatics (ibid. 91). Romance, revenge, and Confucian concepts of family duty and maintaining a moral order all abounded in these films. The typical plots featured convoluted quest narratives about earnest young heroes accruing mystical items or special skills, all while pursuing their filial obligations to their schools or to their flamboyant (and usually supernatural) mentors.

Shaw Brothers and New Style Wuxia

Although still successful with local audiences, the Cantonese postwar *wuxia* cycle never quite managed to shed the stigma of being cheaply-produced populist fare. This characterization was further reinforced by competitive developments from the larger studios like Shaw Brothers and Cathay, which both began to develop high-budget *wuxia* productions in Mandarin. Noting the changes in the air, and likely recognizing the aging audiences (and stars) of their nostalgia-based musicals and melodramas, Shaw Brothers initiated a new cultural venture beginning in 1965. In the pages of their promotional journal *Southern Screen / Nanguo Dianying*[27] the Shaws dove headlong into the swordplay genre by announcing the commencement of their 'colour *wuxia* century,'[28] a new line of prestige action productions inspired by the success of the New

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[27] *Southern Screen/Nanguo Dianying* , no 92, October 1965 (Law 129)

[28] This is based on Law Kar's translation from the Chinese term '*wuxia xin shiji'* (Law, 132). Stephen Teo supplies a slightly different translation as the 'new *wuxia* century'. I am inclined to follow Law's version due to its emphasis on colour; the new Shaw swordplay films were certainly colourful, which made a pointed contrast with the black-and-white Cantonese films that had come before. The English-language copy from *Southern Screen* simply dubbed

School *wuxia* movement. Decrying both the limiting "artifice and staginess" of the "northern school" films, and the lack of realism in the *xiayi-shenguai* mode, the wording was unequivocal; "Modern audiences demand real action!" it declared (Teo 2009, 91).

This move by Shaw Brothers was the inceptional basis for what would become the New Style[29] *wuxia pian,* initiating a self-conscious (but enduring) break with the earlier forms of swordplay cinema, one that tacitly corresponded with the Old School/New School generational shift in *wuxia* literature. Aimed mostly at youth audiences, the tone became darker, more serious, and less concerned with evoking a pleasant cultural reverie than striking a chord with modern teens through shock value. With the Cantonese *wuxia* films' strong focus on magic and fantasy, the New Style differentiated itself along the axiom that "realistic violence was the antidote to fantasy" (Teo 2009, 92). For a time, Cantonese filmmakers also attempted to follow the new Mandarin styles, producing colour films with edgier themes and larger budgets, making the New Style *wuxia pian* an industry-wide phenomenon (ibid.). However, the Cantonese market had taken a heavy hit with the arrival of public on-air television and went into rapid decline, leaving the swordplay genre firmly in Mandarin hands.

Despite all the grand declarations, the first films released under the banner of the 'colour *wuxia* century' managed only a tenuous form of novelty, and were not exceptionally successful. Although they delivered on the promise of the Shaws' impressive production facilities, the new formula was not as much of a departure from the previous *wuxia* films as billed. The initial releases in 1965 were *Temple of the Red Lotus / Jianghu Qixia* and *The Twin Swords / Yuanyang Jian Xia*, two installments based once again on the old Shanghai-school standard *Legend of the Strange Swordsman.* The fantasy elements were downplayed; magical powers and special-effects were replaced with a focus on faster montage, less-mannered physical action, and clanging

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the new movement as the Shaws' "Action Era," which to me feels far less evocative, and fails to capture the specificity of the term *'wuxia'*.

[29] The terminology 'New Style' and 'New School' are largely interchangeable in the scholarship on the *wuxia* genre. This likely arises from slight differences in translation. However, for the purposes of clarity, in this study I will reserve the term 'New School' for the 'second generation' of *wuxia* authors and their works. Hereafter, the term *'New Style wuxia*' will be used to refer to the broad new phase of swordplay cinema initiated in the 1960s. It is useful to create this distinction, since the source stories for the New Style films were often not drawn from New School literary texts, and the salient characteristics between the new literature and the new films were not always shared.

Further complicating this discussion, it seems that no subsequent categorizations have become widely accepted. The *wuxia pian* produced since the Shaw 'Colour *Wuxia* Century' tends to be loosely collected under the New Style, despite some obvious additional periodizations suggested by Chor Yuen's Gu Long cycle of the late 1970s, the 'Hong Kong New Wave' filmmakers of the 1980s-1990s, the transnational and stylistic turn initiated by *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), and the current crop of effects-driven Mainland co-productions.

weapons. However, in terms of narrative style, there was little here that audiences had not seen before. In fact, as observed by Law Kar, many of the aspects from the original source novel that might have been considered anti-traditional in its time – such as the rebellious nature of the young protagonists, the villainy of the chief patriarchal figure, and the critique of religious institutions – were either toned down or changed outright. This Law attributed to the fundamentally conservative ethos that had guided Shaw Brothers and Run Run Shaw through their postwar cycle of 'China Forever' nostalgia films. Although sensitive to the changing market and the different tastes of the post-war generation, Shaw was reluctant to break fully with tradition. Shaw "believed that too strong a portrayal of youth rebelliousness would only alienate the adult members of the family" (Law 135).

For the first few years of the 'colour *wuxia* century' the majority of the films still retained the trappings of the *xiayi* tradition. Metaphysical feats were toned down, but swordsmen still demonstrated gimmicky abilities, like telekinesis or the power to walk on walls. Across the board, there was a strong focus on young female knights in key roles, with subordinate young male heroes as romantic interests or sidekicks. When men did take the lead, it was often as scholar-knights, like the quintessential Confucian gentleman Wen Suchen,[30] as seen in *Knight of Knights / Wen Su Chen* (Sit Kwan: 1966), or as bumbling fops who secretly fought injustice under a mask, like the doctor-hero Zhuang Bai in *That Man in Chang An / Wang Min Daai Hap* (Yan Jun: 1966). A sense of civic duty and patriotism also featured highly among the *xia,* who frequently acted in affairs of the state, to root out corrupt officials or to thwart threats to the nation. Although many of these stories also featured salacious plots involving degraded religious institutions, like temples operated by false priests or perverted monks, it should be noted that these institutions were typically Buddhist or Taoist, sects historically reviled by Confucianism for their anti-society, anti-collective philosophies. Above all, in these films the roles of the clan and the master-student relationship were still central, a hierarchy based on filial obligations and a respect for one's wiser elders. In other words, the New Style *wuxia* in this first phase was hardly a revolutionary genre turn.

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[30] The famous figure of Wen Suchen was a travelling scholar and doctor, but he was most renowned for his beauty and his romantic adventures. The character originated in the eighteenth century novel *Yesou puyan* (*'The Humble Words of an Old Rustic'*) by Xia Jingqu. Already a variation on the *xiayi* chivalric type, the film *Knight of Knights* invests Wen's character with stronger martial qualities while still maintaining his effete posture (Teo 2009, 95).

The real signature productions of the 'colour *wuxia* century' would come in the following years, with King Hu's *Come Drink with Me / Da Zui Xia* (1966) and Chang Cheh's *The One-Armed Swordsman / Dubei Dao* (1967). Both films were immediate critical and box-office hits, firmly establishing the new direction for the studio and the industry. As directors, Hu and Chang possessed very different and highly personalized styles, but both may be seen as crucial to the development of a new paradigm. Formally and thematically, their two films exhibited a modern, international flavour that drew upon the influences of Japanese *chanbara* (swordfighting) movies, Hollywood action genres, and even the experimentalism of the French New Wave. At the same time, Hu and Chang both anchored themselves in a reformulation of the 'dream of China,' weaving between the 'realistic' spectacle offered by the Shaw's technical and financial resources, invocations of Chinese artistic traditions, and a revisionist fantasy of China's past. While King Hu left Shaw Brothers immediately after *Come Drink with Me* in pursuit of more creative freedom, Chang Cheh remained with the studio and was rewarded with a new position and a higher degree of autonomy. The creative direction of the 'colour *wuxia* century' was entrusted to Chang, positioning him as the primary architect of the new *wuxia* genre at this nascent stage.[31]

The stated emphasis of Shaw's 'colour *wuxia* century' was premised on modernity as expressed through "realism," which was itself expressed primarily through violence. The new, harder, more corporeal edge to the action was evident from the outset; weapons had weight, and combat had harsh consequences. The opening scenes of *Knight of Knights* (1966) for example, involve a prolonged battle sequence showcasing explicit dismemberments, cranial trauma, and buckets of blood. The finale of Chang Cheh's film *The Assassin / Da Cike* (1967) sees the surrounded hero (played by Wang Yu) eviscerating himself and then disfiguring his own face, so as not to be recognized. Even King Hu, whose works typically favoured elegance over brutality, opened *Come Drink with Me* with an extraordinarily vicious ambush. As well, scenes of physical torture became common (and increasingly imaginative) in the new *wuxia,* even in films like *The Sword and the Lute / Qin Jian En Chou* (1967), which was the third chapter in the *Temple of the Red Lotus* trilogy. Sometimes these scenes of 'martyrdom' carried a transcendental meaning, as in Wang Yu's literal apotheosis after death in Chang Cheh's *Trail of the Broken Blade / Duan Chang Jian* (1967), where his transparent spirit is seen rising from his corpse and floating to the

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[31] The aesthetics and stylistic legacies of both Chang Cheh and King Hu, especially as they relate to Chor Yuen's later *wuxia* films, are discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

heavens. More generally though, these scenes of disempowerment and destruction of the body served as just another way to affirm realism through corporal materiality.

This is not to say that the *xia* lost all of their fantastic cache; within the context of the martial-arts imaginary, human ability was always subject to a considerable degree of romantic latitude, and these new wandering knights still retained elements of esoteric swordplay and borderline supernatural powers within their new 'realist' register. Preternatural agility, wire-assisted leaping, improbable weapon techniques, extraordinary physical strength, and the ability to endure staggering degrees of bodily injury were all commonly-encountered traits. In large part, however, the depiction of these powers was not deployed to the end of elevating the *xia* to the level of mystic quasi-divinity, but rather to return the hero to the domain of visceral humanity through an increasingly more sensational mode of physicalized (if still stylized) violence, expressed in dirt, blood, sweat, and gore.

This was mirrored in the social and psychological outlook of the characters as well, by dragging the swordsman figure away from the ideals of Confucian tradition, and down to the realm of relatable wants, weaknesses, and foibles. The goals of the heroes became more personal and less determined by social propriety or civic duty. Love, jealousy, or old personal grudges might serve as the pretext for vengeance, no longer sanctioned by feudal codes and orthodoxy. With Hong Kong in the early stages of an economic transformation, and corruption scandals regularly making the news, greed as a motive theme became prevalent. Films sometimes centered on 'who's got the gold?' scenarios, wherein various interested parties schemed to obtain a treasure, such as in *Black Tavern / Hei dian* (Yip Wing Cho: 1972). The pursuit of personal advancement, material wealth, self-gratification, or other morally ambivalent goals demonstrated a critical split with the family-oriented conservatism of traditional values. This was concurrent with similar trends of revisionism seen in the 1960s global film culture, especially in films from Hollywood; spies, heists, treasure hunts, criminality, and a counter-culture macho individualism were common subjects imported into the *wuxia pian* by the New Style directors.

This is not to imply that the genre was entirely morally ambivalent, but rather that the traditional reference points for morality and status had begun to shift, favouring a more rebellious, individualistic, or anti-heroic ideal. The knight-errant was still the focus of identification for audiences, often as a disillusioned player in a changed world where authority was always in doubt. In these circumstances, a student might defy their master or parent out of a

sense of justice, but just as often, a patriarch might harm his child, or betray his students for selfish reasons. A common theme was the self-destructive drive to seek fame and become known as the 'best in the world of martial arts,' which invariably would lead heroes to suffering and regret. Pan Lei's introspective *wuxia* films like *The Fastest Sword / Tin Gwong Dai Yat Kim* (1968) and *The Sword / Jian* (1971) were both early examples that used the ambition of the *xia* to deconstruct the entire thesis of the martial arts hero, valuing inaction over action, and offering a transcendent message. These ideas would be echoed somewhat in later *wuxia* films by Chor Yuen like *Magic Blade / Tianya Minyue Dao* (1976) and *Jade Tiger / Baiyu Laohu* (1977), though with a stronger dose of psychological stylization. However, it must be said that, on the whole, the New Style *wuxia* of the late sixties was more rebellious than meditative, expressing a rough vein of machismo that exalted the individual, and validated his angst through violence.

The iconography of the *wuxia pian* began to change as well, to suit the drift from tradition to a sense of modernity. The peripatetic, immaculate, and fine-featured knights-errant of the *xiayi* tradition, who roamed mist-shrouded mountain passes in search of wrongs to right, gave way instead to grubby, self-absorbed drifters, who were more akin to Toshiro Mifune's masterless samurai in *Yojimbo* (Kurosawa: 1961). In fact, elements of both the Japanese *chanbara* cinema and the Italian revisionist westerns of Sergio Leone were prominently employed by New Style *wuxia* directors. In this new *jianghu*, range-riding desperados terrorized homesteaders, and sword-showdowns erupted in dusty roadside saloons. Lo Wei's twisty, betrayal-laden *Death Valley / Duanhun Gu* (1968) features both a knight who wears twin short-swords in chest holsters like a pair of six-guns, and an inn where men play Chinese dominoes like hands of poker. Yue Feng's films *The Magnificent Swordsman / Guai Xia* (1968) and *Bells of Death / Duo Hun Ling* (1968) both center on laconic hobo-like heroes, peasants with no school, who pursue personal vendettas against bandit gangs who murdered their families. With their wide-brimmed hats, tattered robes, and hidden sword-canes, these figures resemble nothing less than Clint Eastwood's 'Man with No Name' character fused with Zatoichi, the blind swordsman.[32]

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[32] Similarities with the Daiei Film *Zatoichi* swordplay series (featuring Shintaro Katsu as a wandering blind masseur/sword-master) were not coincidental. The *Zatoichi* movies were extremely popular with Hong Kong audiences, and Shaw Brothers served as the regional distributor for the series. Run Run Shaw was known to hold special screenings of Japanese *chanbara* films for his directors, in order to better analyze and assimilate their styles into Shaw *wuxia* films (Bordwell 2011, 130).

Rather than bearing the privileges of their outsider status and *jianghu* clan affiliations, the heroes of some films lived a meager commoner's existence, like the orphaned, one-armed woodcutter played by Wang Yu in *One-Armed Swordsman*, or the drunken, singing beggar in *Come Drink with Me*. A swordsman might also turn to murder-for-hire, a profane commodification of his martial virtue. The figure of the paid assassin-as-protagonist became a common fixture in the New Style films. The meandering *xia* began to connote less a noble way of life, and more a dubious profession. However, at the same time, these loners often exuded an integrity that set them apart from the more decorous *xia* who participated in the affairs of the martial society. Even within the *jianghu,* class divides persisted, and all too often the propriety of upper-class martial-artists masked petty or sinister motives.

The new focus in the martial arts cinema on a masculine rugged individualism was well-received by youth audiences in Hong Kong and in the diaspora. It constituted a form of both engagement with and rejection of the romantic dreams of their elders. Lin Nien-tung remarked, writing in 1981, that "the shifting of emphasis from magic to realism, from flawless heroes to heroes with imperfections can be interpreted as symbiotic to the present generation's cynicism towards traditional values" (Lin 13). Whatever inherently conservative impulses might have resided in Run Run Shaw, he was happy to embrace the enormous commercial success of the New Style *wuxia pian*. After all, this variation of the 'dream of China' was still in communion with the abstract nationalism of the Shaws' 'China Forever' films. As observed by Teo:

> If the effete romantic hero of the previous decades had been connected with the subordinate status of a colonised and dominated culture, the action hero may well be a cultural registration of an increasing sense of self-confidence expressed in the same mythical and historic narrative forms that had provided the generic framework for films such as Li Hanxiang's *The Love Eterne / Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai* (1963). The *wuxia* or martial hero emerged in the mid-60s, when China was asserting its newly acquired superpower status and Hong Kong was becoming an 'Asian tiger'…
> (Teo 1997, 97)

Through their engagement with the past, the New Style *wuxia* films remained anchored to a core culturalist identification with China, sublimating modern and Western influences into a compliant concoction of a strong China that 'always was'.

The nationalistic tenor of this imaginary past is inseparable from the *wuxia* genre, whether expressing conservative or anti-traditional sentiments. The early, gestational films of the Mandarin *wuxia pian* betray a preoccupation with political intrigues, with *xia* stepping in to protect the status quo from internal rebellions, or by exposing corrupt ministers. Sometimes they acted directly on orders from Imperial powers, but most often, the threats invoked were foreign in nature, compelling righteous knights-errant to do their duty as Chinese patriots. While the themes of individualism and personal conflict were still essential to the genre shift of the 1960s, the appeal to an overarching Chinese pride remained a powerful undercurrent in the *wuxia pian*. Historical campaigns against the Japanese or the Tartars became the common touchstones for allegories of ethnic solidarity. King Hu's *The Valiant Ones / Zhong Lie Tu* (1975) features a band of heroes who assemble to stave off a plague of Japanese incursions, forgoing entirely the play of interpersonal drama in favour of presenting a stoic, unwavering Chinese unity against foreign aggression. Chang Cheh's *The Heroic Ones / Shisan Taibao* (1970) meshes personal themes of jealousy, betrayal, and filial discord into a jingoist tale about a clan of martial artists who sacrifice themselves in the defense of their border outpost against the encroaching Tartars.[33]

Cheng Gang's *Twelve Gold Medallions / Shi' Er Jinpai* (1970) recounts a race against time to prevent secret orders from a treacherous prime minister from reaching China's western front and enabling the victory of the Tartar hordes. The heroes succeed against this internal plot at great personal cost; the dissolution of a martial family when the greedy patriarch's loyalty is bought by the collaborators. This turns father against daughter, and master against student, in a prolonged and bloody final showdown, illustrating the elevation of the nation over traditional Confucian family hierarchies. The film ends on a triumphant but somber note, explaining in a post-script that a Tartar messenger still slipped through, and the heroes' efforts were in vain. Historically, of course, the Tartars would succeed in conquering China, and ruled for centuries as the Yuan Dynasty. The closing on-screen text reads: "thus ended this officially unrecorded struggle for national survival." The wording here presents the story as a supplement to history, while being in fact more of a re-writing, in mythologizing terms. The ending of the film simultaneously affirms the *xia*'s duty as an individual to the ethnic nation-state above all other

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[33]   In typical Chang Cheh style, *The Heroic Ones* was in many ways a masculinized variation on the theme of the famous story of the lady generals of Yang, about the women of a noble martial arts family going to war against the Tartars after the clan's men were defeated in battle. The Shaws adapted the original story to screen two years later as Cheng Gang's *14 Amazons / Shisi Nü Yinghao* (1972).

obligations, while also highlighting the *wuxia* genre's tendency to insert itself into China's distant historical events (even and perhaps *especially* its defeats) in order to provide an empowering narrative of Chinese patriotic effort. Tony Rayns observed the genre's apparent blindness to history:

> The phantasy is fundamentally nationalist . . . The sword in the hand of the hero(ine) becomes an agent of phantasy: it sparks into being a vision of a 'China' as imaginary as the 'japan' of Barthes' *L'Empire des signes*. To be effective, this phantasy must be encoded as springing from the past, real or imagined. 'Memory' is rhymed with wish-fulfillment (Rayns 155).

Going back to the original *wuxia* novels of the early twentieth century, we may see that the swordplay genre has always expressed mixed messages; on the one hand, it provided a reinforcement of Chinese ideals and pride through an 'ancient' warrior tradition and an affirmation of the righteousness of the past; on the other hand, it also encouraged rebellion against institutions and tradition. As such, the *wuxia* became emblematic of a Chinese personal and national sense of dignity, expressing their power (in literary terms) over both foreign and internal hegemony. The *xia* represents a subversive alternative to repressive social orders and a balancing force in times of chaos. In this way, the *wuxia* genre may be seen as an apolitical form of asserting Chinese identity in populist terms, by way of a historicized model that may not be accurate, but transfers a sense of legitimacy.

The transformation of the ideals of the *wuxia* genre present a "secularization of the hero" (Lin 13) that shifted the focus away from metaphysical fantasy and idealizations, and instead towards a more individualistic and pragmatic depiction in the New Style swordplay. It is through these shifts within the *wuxia* genre that the kung fu genre was also reinvented in modern form, departing from the 1950s Wong Fei-Hong model and its didactic traditionalism. In this way we can see the kung fu and *wuxia* film styles as interrelated and reflecting similar trends, but still forked along different paths. Although the Mandarin *wuxia pian* provided a desacralized version of the heroic chivalry mythology, this must be viewed in relative terms. Through its historical dislocations (the North of 'long ago'), its presentation of an abstracted alternate society (the *jianghu*), and its persistent invocations of a superstitious imaginary, the *wuxia pian* still carried a charge of culturalist fantasy that tied it to a conception of old China as the true source of culture. The Mandarin cinema's focus on an essentialized historical 'oriental flavour' created a break from

the more immediate Hong Kong subject. As the spirit of localization in Hong Kong progressed, this gap would only widen, leading to a gradual fading of the swordplay film's popularity towards the mid-1970s, and the rise of the kung fu cinema in its place.

Wuxia and Kung Fu: Genre as Identity

The traditional martial arts have long carried strong associations with Chinese culture and its regionalized specificities. Accordingly, the martial-arts film subject has long spoken to notions of ethnic self-identity in the Hong Kong film industry. The two major streams that have contributed differently to this process are the *wuxia* film and the kung fu film. Although the martial chivalry form in literature and film has spawned iterations throughout the Chinese diaspora, as a general rule, the *wuxia* remains firmly rooted in the history and flavour of northern Chinese culture. The swordplay film proposes only an ostensibly historical setting; while often set in an indistinct past, stories may also take place against the political climate of a specific dynasty, or embed historical figures alongside imaginary ones. In this sense, the *wuxia* may be better understood as a *historicizing* genre, which transmutes fantasy into history, or vice-versa, according to the ideological requirements of the storyteller. Through vague pre-modern settings, *wuxia* stories offer a China that is a faraway land, mapped less by concrete geography than by a networked community of shifting clan loyalties, and the paths traveled by heroic knights-errant who use their extraordinary (and often supernatural) powers for the common good. Rather than historical accuracy, this world relies upon the fixity of identifiable folkloric landscapes and cultural architecture, steeped in those Mainland elements viewed as most essentially Chinese; Confucian and Taoist philosophy, traditional art forms like painting and poetry, filial piety, feudal social orders, and an overarching reverence for the past. Even as these values experience shifts in importance through later movements in *wuxia* literature and film, they remain as entrenched points of departure for the genre.

By contrast, the modality of the modern kung fu film that emerged in the 1970s is usually characterized as an authentically 'Hong Kong' creation. Drawing on some of the iconography of the *wuxia pian*, the kung fu genre is instead focused on a more recent, more localized (and ultimately, more Cantonese) conception of past. Rather than emphasizing the *xia* as a privileged outsider, who wields the sign of his status (the sword) in defense of social order and the common folk, the kung fu film instead depicts the commoner who forges his most intrinsic possession and

form of capital – his physical body, his hands and his feet – into the tools of his own emancipation and empowerment. Importantly, this is versed as *his* empowerment; the kung fu genre is a pointedly masculine affair, a restoration of male value through acts of defiance, and a physicality tempered by adversity. The kung fu genre is about work and process, a corporal discipline rather than an ethical one. It conventionally focuses on scenes of physical training, and the 'building up' of muscles and skills in a concrete and realist paradigm. The hero of the kung fu movie must work, suffer, and fight for everything he has, or hopes to achieve. Akbar Abbas places this in context with the supposed political neutrality of Hong Kong films:

> It is not that the kung fu film is ever a direct critique of colonialism, rather, that the ethos of (mainly) male heroism and personal prowess so central to the genre has to define itself in relation to *what is felt to be poss*ible in a changing colonial situation. In defining heroism, it defines by implication the colonial situation itself (Abbas 29).

Hence, this leads to a common critical reading of the kung fu genre in anti-colonial terms, expressing fierce, virile, working-class rebellion in the face of (usually foreign) institutional authority and subjugation. Popularized on the global stage by the naked, chiseled torso of Bruce Lee, the kung fu film found an enduring icon and proud signifier of Hong Kong's hybrid (and therefore distinctly modern) local character, a permeable but assertive identity which spoke across geopolitical and cultural borders.

Conversely, the knight-errant of *wuxia* does not 'work'. The *xia* typically arrives in a story fully-formed and invested with special abilities, integrated into a society that confers a regimented status, and rarely addresses bothersome questions of material sustenance. This indicates a critical remove between these two different martial-arts genres; kung fu films can be seen to represent the vitality of Hong Kong identity, expressed in masculine terms, emerging from colonial submission, and therefore sustaining a sense of contemporality and progress. The *wuxia pian* represents the ethnic fantasy of China; romantic, mysterious, and locked into a perpetual state of past-ness and historicized spectacle. Chen Mo described the *wuxia* setting as "the last dream the people had of their country before the advance of modern civilization in China" (Chen Mo 38). It envisions a China that does not need emancipation, but instead exists at its mythic height, unchallenged by foreign political powers or the necessities of industrial reformation. It is a romance of the past where both human achievement (through fantastical magic powers) and Chinese cultural centrality are at a pinnacle. This China can only be a dream,

a distilled essence of a vanished world, maintained through fantasy and neatly obviating the history of the past two hundred years. As observed by John Hamm, nostalgia "represents not a seamless continuity with the past, but an evocation of the past from a position fundamentally altered in some respect" (Hamm 21). In the swordplay genre, we see a wishful self-exoticizing nativism, an excavation of the past in the search for a trans-historical origin that feels simultaneously like an authentic object, and yet also comfortingly, affirmatively mythic.

Herein lay the twining roots of orientalism and nationalism in the *wuxia* genre. As a recovery of an ethnic Chinese sense of pride, it serves as a rewriting of history in militant, unitary terms. Taken at face value, this historicism subsumes 'lesser values' of Chineseness, like the Hong Kong colonial specificity, into a homogenizing national fiction. At the same time, due to the *wuxia* film's tendency to invoke abstractions, cartoonish cultural essentialisms, and self-exoticizing aesthetics, it can also be taken as a subversion of such a totalizing Chinese identity, one that turns China into an fetishistic object that can be examined from the outside, either by diasporic Chinese, or by foreign film audiences. As such, the *wuxia* swordplay film may be seen – variably or simultaneously – as an expression of a heartfelt sense of nostalgic attachment, as an abstracted ethno-nationalist longing for a severed cultural pride, and as a detached and stylized distortion of the homeland that plays upon the most sensational and exotic tropes for its appeal.

In this sense, it can be said that both kung fu and *wuxia* as film genres reflect a recentralizing of Chinese culture in the hands of Hong Kong filmmakers, variably exalting the virility and self-defining power of a local, emerging, modernizing culture, or taking up the role of representing a 'dream of China' in removed, archaic, and legendary terms, as if history had effectively ended before the foundation of the Qing Dynasty and spared China the interceding years of subjugation to oppressive powers (foreign and otherwise).

It is tempting to allow the historiography of the Chinese martial arts cinema to fall into a teleological narrative of development, wherein the New Style swordplay film flares to life during the late 1960s, but is quickly buried by the new craze for bare-fisted combat in the southern style. At the outset of the 1970s, the mystique of kung fu and the glistening image of Bruce Lee were both powerful signifiers of Hong Kong's shift to a modern, local identity, one that wouldn't be held back by tradition or held down by its deference to Western authority. At the same time, Shaw Brothers was forced to contend with another local development: the return of a rejuvenated Cantonese cinema, which the Shaws had initiated themselves with Chor Yuen's *House of 72*

Tenants / Qishi'erjia Fanke (1973).[34] In addition to the kung fu films, the 'dream of China' was also competing with the growing popularity of a new 'Cantonese burlesque' style of entertainment that comprised tales of urban corruption with slapstick vernacular comedy and sexy exploitation (and often all three in the same movie). In this context, the archaic China presented in the *wuxia* genre may have felt queerly out-of-step. Stephen Teo has suggested that Jimmy Wang Yu, who arguably initiated the reign of the kung fu movie with *The Chinese Boxer* in 1970,[35] went on to eulogize the *wuxia* film as early as 1973 with his *Beach of the War Gods (Zhan Shen Tan)* (Teo 1997, 108). In consideration of the large volume of swordplay films still made throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, we may say that the *wuxia pian* did *not* disappear entirely, but rather simply waned for a short time before flourishing again, and with new spirit. Even as competing studios like Golden Harvest delivered up ample helpings of Cantonese capers and kung fu, the swordplay genre at Shaw Brothers kicked off a new phase, initiated by Chor Yuen and his cycle of *wuxia* films based on the writings of Gu Long. This provided a shift in tone and an injection of stylistic novelty that reinvigorated the genre, allowing Shaw Brothers to continue to proffer the 'dream of China', if only in a revised form. In these films, Chor Yuen reinterpreted the China-myth complex through an increasingly subversive postmodernity, one more directly oriented to Hong Kong's shifting specificities and expressed through a reflexive and self-orientalizing gaze.

Orientalism and the Wuxia Cinema

The following section will elaborate upon the concept of orientalism and how it applies to the subject of *wuxia pian* and Chor Yuen's work at Shaw Brothers studios. At the core of this discussion is the question of Hong Kong's cultural identity, shaped and variegated by the inherent contradictions of its colonial history and a diasporic and ethnically diverse populace. Edward Said's *Orientalism* constructed a typology of practices within Eurocentric scholarship that propagated a wilful and self-serving misrepresentation of the oriental Other. Through the articulation of cinema culture, I posit that many Hong Kong filmmakers and cinema professionals enacted a similar practice, configuring the orientalist gaze to the context of their

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[34] *House of 72 Tenants* and its significance to the Cantonese film industry are discussed in Chapter 3.
[35] *The Chinese Boxer* was released one year before the resounding arrival of Bruce Lee in *The Big Boss* (1971). While Lee's role in popularizing the kung fu mode cannot be overstated, *The Chinese Boxer* must be considered the film that inaugurated the modern kung fu formula.

shifting relationship to China. There is a kind of complicity with which Hong Kong, in the act of defining itself, took on a position of authority growing from its hybrid role as an iteration of the globalized West. In the assimilation of British customs, education, modern infrastructures, and fierce entrepreneurialism, the Hong Kong people – especially those born or raised on the colony – had become recognizably westernized (or nearly so) through a "discourse of progress" (Chu 333) that casts industrial and cultural modernization in opposition to indigenous tradition. This creates a complicated double-bind wherein traditional Chineseness in identifiable terms is at odds with the tools that facilitate aspirations toward anti-colonial nationalism and independence in the global milieu.

This narrative was shared by revolutionary Mainland thinkers of the May Fourth movement, who saw traditional cultural practices as the burden of a feudal past, and who embraced socialist modernization as a means of throwing off the yoke of foreign domination and taking their place in the world. While on the Mainland the emphasis was placed on forging a new socialist Chinese nation, in colonial Hong Kong, this reformation of identity was complicated by an identitary suspension between self and other, colonizer and colonized. In the separation that Hong Kong constructed between its colonial identity and the Mainland, there is an inherent posture of condescension that serves to disavow the anxiety of cultural dislocation (Yau 185). If Hong Kong represents with its modernity and globalized hybridity a version of the Western metropole, then following the logic of binaries (Shohat & Stam, 140), China's Orient must then be relegated to a stance on the periphery, primitive and without voice or power to object to its objectification. Admittedly, this alignment becomes tenuous when one considers the larger fears of Hong Kong becoming subsumed by Communist Chinese political and economic strictures, but in terms of representation, this is precisely *why* Hong Kong articulated its power *to see* and to *be seen* (via cinema) in just such a way. This "flexible positional superiority" (Said 7) permitted Hong Kong a certain ambidexterity, to navigate both Eastern and Western identities as needed, and allowed the colony to manage its proprietary link to a cultural Chinese past from a position of westernized privilege.

Here we may invoke Bhabha's notion of 'mimicry' as a facet of colonized identity. The mimic is an inherently ambivalent concept; the colonial subject cannot fully become the colonizer. Instead the subject must visibly produce evidence of its own slippage, a "representation of difference that is itself a process of disavowal" (Bhabha 122). Following this, I

offer that between the localized spirit of the kung fu movie, and the phantasmagoria of the *wuxia pian*, there is evinced a furtive yet apprehensive sense of kinship with China, colliding with a desire to retain the trappings and perceived benefits of life as a colonized and westernized subject. It is an act of disavowal against the colonizer, while simultaneously reiterating an "interdictory Otherness" of China (ibid. 130).

In the pre-handover atmosphere of the 1980s and '90s, *wuxia* cinema was often inflected by Hong Kong's attempts to define its own claim to Chineseness, both in conjunction with and *in contrast to* an exoticized imaginary of China. Stephen Teo identified this as an 'abstract nationalism' that allowed Hong Kong to identify with China as a primeval source of ethnic culture, at the same time as it "bypassed fear and loathing for the Communist regime, as well as for aspects of the colonial, laissez-faire capitalism which ruled Hong Kong and Taiwan" (Teo 1997, 207). I suggest that the substrata of this relationship between an ephemeral cultural identity and the *wuxia* genre emerged still earlier, and may be examined by identifying those representative tropes with which cultural producers created their Other in images of China. Using orientalism as a lens, we may trace the permutations and influences of this process through Chor Yuen's *wuxia* cinema of the 1970s, and identify its linkages with the later forms of the genre.

The appeal to an essentialist cultural ideal, particularly one reliant on a separation between the colonial present and a remote past that is reconstructed by the subject, is one fraught with ambivalence. Frantz Fanon articulated these complications, when he explained the plight of the 'colonized intellectual', who:

> …at the very moment when he undertakes a work of art, fails to realize he is using techniques and a language borrowed from the occupier. He is content to cloak these instruments in a style that is meant to be national but which is strangely reminiscent of exoticism. The colonized intellectual who returns to his people through works of art behaves in fact like a foreigner (Fanon 160).

In Fanon's view, the ironies of anti-colonial nationalism achieved through nativist endeavours represent the artist's failure to understand their adoption of a foreign gaze. However, in the case of the Hong Kong subject, we may see how the act of engaging willingly in this process of appropriation and exoticism opens up new identitary possibilities. By engaging with an ahistorical pastiche version of China, the *wuxia* film hinges on two points; one, the *reverence* for a disappeared or self-consciously imagined Chinese past, and the other *a denial* of the

contemporary iterations of the People's Republic of China, and its claim to a unitary Chinese destiny. Both of these modes may be understood as operating within a variation of the framework set forth in Said's *Orientalism*. Although Said was responding to specific conditions stemming from European colonial expansion and cultural self-positioning in relation to the 'Near East', the conceptual structures of orientalism can also serve to elaborate the many means by which a society manufactures an image of its cultural Other according to its own needs, along the axis of power relations between the charged polarities of East and West. To this end, Said has provided useful epistemological tools to interrogate modes of representation found within the *wuxia* generic imaginary. Combined with the rapid-fire production rate of the Shaw Brothers studio machine, the repeated and reinforced layering of these cinematic texts becomes a densely latticed *strategic formation* [36] of conventionalized visions of China.

Among the dogmas of orientalism, Said noted that "abstractions about the Orient, particularly those based on texts representing a 'classical' Oriental civilization, are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities . . . the Orient is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself" (Said 300). This description suits well the timeless settings of the *wuxia pian,* which exist largely outside a narrative of historical progress. Instead, we are presented with an unchanging vision of a China fixed at its classical apex. Within the cultural imaginary, it is through the lens of fantasy that Hong Kong movies were able to affiliate themselves with, and control, a sense of a grander China of the past imagination. [37] With its colourful heroic universe and imposture of history, the *wuxia pian* perfectly illustrates Said's premise of 'imaginative geography':

> Much of what we associate with or even know about such periods as "long ago" or
> "the beginning" or "at the end of time" is poetic – made up. For a historian of Middle

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[36] The 'strategic formation' (after Said), is described as "a way of analyzing the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large." (Said 20)

[37] It should be noted here that these relational constructions of Hong Kong and China flow both ways. While the impetus of colonial Hong Kong was to, in some measure, deny the Mainland its own voice in representation, this does not in fact negate China's perspective. As usefully observed by Kwai-cheung Lo, the perception of Hong Kong as a "borderland" space was not restricted to the colony, and has in the recent post-reunification HKSAR, become redrawn in the Mainland's favour.

According to Lo, "when China's economy did not take off, Hong Kong was either condemned, with jealous undertones, as a 'cultural wasteland' or fantasized as an outskirt place safeguarding traditional Chinese culture damaged by political turmoil on the Mainland. Years after the handover, when the economic statuses of the Mainland and Hong Kong have been gradually reversed in terms of hierarchic position in the capitalist world order, and when it is Mainland visitors who condescend to Hong Kong people, ethnic political contention as between center and periphery seems to come into play again" (Lo 73).

Kingdom Egypt, "long ago" will have a very clear sort of meaning, but even this
meaning does not totally dissipate the imaginative, quasi-fictional quality one senses
lurking in a time very different and distant from our own. For there is no doubt that
imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by
dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far
away (Said 55).

I posit the idea of the *wuxia* imaginary operating as a fetishist device that allowed Hong Kong to
disavow the anxiety of political and economic castration – that is to say, its eventual repatriation
to and subsumption within the real China – and at the same time, to assert their Chineseness and
difference from their colonial warders. The *wuxia pian* imaginary recreated an ideal China for
the diasporic consumption. The concentration of images and conventions that define it create an
affective, sensualist response to allay fears pertaining to the future, and to any lingering doubts
about one's own claim to Chineseness. It is not so much presented as genuine knowledge, as it is
a pastiche of elements from which are derived a *feeling* (or a *dream*) of China.

The anachronistic historicity of the *wuxia* mode allows for the projection of Hong Kong
social concerns and values backwards in time onto a pliable, accommodating China that seems
far removed from its contemporary iteration. Here, 'China' becomes an idea that is acted out in
broad theatrical strokes, as if on Said's metaphor of the Orient as a stage[38] (Said 63). This stage
not only acts to confine these figures of ethnic myth, but also to serve as an obfuscating screen
that blocks from view the larger and more troubling picture, that of cultural dislocation, political
disempowerment, and loss of identity. According to Hall, cultural identities are not wholesale
fabrications. They have origins and histories, but "like everything which is historical, they
undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they
are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (Hall 225).

While Hong Kong's processes of self-identification remain in flux, oscillating between
modern individualistic values and cultural tradition, the China present in Chor Yuen's *jianghu* is
constructed as an archaic cartoon of cultural myth, sensuous and inviting, yet locked in perpetual
strife, from which the hero stands apart. As Said observed, "the Orient is watched, since its

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[38] "The idea of representation is a theatrical one: the Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined. On
this stage will appear figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient
then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a
theatrical stage affixed to Europe." (Said 63)

almost (but never quite) offensive behavior issues out of a reservoir of infinite peculiarity . . . the Orient becomes a living tableau of queerness" (Said 103). The fixative typology of this tableau denies China that which Said identified as "the very possibility of development, transformation, (or) human movement" (ibid. 208). These locations and situations are emphatically 'China', but more specifically, they are the 'China' that is performed on Hong Kong's version of the orientalist's stage, and have little interlocution with a real China. What is important is that they reaffirm and recreate the constrained spectacle of 'China' for the viewer. Kwai-Cheung Lo described this kind of voyeurism:

> Precisely because of its powerful technology, capable of recreating a rural China as visually impressive as the real thing on the Mainland, Hong Kong film transforms Chinese local culture into a simulacrum for the tourist's gaze and renders its authenticity suspicious (Lo 267).

In the case of the Shaw Brothers New Style *wuxia pian*, the invocation of realism in its depictions of a naturalistic and historical Imperial China certainly owes much to the sophistication and resources of their production apparatus. By presenting an 'authentic' China to both diasporic Chinese audiences and to the world, Shaw Brothers was manufacturing its own cultural capital, printed and stamped with assurances of quality grounded in verisimilitude. This cast Shaw into the position of defining Chinese authenticity in terms emanating from Hong Kong's position; a proprietary custodial relationship with a 'real' China that has vanished, but lives on through their cinema.

The precept of putative realism and its valuation is not as enticing for the artist as for the ethnographic documentarian. The 'authenticity' of the *wuxia pian* has always been idiosyncratic and complicated by its relationship to escapist fantasy. The otherworldly and ahistorical presentation of 'Old China' in *wuxia* cinema has gone through different cycles, including the outright mysticism of the old *xiayi* or *wuxia shenguai* forms, or the turn to realism in the Mandarin New Style. In the transition between modernist and postmodernist thinking, authenticity takes on an unstable value, and this is particularly evident in Chor Yuen's hyperbolic, ephemeral, and often outright self-reflexive depictions of historical, cultural, and geographic spaces in his swordplay films. Through a regime of self-aware stylistic devices, hyper-aestheticism, and psychological surrealism, these films take on secondary meaning that pushes beyond representation, and instead casts the *wuxia* universe into a heightened state of metaphor

and ludic postmodernity. These elements create a Chinese imaginary which functions in terms similar to what Rey Chow calls a *hyper-affective ethnography*, achieving an exoticizing effect that uses "things, characters, and narratives not for themselves but for their collective, hallucinatory signification of 'ethnicity'" (Chow 144).

Chor Yuen eschews historical or naturalistic realism in favour of simulacra; a condensed artist's reproduction of ancient China as seen in classical painting, constructed with winking artificiality in enclosed studio sets, like enticing ornamental maquettes in a tourist-shop window. As observed by Said, the orient was a fantasy constructed almost entirely from the outside, a "place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said 1). In the hallucination of the *wuxia* landscape presented by Chor, it becomes a metonym for both China and the world as encountered by the Hong Kong hero, and assimilated into a dreamlike 'Chinese' confection for the spectator. China's authority over its own history also becomes amorphous in the *wuxia* genre. Ng Ho called the tendency for anachronism and distortion in Hong Kong films a "historical amnesia" (Ng 1994, 70), but I would liken it more to Dai Jinhua's interpretation of this malleability as a re-adaptation and *mockery* of Chinese historical anecdotes (Dai 83). History is not simply forgotten so much as destabilized in the cinematic imaginary of Hong Kong's borderless gaze, and wilfully contorted into a more attractive form to be managed, processed, and possessed. Abstractions of the Orient, as Said notes, "are always preferable to direct evidence" (Said 300).

Chu Yingchi identified the ways in which the universe of the *wuxia* hero is one permeated by a mistrust of politics, authority and power, which can in turn be considered characteristics of the Hong Kong people (Chu Yingchi 70). While the traditional expression of the *xia* typically stands outside normal strictures of state and society, they are nonetheless bound into a Confucian order of filial piety, clan loyalties and obligations. However, in the *wuxia* imaginary emerging in New Style swordplay films of the 1960s, the knight-errant takes on a solitary individualism and profane pragmatism. While in the kung-fu films and early New Style *wuxia*, the melancholy or weaknesses of the focal hero provide a pretext for self-strengthening, in the strain of chivalry exemplified by Chor Yuen's films of the 1970s, the melancholy is its own end, an alternative to politicizing identities and Chinese core values. Possessing already fully-realized martial-arts talents, self-indulgent personalities, and wandering souls, these heroes eschew the labyrinthine clan hierarchies of a *jianghu* that are no less oppressive and corrupt than

those of civil or governmental authorities (authorities which, in the *wuxia,* are typically notable by their complete absence). While attempting to follow their sentimental whims, the knights of Chor's films always find themselves in opposition to clan politics. Dai Jinhua has suggested that the structures of the martial-arts genre self-consciously position the male hero as a representation of Hong Kong and the self (Dai 89). If the martial hero stands for Hong Kong's sense of subjectivity, then his surroundings become an exoticized and eroticized China, with its "eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability" (Said 206). These traits subordinate this 'China' to the male hero's own narrative of adventure.

It may be argued that the structures and the surfaces of orientalism found in the *wuxia pian* are in many ways inherent to the genre, manifestations of its nationalistic impulse towards retrospective mythologizing and the historicized reconstruction of a unifying and difference-denying ethnic past. However, in the stylistic variations of the genre epitomized by Chor Yuen, the qualities of reflexivity, feminization, and mockery are more exogenous developments, products of operating within the cultural space of Hong Kong and the diaspora, between China and the world. The orientalism evinced by Chor Yuen is, I argue, of a bifurcated variety. These films are not conceived as 'transnational' in the conventional sense; they are not aimed at projecting a China to the West (although these strategies would be taken up by later directors). Instead, they are inherently diasporic, speaking *to* Chinese audiences removed from their origins, and speaking *from* a modernized (and in that sense *westernized*) subjectivity. The double-action of these films is: 1) to place 'China' within the constraints of a re-historicized fiction, a commodity of 'original culture' that breaks continuity with the Mainland, and affirms Hong Kong as a broker of this distinct vision (and associated identity); and 2) to subvert the representation of this 'dream of China' by foregrounding its constructed nature, and removing its authority to transmit traditional values.

The overarching stylistic mode through which Chor achieves this is a form of *reflexive self-orientalism*. I offer this term as a complex for the various aesthetic, thematic, and formal strategies played out in his *wuxia pian*, that seek to undermine the primacy of realism or history, and reconfigure it for the modern and diasporic imagination. The appeal of cinema is often predicated upon its ability to convey an illusion of reality, or of real experience, to its audience. By contrast, the swordplay films of Chor Yuen may be seen as anti-illusionistic in their use of

distancing techniques and tropes of fantasy to disrupt the historicist-realist directives of the *wuxia* genre. The China portrayed in Chor Yuen's *wuxia* cinema is not real; the historicist spell must be broken in order to address the question of forging new modalities of Chinese identity.

In this sense, Chor's contribution to the *wuxia pian* represents a sifting process, pairing an affective, nostalgic, culturalist pastiche with an indictment of didactic nationalism, moralizing puritanism, paternalistic feudalism, and Confucian traditionalism. What we are left with is a hybrid form that makes diasporic Chinese audiences into foreigners, into custodians, and into modern critics of an absurd and defunct past.

CHAPTER 3

Chor Yuen's Early Cantonese Cinema

Before coming to work for Shaw Brothers in 1971, Chor Yuen was already a seasoned veteran of the Cantonese film industry, with 67 features under his belt as director, including many commercial and critical successes. In the period preceding the collapse of the Cantonese film industry, Stephen Teo noted Chor as one of the foremost stylists of the Chinese melodrama (Teo 1997, 58). During this stage of his career, his films reflected an emerging local spirit, featuring young stars, contemporary settings, modern decors, and a tendency to step away from traditional subjects. Chor specialized in chronicles of troubled youths, lost loves, and domestic upheaval, but he also experimented in other popular genres like noir-styled suspense films and campy spy capers. Although Chor's early films emerged from a Cantonese tradition of social realism, his flair for expressionistic visuality and his thematic preoccupation with stories of baroque emotionalism quickly led him to break away from the constrains of realism and towards increased stylization. Beneath his flair for lyrical imagery and decorative style, his films reflected a critical stance on repressive social traditions and the status quo, communicated through his dramaturgical emphasis on excessive and stylistically externalized emotion. Certainly the Cantonese period of Chor Yuen's career is a topic worthy of an exhaustive project all its own, but in the following pages I will attempt to briefly sketch out his early career and style, with attention to representative works, and those formal and thematic currents which help to illuminate the subject of his later *wuxia* films at Shaw Brothers.

Chor Yuen was born Cheung Po-kin[39] in the city of Guangzhou, in the southern Guangdong province in 1934. The name "Chor Yuen" is a pseudonym that Chor whimsically adopted at the very beginning of his film career by plucking two words at random from a dictionary, but it remained his professional *nom-de-guerre* for the rest of his career (Chor 9). [40] Both Chor's father and older sister were trained Cantonese opera performers, and as a youth

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[39] Alternately, his name sometimes appears as 'Cheung Bo-kin', or in the Mandarin form as 'Zhang Baojian'.

[40] The name first appears in the form 'Cheung Chor-yuen' on his first screenplay *A Flower Petal in the Wind / Yipian Feihua,* (1956), suggesting that 'Chor-yuen' was intended to be his assumed given name. However, his name was shortened to simply 'Chor Yuen' for all subsequent credits. In the interests of clarity, in this study I will follow the now conventional reading of his name, being surname 'Chor' and given name 'Yuen.'

Chor was the leader of his school drama society (Chor 49). It was perhaps the influence of growing up in a theatre family that encouraged those persistent strains of theatricality and stylized expression that would come to characterize his later directorial style. Many of the first film actors of Chinese cinema were drawn from the ranks of Chinese opera performers, and Chor's father Cheung Wood-yau had transitioned from stage to screen to become a popular star in the growing Cantonese film industry of postwar Hong Kong. While half-heartedly studying chemistry at Guangzhou's prestigious Sun Yat-sen University, Chor would spend his holidays and summers on film sets, watching his father's productions behind the scenes, and helping out when needed. It was through this intimate exposure to the Hong Kong film scene that Chor Yuen's interest in cinema was ignited.

In 1952 Cheung Wood-yau helped found The Union Film Enterprise Limited,[41] a company of Cantonese film professionals disenchanted with the low standards of the local industry of the time. The Cantonese cinema was often compared unfavourably to the larger Mandarin productions, and The Union artists were committed to producing a higher quality product. Pushing a greater degree of technical merit, the cast and crews at The Union would even take substantial wage cuts on their projects in order to deliver films of higher calibre, in hopes of lifting the standards of the Cantonese film culture (Chor 16). It was in this idealistic and ambitious setting that Chor first became "madly in love" with film and its capacity for expressing larger artistic concepts (ibid. 17). While visiting Hong Kong, Chor watched movies voraciously, especially productions from Shanghai studios like Wenhua and Kunlun. The university at that time did not offer liberal arts programs, much less courses in cinema, so instead Chor Yuen found himself seeking out books on film theory, which were most often translated Soviet cinema texts (ibid. 18). Through his father's contacts, Chor Yuen began to find work as an assistant director and scriptwriter at The Union, eventually leading him to quit his university studies altogether in order to work full-time.

When the Singapore-based Kong Ngee Film Company was undertaking expansion in 1956, Chor Yuen followed most of the staff from The Union to the larger Cantonese studio, which served markets in Hong Kong as well. The signature cinema of Kong Ngee was fresh and aggressively modern, favouring genres in the Hollywood mould, but repurposed to the social

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[41] Union Film Enterprise Limited of Hong Kong is not to be confused with Taiwan's Union Film Company, where most notably King Hu produced the lion's share of his *wuxia* films after leaving Shaw Brothers (Teo 2009, 125).

setting of an urban Chinese diasporic perspective. They produced mysteries, crime films, love stories and romantic comedies, all infused with contemporary subjects and style to suit the studio's stable of young, attractive performers. In his second year, Chor was offered the opportunity to co-direct a film under the supervision of Kong Ngee's premier director Chun Kim. The film was a gothic melodrama called *Autumn Comes to Crape Myrtle Garden / Zieweiyuan De Qieutian* (1958), starring Chor's own father, Cheung Wood-yau. The following year, Chor went on to direct his first solo film, the domestic drama *The Natural Son / Hupan Cao* (1959) (aka *Grass by the Lake*). At 23 years old, Chor was likely the youngest Chinese studio director working in the industry at that time (Chor 20) but his sensibility was already a good match for Kong Ngee's style going into the 1960s.

 The Natural Son is a self-assured work, with a strong social message and distinct stylistic flourishes. It recounts the sad story of Meng-yu (Patsy Ka Ling), a young middle-class woman whose affair with a married man leaves her pregnant. Her younger sister Meng-wai (Nam Hung) attempts to help by arranging for Meng-yu to stay with Meng-wai's boyfriend's family, in order to hide her pregnancy from their own parents. Soon after Meng-yu finds true love with a handsome young pilot named Choi (Patrick Tse Yin), but when she discloses her condition, he meekly departs. When the baby is born, Meng-yu nurses a broken heart and grows ill. At her sister's deathbed, Meng-wai vows to raise the child on her behalf, but this drives a wedge between her and her boyfriend's disapproving family. Returning to her own family, she tells them that the child is hers in order to spare her sister's memory from shame. The boy's real father then appears, a rich older man who had spurned Meng-yu, but now needs a male heir. At the last minute, the young pilot Choi also returns, full of regret for his past behaviour. As the truth comes out, the family rebukes the rich man, and Man-wai and Choi vow to raise the child together. New love blooms and the family unit is reconstituted, but in non-traditional terms. The undulating melodramatic plot allows many opportunities for emotional excess, but at the same time, within its modern middle-class domestic environment, the film critically questions the values of social propriety, family honour, patriarchy, and feudalism that are at the core of Confucian Chinese tradition.

 A central theme that emerges in Chor Yuen's work early on is the persistent sense of personal and collective responsibility toward the social good. Although the impulse is usually evinced by his protagonists, this humanism is tempered by a tone of individualism and

scepticism that maintains a critical (and sometimes despairing) eye upon society. Chor's characters play out their emotional or personal crises in the shadows of the societal formations, traditions, and institutions that make victims of those who don't fit in. The thematic relationship between the individual and society is evident in the early films, where his inspiration from the Italian Neo-Realists is most strongly felt.[42] In *The Great Devotion / Kelian Tianxia Fumu Xin*, (1960) Chor Yuen weaves a tale of family struggling to survive being thrown into urban poverty after the schoolteacher father (played by Cheung Wood-yau) loses his job due to nepotism. The film seeks to capture the experiences of corruption and economic precarity that tainted Hong Kong life in the postwar period, and highlights many sad stories torn directly from the headlines. Even within the mode of the social reality film, we can mark Chor Yuens's affinity for melodrama. The struggling father faces indifference and selfishness as his family is buffeted by an episodic chain of almost absurd misfortunes and injustices. However, these tribulations are also contrasted with acts of benevolence and self-sacrifice from both his children and strangers. These episodes convey, through bursts of emotionality, the importance of individual acts of kindness. By the film's conclusion, the family is finally delivered from their misery, not by way of class struggle or a return to parochial values, but by their father's steadfast virtue in the face of adversity, and by a fortuitous, unheralded opportunity; the father is given a chance to put his education to use by writing a novel.

Here we see the other, more romantic aspect of Chor's cinema, one that distances him from social realist attachments to the working class. The finale of *The Great Devotion* does not rely on a resounding air of futility and failure in order to drive home the pitiless state of society, as in works like De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves / Ladri di biciclette* (1948), nor does it busy itself with nationalistic political solutions, as seen in early Chinese social realism films like Cai Cusheng's *Boundless Future / Qiancheng Wanli,* (1941).[43] Instead, human perseverance is driven by emotional generosity, and validated by the arts (in this case, the success of the author, the man of letters). For Chor, political awakening is less the goal of his social dramas than the pursuit of

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[42] Although Chor acknowledges his early fascination with Italian Neorealism (Chor 24), Hong Kong already had a Cantonese tradition of social realist films and politically motivated filmmakers like Cai Cusheng. Cai was a Cantonese director who had fled to Hong Kong after Shanghai fell to the Japanese in 1937. The more aggressively politicized nature of his films makes for a sharp contrast with the romantic sentimentality and individuality in Chor Yuen's early works. For a discussion of Cai Cusheng, see Tan, See Kam's *Chinese diasporic imaginations in Hong Kong films: sinicist belligerence and melancholia in Screen.*

[43] In *Boundless Future* the corruption of Hong Kong is absolute, and the poverty-stricken protagonists are only redeemed by their collective association and decision to return to China, presumably to join the KMT. (Tan, 12)

affect and personal epiphany. The depiction of reality is secondary to the purposes of inspiring an individualized humanist response in the viewer, and to this effect Chor Yuen's works veer towards the subjective and the expressionistic, "relegating the social elements to mere adornments" (Kei 2006, 64). The miseries of the human struggle simply provide an archetypal and sympathetic backdrop for a lyrical and emotional journey, articulated through melodrama and peripeteia.

The themes of social criticism, community consciousness, and personal responsibility do nevertheless persist throughout Chor Yuen's career, though most often in a stylized and genre-based form. In *The Mad Woman / Fengfu* (1964), Chor uses a Republican setting to craft an indictment of feudalism's persistent influence on traditional Chinese family values. The story involves a woman driven mad because she could not produce a male heir. Not content to treat the subject with realism, he instead invokes the filmic vocabulary of superstition and gothic horror. In a more modern vein, the thriller *The Deadly Night / Siwangjiao Ze Ye* (1964) presents a domestic implosion with a noir twist when a young woman returns to her family home after her father dies suddenly. She soon discovers it was no accident, and that her father was secretly trafficking drugs for an evil gang, whose mastermind is finally revealed to be the corrupt chief of police. *The Deadly Night* features common tropes of the gothic; convoluted mysteries, a vulnerable feminine protagonist, dark family secrets, claustral subterranean spaces, the corruption of paternal figures, and an expressionistic staging. Here we may also see a stylistic genealogy emerging, drawing upon the *gongan* detective traditions of the nineteenth century, and spooling forward into the *wuxia* potboilers of Chor Yuen's later Gu Long cycle, like *Bat Without Wings / Wu Yi Bianfu* (1980) and *The Murder Plot / Kongque Wangchao* (1979).

In a considerably lighter tone, Chor also made films like the camp action caper *Black Rose / Hei Meigui* (1965) which takes a contemporary spin on the chivalric *wuxia* model. It features two sisters (played by Nam Hung and Connie Chan Po-chu) – socialites by day and masked cat-burglars by night – who use their martial-arts skills to steal from the rich and give to the poor. Featuring a chain of duplicities played out in upscale moddish homes and stagey mock-exterior sets, the film may be a satire, but it is one that presents latter-day *xianü* (female knights) uprooting corruption, making fools out of male authorities, and romancing a dashing insurance investigator (Patrick Tse Yin). These themes appeared again in the sequel to *Black Rose*, called

Spy with My Face / Hei Meigui Yu Hei Meigui (1966),[44] and as well another girl-thief romp *The Precious Mirror / Yu'nu Shentou* (1967) (aka *The Maiden Thief*). Both films feature dashing masked martial heroines, stylish modern sets, and trap-filled underground lairs, blending Chinese heroic cinema traditions with sixties feminism and counterculture.[45]

In some of Chor Yuen's last films of the 1960s, the jolts of the 1967 Hong Kong riots and the ensuing social uncertainty seem to weigh more heavily on the works, with his fears for society playing out in youth pictures like *The Joys and Sorrows of Youth / Lengnuan Qingchun* (1969) and *The Prodigal / Langzi* (1969). Both films feature ensemble plots about young people tempted, trapped, and broken by a cruel, morally-confused modern world not of their not making. However, even in depicting the actuality of Hong Kong youth, Chor's characteristic stylistic exaggeration and symbolism prevail. In the final scene of *The Prodigal*, after a fatal confrontation on a beach, the bodies of the characters are erased one by one via optical effects as the camera tracks by, reducing their lives to forgotten or untold stories; people fallen through the cracks of an uncaring society. In the words of critic Sek Kei, Chor Yuen "speaks through dramatisation" (Kei 2006, 65). Embedded in his films, there may always be found a critique of traditions, institutions, and the growing culture of self-interest, but these will be communicated through means of generic convention, romantic tragedy, and pronounced aestheticism.

It is in many of these early films that we also see the essential grain of Chor Yuen's favourite type of cinematic protagonist; sensitive, educated, mild-mannered men, blessed or cursed with artistic cultivation, and prone to both profound romanticism and profound melancholy. In *The Great Devotion* the beleaguered schoolteacher father who becomes a writer to support his family provides one such example. In Chor's narratives, it is frequently the artist-intellectual and his travails that provide the emotional core, perhaps offering a view of Chor's own personal ideals and sense of self; humanistic, romantic, creative, and possibly slightly bourgeois. In melodramas like *Autumn Leaf* (1960) and *Rose in Tears* (aka *Tear-laden Rose*) (1963), Chor tells stories of young artists; poor, sickish, and enslaved to their artistic passions.

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[44]   *Spy with My Face* was Chor Yuen's first film made in colour, a considerable expense at the time due to the cost of shipping the stock to Japan for processing. Fortunately, *Spy with My Face* performed well. (Chor 29)

[45]   The popularity of Chor's light-hearted action-girl capers would be revived almost three decades later, with director Jeff Lau's Cantonese slapstick film *92 Legendary La Rose Noire / 92 Hei Mei Gui Dui Hei Mei Gui* (1992). In this film, a woman inspired by the *Black Rose* movies of the sixties takes on the role of a masked heroine, forging a postmodern link between Hong Kong's Cantonese cinema history, and the generation of 'New Wave' directors that followed. The Cantonese revival of the nineties would fuel two more sequels in a similar vein, *Rose Rose I Love You / Mei Gui Mei Gui Wo Ai Ni* (1993) and *Black Rose II / Hei Mei Gui Yi Jie Jin Lan* (1997).

Winter Love (1968) and *Purple Night* (1968) feature, respectively, a popular writer and a struggling composer. Both men are drawn into tumultuous relationships with equally tragic women. Themes of doomed love, artistic passion, and the price of material success abound in these films. In the Hong Kong cinema of 1950s and early 1960s, the effete, suffering, romantic male was a regular fixture, often cast as a prop for strong, active, glamorous female leads. In this sense, Chor's films often suited the flavour of the time. Nonetheless, Chor would also remain fixated on the sentimental, urbane male figure throughout his career. This archetype would ultimately become embodied in the sophisticated, sentimental swordsmen of his Shaw *wuxia* cycle.

Chor Yuen's days at Kong Ngee represent a significant period for his career, one that saw him mature into an established director with a prolific body of work well before arriving at Shaw Brothers. While at Kong Ngee, Chor Yuen was only under contract for two films per year, but he also wrote and directed for smaller production companies, many of which operated in association with Kong Ngee. It was also during this time that Chor Yuen and his future wife, actress Nam Hung, founded the Rose Motion Picture Company. With cooperation from Kong Ngee (largely consisting of the loan of leading man Patrick Tse), Chor directed five films during the 1960s under the Rose banner.[46] During his greatest period of productivity in 1964-65, Chor claims to have written fourteen scripts and directed fourteen films in one year (Chor 28).

Unfortunately, due to the decline of the Cantonese film industry that occurred in the late 1960s, Chor Yuen found himself with fewer and fewer projects towards the end of the decade. With limited options, he finally accepted a director position at the Cathay Organization[47] studios in 1970, and began to make films in Mandarin. Despite having the relatively luxurious budgets of a major film studio to work with, Chor quickly became frustrated with the disorderly

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[46] *Rose in Tears* (1962), *Love Never Fades / Chun Can Huo Wei Luo* (1965), *Black Rose* (1965), *Spy with My Face* (1966), and *To Rose with Love* (1967).

[47] The Shaws' long-time rival in Mandarin film production, MP&GI (Motion Picture and General Investment) was renamed to The Cathay Organization in 1964 after the death of MP&GI mogul Loke Wan-tho in a plane crash. By 1970, Cathay could no longer compete with the Shaws and closed its doors. Later that year, their studio facilities were purchased by the newly formed Golden Harvest, which went on to become Shaw Brothers chief competition for the local market through the 1970s.

bureaucracy at Cathay (Chor 35). After one year and four movies,[48] Chor Yuen departed Cathay for greener pastures at Shaw Brothers.

Chor Yuen at Shaw Brothers

As a director in the Cantonese cinema, the majority of Chor's films concentrated on modern life with a pronounced emphasis on social melodrama. As a director of Mandarin films for Shaw Brothers, his work would instead become characterized largely by period settings and martial arts. Chor Yuen was at the forefront of the Shaw 'localization' initiative that was intended to bring fresh blood to the studio, but in 1971 – the same year Chor was hired – the studio finally shut down its Cantonese production apparatus. Pressure remained strong to deliver works that reflected the established model of success, and although not known as a swordplay director prior to making *Cold Blade* for Cathay, Chor Yuen was immediately funnelled into action projects when he came to work for Shaw in 1971. This was no doubt largely the result of the economics of the moment; Chang Cheh's brand of violent and masculinized *wuxia* movies had ruled the box office through the late 1960s, and swordplay remained a strong commodity in diasporic overseas markets, most especially in Taiwan. The edgy, rebellious quality of these films appealed to the growing youth market, but the stylized and historicized nature of the genre also made it a perfect vehicle for Run Run Shaw's ambition to produce films that exalted an essentialized Chinese flavour. *Wuxia* films could appeal to a sense of Chinese cultural nationalism, and additionally communicate the richness of 'traditional' (ie: Mandarin) subjects to transnational audiences through exotic spectacle. At the same time, interest in the new trend of the kung fu unarmed fighting films was just beginning to catch fire in Hong Kong, along the model of Wang Yu's *The Chinese Boxer / Long Hu Dou* (1970).

Chor Yuen's first films with Shaw Brothers suggest a brief period of transition and uncertainty. His first outing was *Duel for Gold / Huobing* (1971), a brutal *wuxia* thriller scripted by Shaw Brothers' mainstay Ni Kuang. On the surface, *Duel* recalls little of the elegance or sentimentality found in Chor's earlier works, and instead feels like a concession to the style of Shaw's reigning auteur, Chang Cheh. Nonetheless Chor's flair for artful compositions and sly,

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[48] This consisted of one drama, *The Lost Spring / Yulou Chunmeng*, Chor's first swordplay film *Cold Blade / Long Muxiang*, and two detective films, *Dial for Murder /Luyinji Qingsha'an* and *Violet Clove and Firebird / Huonaio Diyi Hao*. All were released in 1970.

self-aware style is still traceable in the work.[49] Run Run Shaw was so confident about the film that *Duel for Gold* received a major release opposite *The Big Boss / Tangshan Da Xiong* (1971), the debut vehicle for Golden Harvest's rising star Bruce Lee. This was a deliberate attempt to combat the rival studio's audience-pulling power with a fully-loaded Shaw swordplay spectacle. Instead, the gritty, street-level style of *The Big Boss* was a huge hit, and *Duel for Gold* was trounced at the box office, $3.5 million to $700 000 (Chor 38). Chor's next production for Shaw, *The Killer / Da Shashou* (1972), was not a *wuxia* picture but a blood-soaked Republican-era knife-fighting gang movie in a similar vein to Chang Cheh's *Vengeance! / Bao Chu* (1970), demonstrating the Shaws' conservative strategy in following trends. However, at the core of *The Killer* we can see Chor's romantic sensibility at work, using the martial arts/crime-film structure to frame a sentimental tale of two long-lost brothers (one a hired killer, the other a government investigator) who return to their hometown and find the girl they both loved still living there. Although deployed in an action context, the emotional core of the film owes much to the domestic melodramas of Chor's Cantonese period.

Chor Yuen's first significant breakthrough at Shaw Brothers came with his third project, *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan / Ainu* (1972). Based on a script chosen by Chor out of the "bottom scrap" pile of material reserved for the new Shaw directors (Chor 40), *Intimate Confessions* was a novel blend of erotic exploitation, detective fiction, and *wuxia* revenge plot. Chor's approach fused sensational elements of lesbian love and sexual fetishes with a proto-feminist patriarchal critique. The result introduced a strain of difference into the swordplay genre, reimagining the concept of the *xianü* character with a more profane edge, and a pronounced female subjectivity. It proved an ideal vehicle for Chor's stylistic innovations and self-consciously romantic, 'feminized' aesthetics.

Later that same year, he followed up with another iteration of the female-knight motif with a film he both wrote and directed, *The Lizard / Bihu* (1972). Effectively a Republican-era variation on Chor's popular Cantonese cat burglar hits of the 1960s (*Black Rose, The Precious Mirror*), *The Lizard* cast Shaw leading man Yueh Hua as Chen Long (aka 'The Lizard'), a daring Robin Hood-like figure who harasses the decadent Shanghai upper classes. The casting of a male hero somewhat followed the Shaws' masculine trend, but Chen Long is joined in philanthropic banditry mid-movie by his romantic interest Xiao Ju, a local girl and martial arts expert. Xiao Ju

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[49] *Duel for Gold* is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

is of course played by Connie Chan Po-chu, the original co-star of *Black Rose* (alongside Nam Hung), who had since retired from cinema, and returned to play one last film appearance in quasi-reprise of her *Black Rose* role. Cheng Long is a shy, bumbling local cop, and spends much of his time playing the stuttering fool and feigning simple-mindedness. By day he shows kindness and understanding to the poor and downtrodden (in one scene, like an inverse Javert, he releases a man caught stealing bread to feed his family), while by night he dons his black mask to rob the city's most decadent socialites. Once again, it shows Chor Yuen's willingness to cartoon the social messages of his old Cantonese realist films into an exaggerated confection.

While trading the "mock-modern' contemporary setting of his Cantonese films for a more Shaw-friendly Shanghai period piece, Chor's stylism remains in evidence. Visual motifs – like floral splashes of out-of-focus abstracted colour and tightly composed structural interruptions in the picture plane – are still in abundance. In the scene where Xiao confronts Cheng about his double-identity, they play a game of acrobatic tag through the trees of an urban park, a sequence that, with its weightless leaps and autumnal foliage, resembles nothing less than the elegant garden duels of Chor's later *wuxia* works at Shaw. Highlighting Chor's turn towards the more sensational after *Intimate Confessions*, *The Lizard* opens on a salacious beat with an explicit sex scene. Chor places a rich, white-European couple undulating naked on a bed draped with gauze, surrounded by luxurious continental-style décor. The audience experiences this titillating gaze from the voyeuristic perspective of Cheng Long as he burgles their home, creating an odd sensation of inverse exoticism.

Underlying the nationalistic and somewhat anti-colonial aspects of the film – where Chinese heroes resist oppressive foreign powers, most notably rich European and Japanese occupiers – the tone of *The Lizard* lacks the vitriol expressed by other martial arts films in the same setting, like Lo Wei's *Fist of Fury / Jingwu Men* (1972). The Lizard as a vigilante stands less for ethno-national empowerment, than an irreverent form of class warfare. Rather than righteous rage and bloody violence, Cheng and Xiao's victories are mostly achieved through guile and playful misdirection, stripping the upper classes of their riches and their dignity. This demonstrates Chor's preference for colonial satire and cultural reform, over outright militantism. In the end, the most extreme sanction is reserved for the corrupt Chinese chief-of-police (played by Lo Lieh in a dapper all-white European suit), a man who preyed upon and exploited his fellow people. Overall, *The Lizard* gives the impression of a transitional film. The breezy tone,

cheeky, convoluted heists, and the iconic masked, black-clad heroes all recall the earlier *Black Rose* movies, while accommodating a more percussive emphasis on kung fu action and violence for the finale, in accordance with the trends. Although released in Mandarin, like all Shaw films at that time, *The Lizard* functions as a fond backwards glance to a touchstone in the recently-disappeared Cantonese cinema. Indeed, Chor's attachments to Cantonese cinema and local culture remain a theme that persists throughout his time at Shaw Brothers.

Although he is largely known as a Shaw studio director, Chor Yuen's initial contract was only for 2 years, followed by a short break during which he made the drama *Haze in the Sunset / Yanyu Xieyang* (1973) for another studio in Taiwan. Upon his return to Hong Kong, Run Run Shaw surprised him by renewing his contract for another 3 years (Chor 39). His next productions for Shaw were action films, including *The Villains / Tufei* (1973) (an "Eastern Western" about a gang of frontier bank robbers), and *The Bastard / Xiao Zazhong* (1973), a film that is arguably the closest thing in Chor's filmography to a conventional kung fu movie in the masculinist mode. Even so, Chor's sensibilities shied away from machismo, to craft instead a moody, sensualist parable with symbolic and psychological overtones.

In *The Bastard*, a young man abandoned at birth (actor Chung Wa), is raised by a wizened, ascetic kung fu master in the mountains. At the end of his training, he returns to his native town to learn of his past. The locals quickly dub him 'Little Bastard', and he cheerfully takes this as his new name. His martial cultivation is offset by his childlike naiveté, and he relies on the poor people he meets – a dung collector, an aging prostitute, and an urchin named Little Beggar (played by Lily Li) – to explain the world to him. Eventually it is learned that he is the illegitimate son of a rich local boss named Gu, and before long Little Bastard is enticed into his father's world (which is thoroughly encapsulated in the large family manor) through money, status, and sex. Little Bastard is seduced by Ai, a concubine in Gu's employ, and becomes estranged from both Little Beggar and his improvised "street family". Eventually it is revealed that his father plots to use him as a double, to switch with his trueborn son (also played by Chung Wa) who sits on death row. The scheme fails, but Little Bastard is not interested in avenging his honour. Instead he prefers to return to his simple life. It is only when Little Beggar is murdered by Gu's gang, that a disillusioned Little Bastard unleashes his full martial arts abilities upon his father's household in a prolonged combat sequence that ranges all over the family home, destroying it thoroughly in the process.

The themes of class and patriarchal anxiety are unmistakeable in *The Bastard*, with the paternal home serving as the site of all corruptions, and the shabby shack shared by Little Beggar and Little Bastard becoming a space of idyllic purity. Chor chose to shoot almost the entire film on indoor sets, which compounds the sense of the film as a fable, unfolding in a small unreal world. The arrival of the "true" son intensifies the psychological and existential duality in the film, compounded by the eerily surreal scene when Little Bastard returns to an empty, quiet Gu manor, to find the trueborn son making love to the seductress Ai. Gu's son is his double in both the literal and metaphorical sense, as corrupt and worldly as the other is innocent. The line is clearly drawn between Little Bastard's "good" family of fellow working-class people, and his "bad family" of rich, treacherous parasites. The lure of money is pervasive and self-destructive here. Even the stolid martial arts masters who work for Gu's household, who exude the posture and mystique of the traditional *xia* archetype, ultimately fail to affirm a masculine code of honour. Each master fights Little Bastard, and is killed. They sacrifice their lives not out of martial pride, but in response to the ever-increasing price Gu puts on Little Bastard's head. Greed supersedes chivalric brotherhood or righteousness as surely as it dissolves filial bonds.

It is of course meaningful that Little Bastard begins the film in a state of grace, having no name of his own. His true sorrows begin once he takes a name, and with it, all the ills of the father's broken society. It is a legacy he renounces by destroying the house in the last finale, though he chooses not to kill Ai, Gu, or his son (though they receive their karmic punishment in other ways, as befits any fable). The film ends with Little Bastard sadly abandoning the town, and by implication, the secular world. His exit is intercut with shots of his handwritten journal, lessons of the world his master asked him to record: "some may trade their life for money / not all refined people are virtuous / beauty can be a lie / a father is not always righteous to his own son." Delivered like inverted maxims of Confucian wisdom, these phrases bluntly express Chor's anti-traditionalism in didactic terms.

Chor's next project for Shaw Brothers, *House of 72 Tenants / Qishi'erjia Fanke* (1973) was not an action film but a comedy. Although Chor rarely worked in the comedy format, *House of 72 Tenants* would prove itself to be one of his most significant works, particularly in terms of its impact on Hong Kong's developing local Cantonese identity in cinema. Based on a popular Shanghai stage play (and filmed once before in 1963) the story concerns the poor residents of an overcrowded apartment tenement in the 1930s, and their various conflicts with their landlords, a

corrupt police officer, and each other. With an ensemble cast, and presented in an episodic, vaudevillian-burlesque fashion, the film both captures and satirizes the quotidian foibles of the working-class. In mounting the project for Shaw Brothers, Chor decided that the film needed to emphasize the Hong Kong urban character and anchor itself in familiar experiences and idioms of local life. He pitched the film to Run Run Shaw as a Cantonese production, full of local customs and slang expressions. Shaw was initially unconvinced, since the Cantonese film industry had effectively been pronounced dead only a few years earlier, but at Chor's insistence he finally agreed (Chor 58). Informed by his love of Italian Neo-Realism, Chor depicted the social reality of the Hong Kong people; polyglot, pressed together, and generally put-upon, but unified by a sense of community and identity expressed through the vernacular of the Cantonese milieu. *House of 72 Tenants* became an instant phenomenon, breaking Hong Kong box office records and out-grossing even the Bruce Lee star vehicle *Way the Dragon* (1972), 5.6 million to 5.3 million (ibid. 43).

Today *72 Tenants* is generally credited with re-igniting the flame of the Cantonese film industry, by offering proof that local Cantonese audiences were still a viable commodity. The irony remains that, while Chor at Shaw may have re-initialized Cantonese film production in the colony, the studio was hesitant to commit, and too slow to respond to the trend. The following year, the Cantonese street-level comedies of television star Michael Hui would become huge hits, while Shaw Brothers only released a handful of Cantonese films (most of them directed by Chor Yuen). The wheels had been set in motion; by the end of the decade, Mandarin-language cinema in Hong Kong would be practically finished, with the Cantonese industry emerging as one of the largest film industries in the world. However, for Chor Yuen, his aspirations to return to Cantonese production were not to be fulfilled so easily.

For the next two years, Chor Yuen fixated on romantic melodramas, most in Cantonese, and some of them adaptations of popular Cantonese television series, such as *Hong Kong 73 / Xianggang 73* (1974) and *Sorrow of the Gentry / Zhumen Yuan* (1974). Many of these films echoed the themes in his early work; tragic love, characters misled by emotion, and the repressive strictures of traditional Chinese mores. As in his earlier works, the mistrust of patriarchal institutions is offset by a modern sensibility of sexual liberation and individualism, but a certain ambivalence remains as well, with Chor's pointed critiques of the dog-bite-dog capitalism and the worship of money that pervaded Hong Kong life. Chor's *Love, Sex, and Hate /*

Wuyi (1974) explores these themes through the intertwining stories of three Hong Kong women in doomed love affairs. In two of the storylines, rich, powerful meddling fathers play ominous and antagonistic roles, while in the third story, the crisis hinges upon a more lethal threat posed to the heroine by Mainland spies pursuing her lover, an anti-government activist. The resonance between the shadow of the father, and the shadow of the draconian politics represented by the 'two Chinas' (the PRC and Taiwan) is unmistakeable. The Hong Kong heroine caught in between, pursuing simple romantic happiness seems to reflect the desire of most Chor Yuen protagonists to escape from patriarchal and political society, and pursue their personal, emotional goals.

Stylistically, Chor Yuen's melodramas from this time retain what Sek Kei once called Chor's "abstract melancholic romanticized aesthetic" (Kei 2006ii, 83), where formal stylism asserts itself in bold strokes, often speaking louder than the emotional voices of the characters. As before, Chor's affinity for social realism found itself often at odds with his penchant for theatricality and expressionistic virtuosity. His stylistic approach to these simple human tales tends to cast personal conflicts into an iconic, even existential relief; the actors in these films are often arranged into mannered, theatrical postures; Chor's compositions frequently privilege artfully fragmented aperture-like frames that interrupt the spectator's engagement with the space and characters; the ornamental qualities of the mise-en-scene are often distracting and self-aware, dense with modern décor and hyperbolic colour. Melodrama, with its excess emotionality and expressivity was perhaps still too much at odds with the realist aesthetics of the modern love story, creating a degree of separation between audiences and his stylized worlds.

Most of Chor Yuen's dramatic films from these two years flopped miserably, and after a string of commercial failures, he found himself languishing in a nine-month hiatus with no projects underway for Shaw. In spite of this string of disappointments, it seems that Run Run Shaw never lost faith in Chor Yuen's value to the studio. In 1976, Chor's salary was doubled and his contract extended for a further eight years.[50] It is this latter part of the 1970s that would prove to be Chor's most prolific and iconic period, when his particularized approach to the *wuxia pian* – already hinted at by films like *Cold Blade* and *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan* – would become canonized through his 'Gu Long cycle' at Shaw Brothers.

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[50] By 1976, Chor Yuen's retainer at Shaw was $60 000 (HKD) per month. When his second contract was coming to an end, and Chor began to look towards projects in Taiwan, Run Run Shaw offered him a new eight-year contract, five years binding, three years flexible. It specified at least four films per year, with a base fee of $200 000 per picture, a very generous offer at that time. (Chor 40)

The Gu Long Cycle

In the Hong Kong film industry, novelty was quickly consumed by repetition, and a successful formula could run its course in a matter of a few years. By the mid-1970s, Hong Kong was itself changing. The turmoil of the 1960s Leftist riots was in the past, and now being replaced by a more sense of stability and security. Dissatisfaction with the colonial government and rampant corruption was soothed by institutional reforms initiated by the British authorities. The economy was thriving, and the educated, westernized middle-class was growing. Hong Kong's local identity was coming of age, leading to a further revision of its relationship to the Mainland and its ethnic past. Chang Cheh's hard-edged cinema of martial stoicism and angry defiance in the face of disempowerment was finally charting a decline. By 1975, despite a strong showing by King Hu's *The Valiant Ones*, *wuxia* films were a diminishing commodity, with only a handful being produced in Hong Kong that year. Irreverent Cantonese comedies meanwhile were gathering steam, as were contemporary stories featuring gamblers, con-men, and street-crime. Director Li Han-hsiang, who had returned to the Shaw Brothers fold after a decade as an independent, was splitting his time between making sensationalized rehashes of his 1960s palace melodramas, and unabashedly sleazy sex-romps.

During his nine-month dry spell at Shaw Brothers, Chor Yuen had turned his attentions to writing swordplay adaptations based on the New School *wuxia* novels, especially those of Gu Long. Convinced that the genre still offered possibilities for exploring his interests in romanticism and human nature, Chor petitioned Run Run Shaw with the idea of a fresh approach to the swordplay film. Each time, he was rebuffed and his *wuxia* scripts were rejected. Fatefully, it was only when trusted Shaw scriptwriter Ni Kuang suggested that Chor Yuen could shoot a version of Gu Long's new novel *Luxing Hudie Jian* (*Meteor, Butterfly and the Sword*) – itself loosely inspired by Coppola's *The Godfather* – that Shaw relented and gave Chor the go-ahead to make the film, if Ni Kuang provided the script. (Chor 45) Chor agreed, but quietly revised Ni Kuang's screenplay, re-integrating several excised elements from the novel. The result was *Killer Clans / Luxing, Hudie, Jian* (1976), and true to his word, Chor brought a distinct sensibility and aesthetic approach to genre. *Killer Clans* was one of the top-earning films in Hong Kong that year, and also became a hit in the overseas Taiwanese market. With this

auspicious beginning, Chor received Shaw's blessing to pursue more Gu Long adaptations, and in doing so, ushered in the next stylistic expression of Hong Kong's *wuxia pian*.

While still generally considered to be a continuation of the New Style *wuxia pian* of the 1960s, the Gu Long cycle of Chor Yuen represented a departure from the earlier Mandarin swordplay films, especially those made at Shaw Brothers. It could be said that the essence of Chor's approach was not absolutely new; the themes and stylistic aspects of Chor's *wuxia* films from this stage only fulfill the promise of his earlier forays into the genre, as far back as *Cold Blade* in 1970. Nonetheless, it was with these films that he honed the elements of his signature style, and established the groundwork for a new swordplay aesthetic going forward. From 1976 to the end of his contract (and the closure of the Shaw Brothers studio facilities) in 1985, Chor directed 34 features, 29 of which belonged to the *wuxia* or *shenguai* modes.[51] Following the customary language bias at Shaw Brothers, most of these films were released in Mandarin. In addition to carrying on the traditional associations between the swordplay genre and northern Chinese culture, the language also served a pragmatic function; audiences in Mandarin-speaking Taiwan were avid consumers of *wuxia pian,* and provided a coveted market for the Shaw Brothers' cinematic 'dream of China'. Although Cantonese cultural production was making gains in Hong Kong, it would not completely overtake Mandarin cinema for a few more years. By 1980 however, the balance had shifted, and the majority of Chor's *wuxia* films were being produced and released in Cantonese.

Gu Long was one of the 'three pillars' of the New School *wuxia* literature that emerged out of the 1950s.[52] Although born and raised in Hong Kong, Gu lived in Taiwan for most of his life. He had a prolific career, during which he produced at least sixty-eight novels and standalone stories,[53] most of these in the *wuxia* mode, and employing a peculiar hybrid prose style that favoured short punchy phrases and vernacular borrowed from modern (and often foreign)

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[51] The classification of films in the *wuxia* genre is not always self-evident, due to frequent overlap with related genres, and the degree to which the *wuxia* genre is itself subject to a historical and stylistic syncretism. Here I adhere to a loose categorization for *'wuxia'* contingent upon the use of historicized/exoticized period settings, and the presence of *wuxia* character types who exhibit those skills and codes that are identified with the *xia* hero. For the purposes of this study, works in the *shenguai* supernatural adventure mode will also be considered.

[52] The other two figures in this triumvirate are Liang Yusheng and Jin Yong, both Mainlanders who became celebrated Hong Kong residents. Although Jin Yong's phenomenal fame and reputation among global Chinese readers has since eclipsed his contemporaries, prior to the 1980s it was Gu Long who arguably enjoyed greater popularity and influence (P. Liu, 207).

[53] The exact number of Gu Long's works is a subject of debate by Chinese literary experts, with estimates residing between 68-78 separate works (P. Liu 211).

sources like television or movies. Gu was also active in the cinema world, working as a scriptwriter in Hong Kong, and opening his own production company in Taiwan to shoot films based on his work, many of which were directed by Gu himself (P. Liu 211). These films, however, never attained the celebrity of those made by Chor Yuen.

Among his genre contemporaries, Gu Long's works reflect a much more personalized vision of the swordplay world. For example, the archetypal *wuxia* novels of Jin Yong, despite their fantastical elements, make frequent use of specific historical settings and events as backdrops; although the world he presents is fractious, and his *xia* demonstrate human frailties, his stories often play upon the schisms and conflicts in *jianghu* society in order to promote an eventual cohesion of the community towards greater Chinese goals. Gu Long's novels avoid, and even challenge, such a nationalizing vision; his characters instead inhabit ambiguous worlds that patently evade any ties to dynastic history; heroes are typically free-standing outsiders with only tenuous ties to the martial order. His stories display a "conspicuous absence of the familiar tropes of martial and psychological maturation such as training, treasure-hunting, Secret Scripture, tournaments, and bonds between master and disciple" (P. Liu, 207). Rather than revolving around a hero's journey to achieve higher goals or pursue self-improvement, Gu's novels typically chronicle a solitary protagonist's encounter with a society that threatens to consume itself in ever-constricting webs of intrigue and hypocrisy.

Petrus Liu observed that for Gu Long, the *jianghu* and the cultural imagination of martial arts "stand for the forces of history," a signification of Chinese monoculture that "decenters the human subject and resituates it in a social field of Others" (P. Liu 222), a theme that is further reinforced in Chor Yuen's adaptations. Gu Long's public life also added an additional tragic-romantic layer to the perception of his loner characters. By the time of early his death at the age of forty-eight in 1985 from the ravages of alcoholism, Gu's public persona was that of a notorious philanderer with a taste for hard liquor and a history of failed relationships. Likewise, Gu Long's most famous protagonists were heroic but world-weary men; master swordsmen prone to bouts of melancholy or inebriation, and whose lives were as shaped by their romantic failures as by their martial duels. According to Liu, Gu Long's *wuxia* novels exhibited "all the characteristics associated with decadent, bourgeois postmodern culture: sexual and chemical escapism, instant gratification, and an underlying sense of malaise" (P. Liu 213).

Of course, not all of the swordplay films made by Chor at this stage were based on Gu Long's works; other *wuxia* authors like Jin Yong and Wong Yin also provided inspiration. It was his practice to rework all his adaptations heavily from the original sources (Chor 49); after *Clans of Intrigue / Chu Liuxiang* in 1977, almost all of Chor's swordplay pictures were based on his own scripts (usually credited as Chin Yu). Throughout the films of the late seventies, stylistic consistencies and auteurist elements persist, contributing to a coherency of vision that somewhat supersedes the diversity of source materials or the overarching influence of the studio. However, it was the thematic symmetry between Chor Yuen's sensibilities and Gu Long's material that made the union such a natural and successful one, and the Shaw Gu Long adaptations (eighteen films in total) served to epitomize Chor's romantic and melancholic take on the genre.

With *Killer Clans*, Chor laid the stylistic and thematic groundwork for the films that would follow. The film opens with a back-to-back diptych of scenes; a sword duel on a moonlit bridge, followed by a saucy sex scene in a lush bedchamber. Here Chor places both swordplay and erotic spectacle on an equal footing, much as he did four years earlier in *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan*. Building on this mix of soft and hard aesthetics, *Killer Clans* foregrounds a maze-like mystery narrative featuring a dizzying array of characters, none with clear motives. Here, duplicitous gambits, mind games, and an undercurrent of romantic longing assert themselves over straightforward feats of martial skill.

The story sways between two main threads that gradually entwine. One concerns Master Sun (literally 'Uncle'), a wise and respected martial clan patriarch whose empire is crumbling around him, undermined by the Machiavellian schemes of a rival clan. The other plotline follows Meng, a brooding hired killer who operates out of a brothel along with two other misfits; Kao a courtesan who acts as his agent, and Yeh, a fellow assassin ruined by drink. Meng is a pragmatic and nihilistic master swordsman with no use for fame or reputation. When Kao mocks him for his anonymity in the martial world, he shrugs indifferently and replies "a killer has no life." Later, on his way to a job, Meng encounters Hsiao, a sad and mysterious woman living in an idyllic grove called the Butterfly Forest. This set epitomizes Chor's visualization of the *wuxia pian* as a condensation of cultural nostalgia; a misty, unreal space patterned on a Chinese painting, with a genteel house by a brook, resting under a thick canopy of orange leaves. Here Meng and Hsiao exchange verses of bittersweet poetry ("Butterflies live in spring / but go away in winter / Butterflies are like love"). Meng becomes sentimental, questioning his vocation and vowing to

return to see her again after his mission. It is only much later that he discovers that Hsiao is the estranged daughter of his target, none other than Master Sun himself. Meng joins the Sun household as a bodyguard, but after a chain of twists, it is revealed that the plot against Sun has been hatched by his own favourite son, in collusion with the most trusted members of Sun's household and the rival clan. Despite his mission to kill him, Meng finds himself helping Sun instead. The revelation of the degraded value of family loyalty and martial ethics is summed up by Master Sun, who tells Meng "Sometimes one trusts an enemy more than a friend."

The parallels between the *jianghu* and the mafia underworld are clearly drawn in *Killer Clans*, reflecting Gu Long's inspiration in *The Godfather*. However, rather than serving to romanticize the world of the mobster, this invocation of the American gangster genre inverts the equation, instead tinting the noble clans and knights of the *jianghu* with a stigma of criminal decadence. Here, the world of martial arts is depicted as a glamorous illusion that hovers over a seamy underbelly of corruption. While at first the story seems to lament the loss of such codes of honour and respect, Chor uses this scenario to engage in a strangely more ambivalent deconstruction of the Confucian family order to play with our sympathies. At the outset of the film, Master Sun embodies the wise, conscientious 'godfather' figure, granting favours and maintaining order in the *jianghu*. When the traitor in his family is revealed, Sun escapes via a devious contingency plan that requires him to call in the many favours owed to him. Here, his benevolent veneer begins to peel away, revealing a more sinister and calculating truth. In one chilling scene, a woodcutter's family hides Sun in their well as arranged. He then gravely reminds them of their responsibilities: to ensure that nobody can reveal Sun's true whereabouts, the peasant couple are obliged to poison first their two young children, and then themselves. Just as the filial disloyalty of a son brings suffering and senseless death to the martial world, the honouring of these bonds also brings the same. Although Sun is initially presented in a sympathetic and heroic light, gradually the true nature of the patriarch's power is revealed; assassinations, bribes, intimidation, and a complex network of spies. In the end, all of Sun's paternal gestures are transactional, expending others' lives in order to maintain his position at the top of the *jianghu*.

At the film's climax, the conspirators are finally outwitted and defeated by Sun and Meng. Although on the surface, evil is punished and community order is restored, the subversive subtext remains. The means that led to Sun's victory are ultimately no less devious and cruel

than those of his enemies, and the ambivalent final outcome seems to remind us how even righteous-seeming authority is forged and maintained through manipulation and force. Earlier in the film, the drunkard Yeh sadly tells Meng "Names, family and love are not for people like us." By the conclusion, in the bloodstained shambles of the Sun family manor, the relative implications of that statement are questioned, for what does such a world wreak on those who belong to it? Sun's final gesture, to send Meng and his daughter Hsiao away together, is also rendered transactional and self-interested: "If you stay, you may kill me some day, for there's always a power struggle." Meng replies in tossing aside his sword: "Where there are swords, there is killing." The romance of the *jianghu*; its heroic precepts, its social structures, and the practice of martial arts are all abandoned in order to live free, signalling a corresponding break from China's past and historical identity.

With the success of *Killer Clans*, Shaw wasted no time capitalizing on the formula. Chor Yuen followed his first Gu Long film with another, *Magic Blade / Tianya Minyue Dao* (1976). Darker and stranger in tone, it pushed Chor's *wuxia* vision further, with a story about a lone swordsman, disillusioned with the martial lifestyle, who is drawn into a bizarre game of deception by a faceless mastermind. Here Chor's break with the New Style's realist approach was emphasized by an existential theme and a more bleak and alienating mise-en-scene. *Magic Blade* also marks the first production where Chor Yuen worked with Shaw leading man Ti Lung, who had made his name playing stoic, masculine roles in the films of Chang Cheh. However, Ti would soon become synonymous with Chor Yuen's Gu Long adaptations, as the embodiment of the new type of sentimental male hero that was at the core of Chor's *wuxia pian*.[54]

Magic Blade was quickly followed by the *wuxia* film *Web of Death / Wu Du Tian Luo* (1976), as well as a Chaozhou-dialect opera film *Farewell to a Warrior / Cilangzhou* (1976). Compared to *Magic Blade, Web of Death* was far more flamboyant in tone. This time the story was not based on Gu Long, but instead loosely drawn from the writings of Jin Yong. The story features an earnest young knight from the Wu-Tang clan who is charged with tracking down a dangerous magical spider hidden away by the Five Venoms Sect. In his quest, he inadvertently meets (and falls in love with) the princess of the Venoms Sect who is travelling disguised as a boy. After fleeing a coup in the Venoms Sect, the young couple returns to Wu-Tang, where treachery and suspicion lead the hero into conflict with his elders who wish to kill the princess.

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[54] *Magic Blade* will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

Although Jin Yong's *wuxia* novels typically focused more on the internecine squabbles and politics of the *jianghu*, in *Web of Death* Chor drew out the qualities of wrenching domestic melodrama, and used martial society to play out the old anti-traditional themes of his Cantonese family tear-jerkers.

Web of Death is also notable for another way it echoed the Cantonese cinema, by embracing a more overtly fabulous tone; the plot strikingly recalls the old Cantonese swordplay serials of the 1950s and '60s, with duelling clans, star-crossed young lovers on the run, and a fantastic quest for a supernatural weapon. In this case, the centerpiece McGuffin is a roaring, glowing, radioactive tarantula sealed in a magic lantern. Once freed, it snares people in electrified laser webs, or injects victims with poison that reduces them to pools of steaming liquid. These sequences are extravaganzas of trick photography and optical special effects, and beyond that, the film unleashes a full repertoire of high-fantasy elements borrowed from the Cantonese *wuxia*: sorcerous spells, superhuman powers, magical animals, secret underground lairs, and deadly automated traps. Here Chor deploys his most elaborate mise-en-scene since joining Shaw, with wildly outlandish costumes, psychedelic lighting, spectacular pyrotechnics, and a truly impressive array of colourful, exotic (and massive) interior sets. Indeed, with each film, Chor's productions seemed to move increasingly indoors, with fewer and fewer scenes shot on the Shaw outdoor locations. Despite the focus on community that runs through most of Jin Yong texts, *Web of Death* still pushes forward Chor's usual themes of tragic love, deception, and oppressive family dynamics, while mixing in titillating touches of sexuality and seduction. At the same time, the focus on special effects and magic marks it as an oddity of sorts among the Shaw Brothers films of the mid-1970s,[55] suggesting that it may have been too soon to effect a comeback of the Cantonese *wuxia shenguai* style. *Web of Death* was perhaps an experiment that came before its time, and it underperformed compared to *Killer Clans* and *Magic Blade*. Chor would not return to this style of ostentatious fantasy until his films of the early 1980s.[56]

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[55] In the mid-seventies, the Shaws made only fleeting forays into this brand of fantastical visual-effects spectacle, with films such as the bizarre mythological musical-horror *Snake Prince / She Wang Zi* (1975), the fanciful swordplay film *The Battle Wizard / Tian Long Ba Bu* (19f77), and Chang Cheh's *Fantastic Magic Baby / Hong Haier* (1975), a Chinese Opera film based on the Monkey King legends. All three films focused heavily on creature effects, suggesting a strong inspiration from the Japanese *kaiju* (giant monster) movies of the era.

[56] In the early 1980s, Shaw Brothers made increased use of elaborate optical special effects in the *Star Wars* mold, reflecting the studio's desire to be technologically competitive alongside global Hollywood sci-fi hits. Rather than pushing forward, into a futuristic imaginary, Hong Kong directors instead looked back in time to find a carrier for

The following two years with Shaw would be Chor Yuen's busiest, delivering ten swordplay pictures in that span, with all but two based on Gu Long stories. *Clans of Intrigue / Chu Liuxiang* (1977) was his next production, a wildly exotic *gongan*-style mystery that epitomized Chor's particular variation on the *wuxia* aesthetic. It was with this film that Chor's brand of *wuxia* hero became solidified. Transitioning from the sentimental but manly hero figure in *Magic Blade*, Ti Lung instead plays Chu Liuxiang a soft-mannered gentleman thief with a dashing yet effete manner. *Clans of Intrigue* was a smash hit in Hong Kong, and would go on to inspire two further sequels based on the same character, *Legend of the Bat / Bianfu Zhuanqi* (1978) and some years later, the misleadingly-titled *Perils of the Sentimental Swordsman / Youling Shanzhuang* (1982).[57] Other films from these years included *Heaven Sword and Dragon Sabre / Yi Tian Tu Long Ji* (1978), a two-part adaptation of Jin Yong's popular *wuxia* serial about star-crossed love and divisive *jianghu* politics, *Clan of Amazons / Lu Xiaofeng Chuanqi Zhi Xiuhua Dadao* (1978), a *gongan* potboiler featuring another free-spirited detective in the Chu Liuxiang mold, and as well, the unlikely *wuxia*-buddy movie *Pursuit of Vengeance / Mingue Dao Xueye Jianchou* (1977), which provided a more farcical take on the swordplay genre. As well, during 1977 Chor also delivered three of his most thematically representative swordplay films: *The Jade Tiger / Baihu Laoho* (1977), *Death Duel / San Shaoye De Jian* (1977), and *The Sentimental Swordsman / Duoqing Jianke Wuqing Jian* (1977). In these films, he firmly established his usual subject of the romantic, sentimental individualist faced with a hostile and self-destructive system based on hypocrisy, competition, and oppressive social conventions.

In *The Jade Tiger,* Chor tells the story of Wuji (Ti Lung), the young scion of the prominent Zhao clan, whose father is murdered by a retainer. Vowing revenge, Wuji goes undercover in the *jianghu* and eventually tracks his quarry to the rival Tang clan. Along the way, he encounters many traps and assassins, is saved from poisoning by a *xia* brother and sister duo, and meets a secret order of martial artists called the Hate-Free Hall, who have abandoned the *jianghu* and all of its infighting. By the time he manages to insinuate himself into the enemy

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the sci-fi effects model. With Cantonese culture asserting its dominance, and with a renewed interest in local nostalgia, the wild Cantonese *wuxia shenguai* provided just such a model.

[57]   The third Chu Liuxiang movie was marketed to English-speaking audiences as *Perils of the Sentimental Swordsman*, suggesting that it could be the third installment of Chor Yuen's popular *Sentimental Swordsman* series. Although Ti Lung plays similar lead characters in both series, they are otherwise unrelated. Still more confusingly, *Perils of the Sentimental Swordsman* is based on an adapted Gu Long story that originally featured Lu Xiaofeng, another, different detective hero. Lu Xiaofeng was featured as the central character in Chor's Gu Long-based mysteries *Clan of Amazons* (1978) and *Duel of the Century* (1981), with actor Lau Wing playing the role.

Tang clan, he discovers that his father orchestrated his own death as part of a gambit to allow his Zhao clan to destroy the Tangs from the inside and loot their secret weapons cache. Complicating matters, Wuji has fallen in love with the daughter of the Tangs, revealed as one of the siblings who saved his life. Before long he finds himself torn apart by the suspicions and recriminations of people from both clans, wavering between romantic love, filial duty, and his sense of right and wrong. By the film's conclusion, intrigue turns to open conflict. Wuji secures victory for the Zhao clan but at a terrible cost: the lives of everyone he has come to care for. Sitting at the top of the *jianghu*, he is overcome with remorse, and abandons his clan in search of the Hate-Free Hall, intent on joining them and disappearing.

Acknowledged by Chor Yuen as his personal favourite among his *wuxia* films (Chor 47), *The Jade Tiger* presents an especially muddied view of martial chivalry, with both clans incorporating equal measures of good and bad people. Chor makes use of an intensely romantic aesthetic, replete with classical poetry, palatial manors, and increasingly fantastical landscapes torn out of a painterly imagination, and injects this into a baroque tale of family drama. The lush beauty of the artificial settings serves as a surreal counterpoint to the film's vicious indictment of feudal values and its deeply cynical treatment of the *wuxia* lifestyle. While the martial combat in the film is spectacular, Chor affords an unusual amount of time to the denouement after the fighting ends, driving home the tragic consequences of such violence, and underscoring the pointless and irreversible loss of life.

The psychological revisionism of the genre became even more stylized in Chor's following picture, *Death Duel* (1977). As if continuing directly from ending of *The Jade Tiger*, the film follows a wealthy leading swordsman who attempts to flee his name by leaving martial society to live as a peasant. However, the old entanglements of martial society pursue him into his new life, including ambitious *xia* looking to make a name, old enemies seeking vengeance, and the usual machinations of those attempting to hegemonize the *jianghu*. Compared to the other entries in Chor's Gu Long cycle, *Death Duel* relies less on mystery and conspiracies, and more upon a heavy dose of melodrama and tragic romanticism. This is reflected in the film's striking visuals, which paint the *wuxia* world as a seductive and thoroughly unreal domain, while retaining Chor's usual criticisms of society.[58]

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[58] *Death Duel* will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

The same year, Chor also directed a slightly more unusual Gu Long adaptation, *The Pursuit of Vengeance* (1977). Functioning as a loose sequel to *Magic Blade*, it once again places Ti Lung in the starring role as the brooding wanderer Fu Hung-hsueh, but this time creating a jarring tonal shift towards comedy. Here, the stern, unpretentious Fu becomes both a romantic self-parody, and a straight-man for the bawdy antics of Ye and Lu, two irreverent, cartoonish swordsmen he encounters in his journey. Soon the unlikely trio becomes enmeshed into a truly Byzantine murder plot, and through a series of ploys, improbable coincidences, and double-fakes, it turns out that Fu and Lu are seeking revenge on the same man. This leads to a comical squabble at the conclusion over who should kill the villain, and a duel that ends with one of the *xia* striding off bare-assed, having lost his pants. Although quirkily out-of-place among his more dramatic swordplay pictures, *The Pursuit of Vengeance* incorporates Chor's now-signature stylism and twisting narrative approach into a satirical variation on the *wuxia* genre's typical subjects of vengeance, honour, and *xia* conduct.

With *The Sentimental Swordsman / Duoquing Jianke Wuquing Jian* (1977), Chor further established the figure of his romantic knight-errant type. In this film, Ti Lung portrays a solitary, lovelorn *xia* named 'Little Dagger' Li. After abandoning his home, his fortune, and the woman he loves to repay a fellow *xia* who saved his life, Li is consigned to an elegant, aimless existence of drifting and melancholic alcoholism. Portrayed as a skilled martial artist, but otherwise too sensitive and trusting for the world he lives in, Li finds himself drawn back into the *jianghu* when he is betrayed by old friends and accused of crimes he didn't commit. Here Chor's usual propensity for a densely packed mystery format takes on a more personal dimension, as Li must delve back into his past life to find the identity of the 'Plum Blossom Bandit' who is the architect of his miseries. *Clan of Amazons* (1978) follows a similarly feminine-themed motif, featuring an effete, flirtatious detective, Lu Xiaofeng, who must solve the case of the mysterious 'Embroidery Thief,' a masked male supercriminal who uses sewing needles to mutilate anyone in his way, and leaves meticulous embroideries at the scenes of his crimes. Enlisting the aid of his old flame, a spunky *xianü,* Lu sets about infiltrating a secretive clan of powerful female martial artists who are implicated in the crimes, but eventually ends up joining with them to uncover the real culprits.

Narratively, the New Style films had stripped away the twisty convolutions of the old Cantonese *wuxia* serial plots, to instead focus on more austere plotting with simple causes and effects. The centrality of vengeance facilitated the mechanics and pre-eminence of

sensationalized violence. By contrast, Chor's *wuxia* films tended to chart more circuitous paths. Most of the films in Chor's Gu Long cycle followed a mystery format, positioning the hero as a detective, unravelling chains of multifarious clues and deceptions that lead him to expose the sordid underbelly of the *jianghu*. Martial displays in these films were still a key element of the cinematic spectacle, but often became secondary to the play of intrigue, with riddles, cerebral mind games, and complex emotional manipulations taking the center stage. Throughout, Chor continued to build a new geography of the *wuxia pian*. Rather than depicting the *jianghu* society as being peripheral to any overarching map or social history of China, instead Chor's swordplay cinema displays a growing sense of existential detachment through setting and style. The world of martial arts is presented as an autonomous simulation, a dimension that never quite overlaps with real time or space. This effect is accentuated through Chor's usage of more and more opulent and ostentatiously artificial indoor studio sets. His films moved increasingly in the direction of the expressionistic and the metaphorical, and towards the end of the decade, Chor began to engage with more forceful deconstructions of realism through his style and content. Films like *Swordsman and Enchantress / Xiao Shiyilang* (1978) and *Full Moon Scimitar / Yuanyue Wandao* (1979) courted the supernatural in playful ways that toyed with audience expectations.

Full Moon Scimitar recounts a magical fable about a young *xia* named Ding, who has lost everything due to the machinations of a manipulative clan leader. As he is about to take his own life in shame, he falls into a mysterious and magical subterranean world, where he meets Ching Ching, a girl bathed in ghostly green light who identifies herself as an immortal fox-spirit. Ding swears he is done with the 'mortal world' so Ching Ching invites him to the spirit world to live with her fox-spirit family. This realm provides for some of Chor's most spectacularly phantasmagoric set designs, and Ching Ching is depicted with an array of lighting and camera effects that highlight her ethereal otherworldliness. When Ding finds a magical blade (the titular Full Moon Scimitar), he becomes obsessed with returning to the human world to restore his family's good name. Ching Ching agrees to use her fox-powers to help him on condition that he return with her afterwards to the spirit world. Naturally, once his revenge is complete, Ding becomes addicted to the fame and respect he commands in the *jianghu,* and sends Ching Ching away, not realizing that she carries their unborn child. Eventually Ding is undone by the treacheries and petty jealousies of the martial society, and goes running back to the fox world.

The fairy tale mask slips at this point, as it is revealed that Ching Ching's family are not spirits at all, but simply a clan that disappeared from the *jianghu* years earlier to escape persecution. Now exposed to their enemies by Ding's actions, they must again fight for their lives.

In some ways, the structure of *Full Moon Scimitar* recalls King Hu's *Touch of Zen / Xia Nü* (1971) in its presentation of a male hero entranced by a mysterious woman and caught up in an apparent ghost story, which later turns out to be simply a matter of all-too human intrigues in the martial world. Chor Yuen differs in his approach with just how far he is willing to carry the illusion, engaging his spectator in a lavish, effects-laden mythological fantasy, only to reveal in the final act that things are not as they seem. Chor is unconcerned with the questions of how and why; no explanations are given for the supernatural powers exhibited by the fox-spirits earlier in the film. Instead it must simply be treated as part and parcel of the cinematic shell game he plays with his audience.

Swordsman and Enchantress (1978) remains one of Chor's strangest *wuxia* films. Xiao Shiyilang (Ti Lung) is the quintessential outsider, a superior fighter of common birth who shuns martial society, and as a result has gained a nefarious (and unwarranted) reputation as a heartless rogue. Xiao is cast in contrast with Lian, the most esteemed and noble *xia* in the land. In a plot to steal a magical sword, Lian's wife, the Lady Shen, is kidnapped. Xiao intervenes and rescues her, but soon finds himself framed for both the kidnapping and the theft of the sword, with both villains and Lian on their trail. The more conventional *wuxia* plot of tragic romance and a race for a supreme weapon is abruptly derailed when the pursued Xiao and Shen seek refuge in mysterious castle in the forest. Inside they find an incredibly detailed model of a sprawling manorial estate filled with tiny realistic dolls. A servant explains that they are not actually dolls, but famous missing martial arts masters who were captured by his master Tien and shrunk to miniature size by black magic. They revive only during the full moon, and must live out their days in the tiny Puppet Villa.

This is, of course, the pretext for a trap, and Xiao and Shen quickly become the newest residents of Puppet Villa. Chor takes full advantage of this bizarre twist to play out a surrealistic scenario that feels reminiscent of the 1960s television series *The Prisoner*. They are told by the voice of the unseen Master Tian that they are now only 'puppets,' and no longer part of the human world. Xiao finds himself trapped in this tiny artificial world-within-a-world alongside other luminaries of the *jianghu* who have long since given up finding an escape. Even as he and

Shen are confined to a facsimile of the martial society that he that he spent his life avoiding, it is also in this ersatz environment that all the hierarchies and politics of the *jianghu,* robbed of meaning, have ceased to exert their power. Removed from the propriety of the human world, Xiao and Shen are free to acknowledge their growing love for one another. At the climax of the film, this illusion of happiness is shattered when the Villa is revealed to be only an elaborate trick, a hidden full-size compound made to match the miniature version, allowing the conniving patriarch Tian to remove his rivals and control the *jianghu.* At its core, this revelation makes even less sense than the superstitious black magic plot device; instead it merely accentuates Puppet Villa's dramatic function as a means to symbolically liberate characters from their conditioned behaviours. After this point, a subsequent chain of deceptions peels away the layers of the plot even further, leaving the nature of truth even more ambiguous than ever, for Xiao and for the spectator.

There is something subversive in Chor's deployment of deception in these films. No longer confined to the various schemes and deceits that already proliferate in his *wuxia* stories, these illusory games of concealing and revealing engage the viewer on the level of cinematic legerdemain, using genre as a lever to further dislodge the *wuxia pian* from any pure notion of Chinese history. Although Chor's *wuxia* films did invoke some of the phantasmagoria of the Cantonese *wuxia shenguai*, this homage only went so far. The cinematic language of gothic mystery persists through Chor's later career. Similar to *Full Moon Scimitar,* films like *Bat Without Wings / Wu Yi Bianfu* (1980), *Black Lizard / Hi Xiyi* (1981), and *Perils of the Sentimental Swordsman* (1982) also made use of a supernatural imaginary of spirits and revenants, which are all eventually revealed as mirages that conceal the darker spectres of past family sins and a decaying feudal society. Despite the pronounced elements of fantasy in his films, Chor Yuen was primarily a manipulator of the profilmic environment, relying on practical or in-camera effects, lighting, and props, rather than on postproduction effects. In spite of the touches of mysticism that still lingered within the genre conventions of the New Style *wuxia* (weightless leaps and incredible feats of skill), Chor's films took special pains to disrupt the sense of realism in other ways, by producing a world so artfully artificial and aestheticized that it instead invoked the shifting logic of dreams. Fantasy in his films generally leans towards the psychological and the uncanny, rather than the outright magical.

Chor's later *jianghu* intrigues also became ever more labyrinthine and political, often featuring heroes who were themselves required to engage in subterfuge and treachery by infiltrating various evil sects or organizations, as in *Murder Plot /Kongque Wangchao* (1979) and *The Roving Swordsman / Daxia Shen Shengyi* (1983). In *Duel of the Century / Lu Xiaofeng Zhi Juezhan Qianhou* (1981), the detective Lu Xiaofeng becomes enfolded in an imperial plot in the Forbidden City, while *The Emperor and his Brother / Shu Jian Enchou Lu* (1981) is based on Jin Yong's novel about rebels in the Qing Dynasty. In spite of these flirtations with historical locations and subjects, Chor's consistent stylistic and thematic engagement with dissimulation and his decadently artificial imagery always places these films into a paradigm of factitious and voyeuristic orientalism.

Towards the mid-eighties, Shaw Brothers production was slowing down, and Chor's prolific rate of output also began to wane. In his last few years at Shaw, Chor directed only a couple of films each year. Among these we find his last, and most outrageous, *wuxia shenguai* fantasies, and even a remake of his earlier *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan*, entitled *Lust for Love of a Chinese Courtesan / Ainu Xin Zhuan* (1984), which heightened the elements of seduction and manipulation, while downplaying the actual role of swordplay. Even so, his work was beginning to show the signs of fatigue and repetition.[59] When the studio finally closed its doors in 1985, Chor was adrift and out of touch with the changing industry, which had moved away from the sheltered studio system that had defined Chor's career ever since his days at Kong Ngee. Between 1985 and 1990, he directed half a dozen more films – comedies, melodramas, and even a gangster film – but he would never again work in the *wuxia pian*. His later projects enjoyed little commercial or critical success, and Chor began to transition into acting, appearing in cameos or as a bit player in various productions. This led to recurring roles in television series for TVB (Shaw Brothers' television division, still overseen by the immortal Run Run Shaw). He continued this way until 2002 when he officially retired from show business.

From New Style to New Wave

Through his Gu Long cycle of the seventies, Chor helped to initiate a 'second movement' of the Shaw Brothers New Style and triggered a resurgence of the *wuxia pian* in the Hong Kong

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[59]   Chor Yuen himself has attested to the effects of creative exhaustion near the end of his *wuxia* cycle: "After I made 20 to 30 of these adaptations, I began to be bored … I got really sick and could go on no more" (Chor 47).

industry. Production of swordplay films increased through the second half of the decade and carried through into the early eighties. Many of these films exhibited similar deconstructive characteristics and explored mythic but defamiliarized versions of the traditional martial-chivalry mode. Mystery plots and superstition prevailed. The Shaw *wuxia pian* began shifting toward nightmarish and carnivalesque films like Sun Chung's highly stylistic, Machiavellian swordplay thrillers, and Chang Cheh's late cycle of projects with the 'Venoms' stunt crew, featuring outrageous weapons and insidious traps which minced and mangled the gaily-attired acrobatic cast in increasingly delirious ways. On the other side of the spectrum, a new breed of independent *wuxia* films began to appear which treated the *jianghu* with an increasingly allegorical, post-apocalyptic emptiness. The roots of the Hong Kong 'New Wave' movement were laid with such mannered, avant-garde *wuxia* art-films as Tsui Hark's *The Butterfly Murders / Die Bian* (1979), Johnnie To's *The Enigmatic Case / Bishui Hanshan Duoming Jin* (1980), and Patrick Tam's *The Sword / Ming Jian* (Tam: 1980). As observed by Stephen Teo these early New Wave films display a distinct spiritual lineage from Chor Yuen's weirder, gloomier Gu Long films (Teo 2009, 148).

Nonetheless, by the early eighties, a giddier retrospective gaze was being applied to the history of the Cantonese cinema. Shaw Brothers hitched their wagon to this trend by producing direct revivals of the Cantonese *wuxia pian*, including remakes of old classics like *Buddha's Palm / Ru lai shen zhang* (1982), with accelerated breakneck plots that often felt as if an entire serial was being packed into eighty minutes. Hyperactive and kinetic, these films were replete with flying warriors, magic weapons, weird monsters, laser beams, and blaring electronic sound effects; they represented the combination of an exotic magical past, with a high-tech sugar-rush inspired by global sci-fi blockbusters like *Star Wars* (1977).

A postmodern tone of mockery can sometimes be felt in these films, foregrounding the patent absurdity of their exotic worlds with both winking exaggeration and nostalgic affection. Although new techniques in visual effects allowed the fantasy to become further pronounced, speed was the newest ingredient, pushing the limits of the audience's ability to construct events coherently. Wild special effects, brazenly under-cranked action scenes, and frenetic impressionistic editing, collided the stunt-based realism of the kung fu and New Style films with an ephemeral antirealist styling. Tsui Hark's *Zu:Warriors of the Magic Mountain / Shushan jianxia* (1983) reconstructed the world of *xiayi-shenguai* fiction with extravagant effects and

themes of a factionalized and dysfunctional mythic China on the verge of apocalyptic destruction. At this same time, we also find some of Chor Yuen's last studio productions for Shaw, ostentatious fantasy works like *Descendant of the Sun / Rie Jie* (1983) and *The Enchantress / Yao Hun* (1983).

      Descendant of the Sun features a magic baby fallen from heaven, and raised by a kindly woodcutter and his wife. As a young man he discovers he possesses fantastic powers, including the ability to fly, and decides to help people under the guise of a magic caped fairy, all the while maintaining a secret identity as a clumsy palace servant. *Descendant of the Sun* rather brazenly attempts to fuse the premise (and many key scenes) of Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978) with Chinese mythology. The opening montage of the film shows clips from 1960s Shaw Brothers adaptations of Chinese folktales, while an announcer asserts that the following story is also based on an ancient legend, demonstrating the mutable hybridity of the Shaw 'dream of China,' which blends elements of East and West into its new mythology. While featuring some of the most grandiose and ornamental sets of Chor Yuen's career, the film is primarily an effects-driven pastiche that attempts an extreme level of cartoonish high-fantasy excess, the likes of which would not really be seen again until the explosion of Hong Kong computer-effects blockbusters in the new millennium.

      The Enchantress takes a far darker route than *Descendant of the Sun,* blending *wuxia shenguai,* supernatural mythology, and outright horror elements. A young swordsman meets a mysterious girl in a decrepit old manor, who leads him through a mystical portal (a large rectangular decorative panel, itself reminiscent of a movie screen) into a supernatural realm. The two fall in love, but the swordsman soon discovers that the girl's mother is actually a flesh-eating female ghost, spurned long ago by a virtuous knight, and now seeking entry into the human world to wreak vengeance on the *jianghu.* Together the young lovers race through the martial world, calling upon various mystical priests, superhuman *xia*, and even divine spirits to help them stop the mother's murderous rampage. *The Enchantress* is a weird, fast-moving, and hallucinatory piece, full of special effects both new and old. While Chor's signature themes feel somewhat eclipsed here, his expressionist visuality and talent for creating sensual and nightmarish environments is in full effect. Both narratively and stylistically, *The Enchantress* foreshadows the paradigmatic New Wave films that would follow, notably Ching Siu-tung's

Chinese Ghost Story / Qiannü Youhun (1987) and Ronny Yu's *The Bride with White Hair / Bai fa mo nu zhuan* (1993).

Produced by Golden Harvest, Ching Siu-tung's *Duel to the Death / Sheng Si Jue* (1983) presents a particularly fascinating example of a stylistic stepping stone between cinematic trends. Its breathless speed and frenzied editing announces the style of action that first-time director Ching would bring to the New Wave *wuxia* movies a few years later. The film follows an arranged duel between the champion swordsmen of China and Japan, pitting *xia* versus samurai, with a ninja plot and *jianghu* intrigues looming in the shadows. In many ways, *Duel to the Death* is a giddy summation of the martial arts cinema of the preceding two decades, but its reluctant romantic hero, exotic preposterous world, and careening narrative full of betrayal and revelations, it wears its debts to Chor Yuen on its sleeve. The recurring motifs of deception and performance follow on from the Gu Long cycle, and reinforce an ultimately cynical view of *jianghu s*ociety, martial arts, and national pride. The cataclysmic final scene leaves almost every other character dead in the aftermath of a thwarted grand conspiracy. In a turn reminiscent of Chor Yuen's *Death Duel*, the Chinese hero is appalled by the pointless human cost, but his solemn samurai counterpart insists that they fight their duel anyway. In the conclusion, both swordsmen end up cutting each other literally to pieces, and the film closes on the ruins of their bodies in the moments before they collapse. Although the viscerality of the violence recalls Chang Cheh's gory extremes, there is no implied transcendence in this ending, and no ascension into myth. Instead it serves as only a sensationalized liquefaction of the ethos of the martial chivalry genre into absurd meaninglessness.

For Shaw Brothers, their attempts to remold their output to fit the changing times came too late; by 1985, they closed their doors, and the reign of the Shaw studio system officially ended. The Hong Kong New Wave's first swordplay cycle had not immediately taken hold, overshadowed instead by the stunt-heavy bombast of modern martial-arts adventures and cop films. Spearheaded by figures like Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung, and Yuen Woo-Ping, these movies profited from the appeal of contemporary local settings and the kung-fu film's celebratory premise of physical realism. The true resurgence of the *wuxia pian*, with all its historicism, supernaturalism, and allegorical weight, would not occur until a few years later with films such as Ching Siu-tung's *Chinese Ghost Story* (1987), Ann Hui's two-part *Romance of*

Book and Sword / Shu Jian Enchou Lu (1987), and the extremely successful *Swordsman / Xiao'ao Jianghu* (1989) (nominally directed by King Hu[60]).

It is likely pertinent that 1984 marked the drafting of the Sino-British Joint Declaration between the PRC and Great Britain, dictating the terms and timeline of Hong Kong's return to China. Excluded from the repatriation negotiations, the local populace was confronted by its own lack of agency in self-determination, leaving the colony in a state of nervous anticipation of a reconciliation with its estranged historical parent. In returning to Chinese control, decolonization of Hong Kong would be elided; instead passing from the stewardship of one nation to another (Abbas 31). With the spectre of the modern China looming large in the apprehensions of Hong Kong citizens, it is perhaps unsurprising to see that the self-orientalizing, mythopoeic, conflict-ridden 'dream of China' would return to the forefront of the cultural imagination. This fresh cycle of Cantonese *wuxia* films of the nineties became emblematic of Hong Kong's cinema during the pre-handover period.

Chor Yuen as an Auteur

Throughout his long career, Chor Yuen worked virtually exclusively within a studio system framework. As a screenwriter and director, Chor's work spans a diversity of genres and thematic material, including social realism, melodramas, mysteries, spy capers, and martial-arts spectacles. With such a broad range of genre-based fare, the easy temptation would be to mute his creative voice under the industrial drone of the studio system he worked within, and count the size of his commercial filmography against his merits as a worthy subject of study. Weighed against the much smaller corpus of a standout figure like King Hu, who is simultaneously defining and transcendent of his genre, Chor Yuen's work might be comparatively attributed a quality of dilution; the bulk of his films were, after all, driven by the relentless schedules of an industrial studio production mindset – first at Kong Ngee and then at Shaw Brothers – and were never wholly free of commercial exigencies. The Shaw studio environment operated under extremely controlled circumstances, with the autocratic figure of Run Run Shaw holding sway over the whole system. Directors were beholden to a rigid round-the-clock schedule with

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[60]   Although King Hu retains the director credit for Swordsman, it was widely reported that he left the production early, leaving it to be finished by Ching Siu--tung and producer Tsui Hark as co-directors. (Teo 1997, 169)

overlapping productions[61] and very few had a say in the material assigned to them. Personal subjects came second to keeping up with the latest trends..

In spite of all of this, I maintain that it would be too cynical to discount Chor Yuen's work as solely the extension of economic demand. Andrew Sarris suggested that an auteur must, across a group of films "exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature. The way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels" (Sarris 562). In the comprehensive view of Chor Yuen's works, there can be little question that an authorial presence is felt, both through thematic and stylistic motifs. Proceeding from the social, cultural, and demographic formations of Hong Kong during the 1960s and 1970s, we may see how Chor's films both reflected their milieu, and acted upon it. Rather than considering the work compromised by the constraints and pacing of the studio system, we can instead tease out the ways in which Chor Yuen combined thematic consistency, a virtuosic formal elegance, and revisionist genre conventions to consolidate an artistic and ideological expression, and still grant an accessible immediacy within the mass entertainment format. In fact, it is perhaps due in many ways to the delimitations of genre, and the homogenizing backdrop of a mechanical production style, that those aspects of personal style that we recognize as being 'auteurist' in nature can become more apparent to us.

Chor Yuen first embarked on his film career as a screenwriter and often worked from his own scripts throughout his directorial career. At Shaw Brothers, projects were dictated overwhelmingly by current fashions, ticket sales, and sometimes the whims of overseas investors[62], but Chor's versatility and commercial successes earned him enough favour with Run Run Shaw to allow a degree of conditional autonomy.[63] Chor also served as the scriptwriter on

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[61]　When Chor Yuen first arrived at Shaw Brothers, each director had their assigned crew, and only Chang Cheh was at liberty to freely choose his writers, editors and team. The turnover time for feature productions was between 40–60 days. This was still a luxurious pace compared to Chor's Cantonese films before signing with Shaw, most of which were shot in 2–3 weeks (Chor 39).

[62]　In an anecdote recounted in *Chor Yuen, Director,* Chor reveals that Run Run Shaw called him off the set to an investor's party attended by rich tycoons from the Chaozhou region, including the noted Chaozhou opera actress Xiao Nanying. At Xiao's request, Shaw instructed Chor to direct *Farewell to a Warrior* (1976) with her as the star. As a Chaozhou dialect opera film, Shaw knew full well it would lose money at the box-office, but considered the gesture to be a good investment. The film lasted only three days in theatres (Chor 48).

[63]　"Run Run Shaw loved that film [*Duel for Gold*] and asked Chang Cheh to have a look. I did not know what Chang Cheh thought of the film, but I had the feeling he approved of what I had produced because my path was quite smooth during my tenure at Shaws. Once I handed in my script to Mr. Shaw, he would let me choose my cast and proceed with the production" (Chor 37).

the great majority of his Shaw films, mostly under his pseudonym 'Chin Yu'.[64] For the stories he adapted from popular *wuxia* literature, such as those by Jin Yong or Gu Long, Chor liberally re-wrote or condensed the elaborate serial plots and expansive character lists to suit his interests and the needs of the screen (Chor 39). As a result, these films regularly diverged from the original stories, or adapted just a fragment of a larger narrative. Due to the popularity of the New School *wuxia* literature, Chinese audiences were often already well-versed in the original novels, and had little difficulty picking up on these variations.

While always keeping an eye toward commercial considerations, Chor Yuen's artistic signature remains written into his works. Despite operating under tight studio controls, Chor's identifiable aesthetic flair and romantic sentimentality mark his films and convey a palpable sense of holistic congruity. Due to the professional freedoms allowed him at different levels of the production process, those coherent themes that Chor would return to throughout his career may be treated as expressions of an auteur persona. Additionally, drawing upon his humanistic values and aspects of his Cantonese cultural background, Chor introduced a strain of change into the Shaw formula. Through an elucidation of his film style, we may see how Chor Yuen's *wuxia* films in particular constituted an intervention into the genre, reshaping it to suit the needs of both the studio, and more broadly, the needs of an emerging Hong Kong sense of cultural identity. In this way, Chor Yuen's films are an articulation of Shaw Brothers' agency in social and identitary politics, while simultaneously expressing Chor Yuen's own interests as a filmmaker and artist: his aesthetics, his politics, and his sensibilities.

From the outset of Chor Yuen's Gu Long cycle with *Killer Clans* we may mark the shift in the generic conventions that prevailed in the earlier Mandarin New Style *wuxia*. This was of course deliberate, the product of Chor Yuen's desire to bring a new literary and human dimension to the swordplay film as an alternative to the repetitive revenge cycles and empowerment fantasies that dominated the new machismo of the genre. Instead Chor emphasized the social and emotional aspects of the *jianghu*. Like the 1960a *wuxia*, Chor presented this world as a metonymic representation of a Chinese community where traditional values and institutional authority were inherently suspect, but his means of engaging with this underlying cultural critique differed both in its sly cynicism and its deflation of the masculinist

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[64] Out of his overall body of forty-seven films for the Shaws, Chor Yuen's name appeared on only ten as scriptwriter. However, under his pseudonym "Chin Yu" he is credited for an additional twenty-one films, including most of his Gu Long swordplay adaptations (source: The Shaw Screen pp379–411).

measures of heroism. In Chor Yuen's films, the introspective, morally-centered hero, a projection of Chor's own romantic, bourgeois humanism, seeks a release from the political strife around him, in order to indulge the cultivation of the self. This is not an esoteric spiritual journey, but one conceived in simple human terms; these characters live for poetry, for companionship, and for the pursuit of individual happiness.

The world this romantic hero struggles to retreat from is a vacillating metaphor; it carries within it a deep historical formation of quasi-religious Chinese traditions and patriarchal values that clash with the individualistic, westernized secularity of a modern progressive sensibility; at the same time, this *jianghu* resonates with the chaotic frequencies of modern society, capitalism, self-interest and political anxiety. Chor's swordsman hero prefers to live on the fringes of this world. He mirrors Hong Kong's negotiation of the encounter between modernity (inevitably conceived as 'western') and a Chinese cultural history that has become locked in a state of ancient fixity.

CHAPTER 4

King Hu, Chang Cheh, and New Style Wuxia

In the study of the Shaw Brothers era, one challenge for researchers has been the historically uneven accessibility of filmic texts, and the degree to which this can shape the contours of the criticism and discourse on the whole. In the case of the Shaw canon, the scarcity of materials meant that, prior to the restorations by Celestial that began in 2002, the scholarship (especially in English) was often based upon an incomplete sample. A huge swathe of the Shaw filmography – itself representing a significant share of Hong Kong's overall cinematic output during the studio era – was still out of reach. Although archives and film journals provided critical and industrial overviews, sources for the actual film texts could be as erratic as patchwork prints that had survived global Chinatown theatre circuits, or multi-generational bootleg VHS dubs shared within networks of enthusiasts**.** In terms of the *wuxia pian*, the scholarly eye rested largely upon the view of the subject that was most readily apparent. As a result, the position of *haute-relief* in the study and historiography of the swordplay genre mostly focused on two names: King Hu and Chang Cheh.[65]

On the surface, these two figures presented a play in contrasts. Hu was seen as an independent-minded visionary artist, who traced graceful, philosophical portraits of Chinese culture with an aggressively modernist formal stylization, and emphasized powerful women in leading action roles. Chang is often portrayed as an unapologetic chauvinist, who churned out gory, sensational, and intensely homosocial films to feed a martial-arts craze sweeping the world. These descriptions of course paint a gross caricature of both directors, but still summarize the broad tenor of discussions surrounding them. King Hu and Chang Cheh are not simply held to be the seminal figures of the *wuxia pian*, but are often discussed as if occupying virtually binary positions, charged with the opposing polarities of auteur *vs.* studio, feminist *vs.* masculinist,

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[65]   Here I must add as a caveat the case of martial arts choreographer-turned-director Lau Kar-leung, whose work is of tremendous significance, both to Shaw Brothers and to martial-arts cinema on the whole. Lau was promoted to director during the Shaws' localization stage in the early 1970s, and was active with the studio until they closed in 1985. Although certainly one of the most important and celebrated names attached to Hong Kong action cinema, Lau's especial focus on authentic Southern-style martial arts culture places him primarily within the sphere of the kung fu film genre and somewhat apart from this discussion of the *wuxia pian.*

high-art *vs.* popular culture, and so on, leaving their contemporaries somewhat hidden in their shadow. In the interests of creating a more holistic portrait of the development of the *wuxia* picture through the Shaw years, I offer up for consideration the films of Chor Yuen.

To be clear, Chor Yuen has not been completely overlooked. During the 1970s, and up to the early 1980s, his prodigious output was closely followed by Hong Kong audiences and critics. In the book *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions*, Stephen Teo outlined Chor's career in the Cantonese cinema of the 1950s-60s, and credited his films for defining the "mock-modern aura" of the moment (Teo 1997, 57). According to Teo, Chor formed the crucial "link between the old generation of Cantonese directors and the new generation who would make their mark from the mid-70s onwards" (ibid, 58). Since the Shaw Brothers restorations, appreciation of Chor Yuen has broadened considerably and triggered a resurgence of interest in his films. Yet there remains nonetheless a relative paucity of material discussing just how that link between generations was forged. In the *wuxia* genre, Chor Yuen may indeed be one of the most significant figures of the discourse, but in order to delineate him as such, it is helpful to locate him in relation to those other two well-known figures, Hu and Chang. As part of this process, the existing critical model will need to be somewhat redrawn, and as a result, one of those two figures will be gently (and with all due respect) nudged aside. In the following section I first discuss in brief the overlapping and contrasting styles of King Hu and Chang Cheh, and summarize the premise of the binary that arranged them along 'masculine-feminine' (or *yin-yang*) thematics and aesthetics. Following this, I put forward an alternative view; that the Hu/Chang binary is insufficient to account for the developing identity of the *wuxia pian* through the 1970s, and perhaps overstates Hu's direct influence on this process. Instead, I propose a reconfigured binary along the following lines: Chang Cheh represented the dominant model that shaped the martial arts imaginary at this stage, and provided the blueprint for both the New Style and kung fu heroes; Chor Yuen's large body of *wuxia* films effected the most palpable and influential form of resistance to this model, and provided alternate forms of Chinese self-identification through his redirection of the genre's conventions. By way of comparison between Chang Cheh and Chor Yuen, I believe that we may see both the elements of Chor's auteurism and his larger impact on the *wuxia pian* in greater distinction.

While both Hu and Chang drew heavily on influences like Hollywood westerns or the Japanese *chanbara* genre, each also brought their own distinct Chinese cultural attitudes to the

screen. King Hu's contributions included a vibrant new stylism, fusing an intensely researched historicity and affinity with northern culture, with a singular brand of jarring, fragmentary montage. Swordsmen and swordswomen in Hu's films seem to float on the edge of the supernatural, performing remarkable feats, bounding like astronauts (thanks to off-screen trampolines), and traversing space in blink-fast truncated edits that are as much about the expressive effects of cinema as they are about any sense of superhuman reality. They are in the main defined by their lack of weight and mortal substance. In the words of Sek Kei, martial arts for Hu "starts with the corporeal and progresses into the sublimated, ethereal incorporeal. This transcendence from the physical to the metaphysical is the ultimate Chinese cultural ideal" (Kei 2004, 15). By contrast, Chang Cheh's brand of swordplay was less esoteric. Advancing a far more vulgarized vision of the *xia,* Chang invested his New Style films with a renewed focus on the athletic masculine body pushed to its human limits. Kei identified in Chang's films a "physicalisation of violence" (ibid.) that not only brought knight-errantry down to a more brute-force level, but made it *visceral* above all else. The physicality of his male heroes owes less to traditional Confucian gentlemanly ideals than to an animal grit, made manifest through torment, bloodletting, and the ultimate dissolution of the body into its component parts. Although Chang's protagonists often have rough-hewn commoner origins, he elevates their emotions and personal conflicts to a level of theatrical excess. Unlike King Hu's engagement with historical periods, Chang's young male heroes do not navigate history so much as they make new histories. He infuses their victories and defeats with an epic quality of militaristic grandeur and beatific suffering, granting them the majesty of operatic heroes commanding the stage.

In the films of King Hu, we see a curious mix of historical fetishism and political affiliation that was not entirely synchronized to the larger spirit of the New Style. All of Hu's *wuxia* films are set in a carefully reproduced Ming Dynasty, symbolically the last 'real' Chinese empire (under ethnic Han rule) before it was overtaken by successive regimes of foreign occupation and exploitation. Hu's knights are usually patriots, inextricably enmeshed in political causes or serving government authority. For example, Golden Swallow in *Come Drink with Me* is a member of a government officer's family, while in *Dragon Gate Inn / Long Men Ke Zhan* (1967) and *Touch of Zen / Xia Nü* (1971) the *xia* characters act to protect the families of virtuous officials wronged by corrupt courtiers, demonstrating their allegiance to a Confucian civil hierarchy. Hu's swordsmen and swordswomen alike tend to exude all of the iconic traits of the

xia. In their staunch, unflappable devotion to duty, an abstractly nationalistic undercurrent is emphasized by their uniformity of purpose and their frequent affiliations with political factions. As observed by Bordwell, Hu's heroes demonstrate "an aloof severity far removed from the sweaty anguish of Chang's mutilated swordsmen . . . their psychology is rudimentary at best" (Bordwell 2000, 161). Their heroism is galvanized through collective action, and an ideological commitment to China, leaving little room for personal affectations, psychological depth, or individual desires.

Chang Cheh's *wuxia pian* is less engaged with historical constructions of nationalism; as observed by Sam Ho "if there is anything historical [in Chang's films], it is a reflection of the mood in the 1960s Hong Kong" (Ho 2003, 117). Chang's aesthetics of violence were well in step with the volatility of the early 1960s and the sense of malaise around China's Cultural Revolution on the Mainland. Authority figures, government, and traditional institutions were all viewed with equal wariness and skepticism. For Chang, his films spoke to forward motion, self-strengthening, and revolution, themes consistent with Chang's background as a public intellectual and cultural officer in the KMT Nationalist movement prior to working in Hong Kong as a filmmaker.[66] Chang's anti-traditional bent and avowed influences from Peking opera may seem at odds, but instead this shows his personal communion and reconciliation with China's past and present. An avid follower (and onetime practitioner) of Peking opera, Chang was disappointed by the devaluation of the Peking opera during the Cultural Revolution. He believed the northern opera style was inherently revolutionary and anti-establishment (Chang 143–44), and he sought to revive this spirit through his masculinized *wuxia* cinema.

By Hong Kong standards, King Hu's filmography was relatively sparse[67] over his thirty year career. He was primarily a stylist of the *wuxia pian*, with some variations in the *shenguai* mode. In actual fact, Hu made only one *wuxia* film for Shaw Brothers, *Come Drink With Me* / *Da Zui Xia* (1966), which is now widely credited for revitalizing the swordplay genre and

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[66] In Shanghai, while Chang was still in his early twenties, and despite never being officially a member of the party, he was appointed by the KMT to the position of commissioner of the Cultural Movement Committee (CMC), a bureau of the central government. After the defeat of the Nationalists in the Chinese Civil War, Chang retreated to Taiwan with the KMT government. After growing disillusioned by political infighting, he later moved to Hong Kong to get involved with the film industry as a writer and director (see: Chang pp40-51).

[67] The exact count of King Hu's films varies between 13-17 features. Some of these include early collaborations with Li Han Hsiang, a segment in the anthology film *The Four Moods* / *Xi Nu Ai Le* (1970), and an abortive comeback when he left the production of *Swordsman* (*Xiao'ao Jianghu,* 1990) over creative differences with the producer Tsui Hark. (Teo 1997, 265)

cementing the figure of the *xianü* (female knight errant) into the martial-arts cinema. After *Come Drink with Me*'s success, Hu broke with Shaw Brothers and relocated to Taiwan, There he made films like the wildly successful *Dragon Inn / Longmen Kezhan* (1967), and his ambitious *Touch of Zen / Xia Nü* (1970) which took three years to shoot, at considerable cost. *Touch of Zen* performed poorly in both Taiwan and Hong Kong, and passed without fanfare in Asian markets (Teo 2009, 143). However, five years after its initial release, the film was embraced enthusiastically by foreign critics when it screened at Cannes in 1975, garnering both the Technical Grand Prize and a nomination for the Palme d'Or. After this, the international interest in the *wuxia pian* focused mainly on King Hu, with scholars looking to him as the guarantor of the genre's artistic and cultural relevance. This view is only partially complete, and informed by a retrospective gaze that suggests that King Hu's position in contemporary (and largely western) scholarship is reciprocal to his importance in the Chinese film industry of his time. Stephen Teo acknowledges that "for a time, Hu was the only director from Hong Kong to be taken seriously by Western critics . . . his international renown has superseded the reputations of most of his contemporaries" (Teo 1997, 87). There can be no question that King Hu's films are remarkable works that demonstrate a vibrant personal vision and stylistic virtuosity, but even so, as argued by David Desser, it may be questionable whether Hu's swordplay films exerted the most significant influence on the developing *wuxia* cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. Desser points instead to Chang Cheh's films as the true force of change in that period, asserting that it was "almost exclusively, the film style, themes and motifs apparent in the works of Zhang Che [Chang Cheh] that shifted the martial arts films away from the style, themes and stars of both the Cantonese and Mandarin martial arts film" (Desser 17).

This evaluation mitigates the seminal status of *Come Drink with Me* and suggests instead that its impact was poignant but momentary. It is an interesting point to unpack; although King Hu's 'discovery' by the international film community in 1975 sparked fresh interest in his work, his direct and substantive influence on the *wuxia* genre's growth during the 1960s and 1970s is less certain. After leaving Shaw Brothers, King Hu's output was irregular and spaced far apart in comparison to the unrelenting stream of swordplay films pouring out of Hong Kong, the majority of which were in imitation of Chang Cheh's style, if not produced at Shaw directly under Chang's oversight.

While the prominence of the female knight (*xianü*) enjoyed a surge in popularity alongside the male hero in the latter 1960s, this was not a significant paradigm shift in of itself. In the Hong Kong film industry, female stars had long held sway over the box-offices, and *xianü* were already common fixtures in Cantonese and Mandarin *wuxia pian*. In this sense, it may be more accurate to offer that *Come Drink with Me* served only to extend the popularity of female heroism and so-called 'feminine aesthetics' a short while longer before they were eventually overwhelmed by a wave of machismo initiated by the success of Chang Cheh's *One-Armed Swordsman* (1967).[68] As Desser observes, Shaw Brothers films in the "masculinist mode" reigned over the box office from 1967–1972 (ibid. 26–27), and the reasons for this can be traced to the increasing cultural shift away from the female-centered star stables of major studios like Shaw and Cathay. Some of this may also be due to the increased influence of Western-style action films like the James Bond series, which centered around swaggering male leads. However, a large part of this shift must also be attributed directly to Chang Cheh's deliberate effort to push masculinity to the fore.

Chang Cheh himself coined the phrase *yanggang* (which translates as 'staunch' or 'rigid masculinity') to describe his new ideal of Chinese heroism, "comprehending it as machismo and all its implications of boldness, unrestrained exercise of strength, lust for fighting, and martyrdom" (Law 2003, 140). For Chang, *yanggang* was a self-conscious corrective for the prevailing archetype of the Chinese as 'the weak men of Asia'. His heroes are defined by their thematic youthfulness; they are knights-errant as troubled teens, with stubborn streaks and a self-destructive indifference in their forward momentum to challenge and tear down an unjust society. His work is invariably punctuated by a virtuosic embrace of gore and Grand Guignol-style excess that connoted a cynical, unvarnished, and unflinching realism. Honour, betrayal, vengeance, masochistic suffering, and a virile strain of machismo earned Chang's films a following among young, disaffected, mostly-male audiences, at first in Hong Kong, and later in

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[68]   Stephen Teo has taken issue with Desser's assertions by pointing out that *Come Drink with Me* inspired a chain of female *xia* movies: "Hu's greatest legacy in the martial arts cinema is that of the popularisation of the female knight-errant figure as a revitalising heroine in both the *wuxia* and kung fu forms. (…) The films starring Angela Mao and Helen Ma, together with such classics as the Shaw Brothers productions *The Fourteen Amazons* and *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan*, marked an as yet unrecognised high point of the female knight-errant wave in the early 1970s, which is definitely a legacy of Hu's *wuxia* cinema" (Teo 2009, 146). I cannot deny Hu's influence here, but it seems to me that Desser's point still applies; the films in the 'masculinized' mode were not only the most prolific portion of the New Style *wuxia,* but also represented a substantive shift in the genre *away* from the pre-existing feminine (and feminized) model.

movie grindhouses the world over. Operating interchangeably in both the kung fu and *wuxia* modes, Chang Cheh makes for an easy contrast with the seemingly more erudite, graceful, and feminine visions of King Hu. His films were instead brashly masculine, violently sensationalist attractions.

Following this rubric, Stephen Teo asserted that the defining measure of King Hu and Chang Cheh as "self-fashioning artists" is found in their portrayal of gender identities through their *xia* characters, respectively feminine and masculine (Teo 2009, 94). Putting a more sophisticated twist on the implicit binary of these two directors, Teo proposed a less oppositional reading, instead highlighting the "correlated and equivalent" qualities of the male and female *xia* figures, who are "relative to each other from the *yin* and *yang* perspective in the genre as a whole" (Teo 2009, 96). However, Teo also goes on to acknowledge that Chang Cheh "practically dominated the martial arts genre for some fifteen years" (ibid. 96) and that he remained "Shaws' most representative director of new school *wuxia* pictures" (ibid. 94). This introduces some doubt about the equilibrium of such a Hu-Chang binary, both in terms of the broader socio-cultural weight borne by their films, and as a historically contingent reading of the genre's development.

Discussions of King Hu's vision of the *wuxia* frequently invoke a feminine vocabulary that foregrounds the invocations of Chinese classical art, the dance-like grace of the fantasy martial-arts, and the ubiquitous presence of formidable female warriors. Undeniably, the recurring figure of the *xianü* in Hu's films does form a contrast with Chang Cheh's male-dominated world. Nonetheless, the supposed feminine qualities of his style are less clearly demarcated when removed from the context of a conventional Western reading of the *wuxia pian*. Although lauded for his showcasing of the female knight Golden Swallow in *Come Drink with Me*, the film also served to reintegrate the figure of the masculine hero into the female-dominated Mandarin cinema, with the role of Drunken Cat (Yueh Hua), the foppish itinerant beggar who is finally revealed to be a powerful martial-arts master who saves the day. While Cheng Pei Pei as Golden Swallow resonated with audiences, it was the male hero who can truly be said to have made a comeback in *Come Drink with Me*, as emphasized by the Chinese title of the film ("*Da Zui Xia*") which translates as "Great Drunken Knight'. This changeover in the film is signaled by the scene where Golden Swallow falls deferentially to her knees, and acknowledges Drunken Cat as her sifu (master). From this point onward, the film arguably continues as if Drunken Cat had

been the main character all along, driving home the idea of the male *xia* as the ultimate (if recondite) subject of the film.

The ongoing presence of the *xianü* in King Hu's works speaks to an integration of male and female heroism into the *wuxia* paradigm in united rather than polarized terms. However, for all the vaunted femininity of King Hu's film style, the physicalisation of gender is rarely made manifest. In their ethereality and in their expression of *xia* virtues, Hu's characters evince a peculiar desexualisation. In traditional Confucian philosophy, the physical body is seen as unimportant, secondary to social conduct in terms of constructing both gender *and* Chineseness.[69] In the attire of the male and female knights, the sexual body is obscured, and "its erasure works to produce femininity and masculinity socially" (Lu 100). In her use of male garb – in 'performing' masculinity – the *xianü* gains access to the chivalric codifications of the male *xia* (Louie 2011, 4). In this way, she becomes 'male' and 'Chinese' in the Confucian sense, with all of the attendant social conventions concerning self-governance and denial of bodily desires. While the film introduces other perturbations into this dynamic, this can still be seen in the sexual politics at work in *Touch of Zen*. The *xianü* Yang (while 'undercover' as a lady in normative feminine clothing) shares an amorous encounter with the scholar protagonist Gu, and later bears his child. In this relationship the portrayal of personal wants and desires seems oddly one-sided; Yang seems to approach her 'romancing' of Gu with a firm, enigmatically unsentimental resolve. Later, she releases her baby to Gu's care and dispassionately resumes her duties as a righteous female knight, displaying no undue angst or hesitation. The physical and emotional engagement in both sexual love and motherhood is largely obviated in order to preserve Yang's unanchored and androgynous *xia* essence. Following from this, it may be argued that King Hu's films, rather than expressing a truly 'feminine' imaginary, instead play upon a more asexual and transcendental motif, which deployed Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist imagery to elevate his characters to an idealized metaphysical state.

Conversely, the heroism that was popularly expressed through the majority of the New Style and kung fu films fully embraced the body and its physicality as the site of a resuscitated Chinese masculinity. In this sense, it was predominately the *yanggang* model that shaped the

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[69] Jie Lu explains how the traditional Confucian view of the visible male body was tied to both class and ethnic associations, pointing out that "the aesthetic disdain for the (male) body came to be based on its association with barbarians as well as with others of low social class such as entertainers, boxers, and acrobats. The *wen-wu* paradigm of masculinity is defined against a series of "others"—namely, minority/non-Han Chinese, women, and others of low social class" (Lu 112).

genre imagination of the *wuxia pian* through the late 1960s and into the 1970s, up to the point that it would be reformulated again by Chor Yuen. In the interests of creating a productive dialectical relationship between 'hard' and 'soft' sensibilities in the *wuxia* cinema, I suggest that the significant contributions of Chor Yuen's many Shaw swordplay films provide the most relevant counterpoint to the works of Chang Cheh.

Wuxia Masculinities: Wu and Wen

The binary of *yin* and *yang* is often invoked to describe the play of opposites in Chinese philosophical thought. While this comprises an understanding of gender and sexuality split along female/male lines, the *yin-yang* paradigm is also used to measure binary aspects in all things. The *yin-yang* iconography includes such complexes as soft/hard, cold/hot, wet/dry, moon/sun, negative/positive, spirit/mortal, shadow/light, concealed/visible, and deception/truth.

Stephen Teo identified in Chor Yuen's films a strong '*yin* aesthetic,' noting his preference for transparent screens or gauzes to mask the view of his environments, as well as the recurrence of poisons, "a stereotypically *yin*-feminine fashion of killing one's enemies" (Teo 2009, 154). Additionally one may note the prevalence of mists, moonlight, flowers, and an indulgence in excess ornamentation through Chor's mise-en-scene. Rosalind Galt noted that ornamentation is by association feminine and "surplus to masculine requirements. It likewise connotes the geopolitical outsider, the primitive whose absence regulates the central place of the European cultural order" (Galt 98). Through his engagement with this feminine iconography and its attendant orientalizing tendencies, it may be argued that Chor Yuen does demonstrate a heavily *yin*-inflected set of aesthetics, especially in contrast with Chang Cheh's fervent *yang* ideals and aesthetics. However, the natural comparison between these two directors suggests not only the conventional masculine and feminine *yin-yang* dynamic, but also one drawn along another Chinese philosophical binary: the *wu* and the *wen.*

The *wu-wen* is a traditional paradigm specifically directed to constructing and classifying Chinese masculinity. These terms already have a long history deriving from Chinese literature and theatre. In Peking opera, roles would often be classified along this divide. *Wu,* as we have seen in the etymology of the term '*wuxia*', indicates the military domain, and by association all the combative elements of male identity. The *wu* typology also places emphasis on a certain straightforwardness, loyalty to one's brothers, and an overriding sense of righteousness. In short,

wu is at the core of the *yanggang* hero of New Style swordplay. *Wen*, on the other hand, pertains to the civic domain, and traits of learning, judgement, and moral introspection, which are all traits of the scholar figure. Broadly speaking, *wen* evokes "those genteel, refined qualities that were associated with literary and artistic pursuits of the classical scholars, and can hereby be partly analysed as a leisure-class masculine model" (Louie 2002, 14). In Chinese literary and theatre traditions, this archetype was known as the *shusheng* (Teo 1997, 76). The *shusheng* can be seen as a reflection of the important role that the educated scholar class had in the bureaucracy of Imperial China. In this sense, the *wen* type was more highly regarded than the *wu* type (Lu 100). Despite his more effeminate physique, the traditional scholar figure evoked masculinity in equal measures to the *wu* type, and was seen as an attractive, romantic male ideal. While linked to class and government, the *wen* identity also connoted the realm of culture and sentiment. The scholar's educated refinement allowed him to appreciate the finer points of art, calligraphy, music, and poetry, placing him at the intersection of high culture and the pragmatic needs of civil society.

Classical Chinese literature often features heroes who strongly the embody characteristics of the *wu* – such as the mighty General Guan Yu[70] – or the *wen* – as with the travelling physician Wen Suchen.[71] These archetypes illustrate the fundamental validity of both conceptions of masculinity. However, beginning in the nineteenth century, China found itself appearing weak in the international arena, subdivided and otherwise bullied by foreign imperial powers like Great Britain and Japan. The implicit delicacy of the scholar-hero began to take on other associations, leading to the use of these "weak, tubercular heroes . . . to symbolise China's subjugated and weak condition which prevailed for about a hundred years from the Opium Wars to 1949" (Teo 1997, 77). Writer Lu Xun famously introduced the character of Ah Q,[72] a feeble, ineffectual variation on the *shusheng* persona, the "caricature of a Chinese loser, a fool who aspired to be smart and strong but who forever remained a fool because society looked down on his aspirations" (ibid.). The Ah Q model became a recognizable archetype for the Chinese male, one that spoke to a broad sense of fatalism that was increasingly felt by the Chinese people. After generations of strife and subjugation to foreign powers, the notion of China as the "sick men of

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[70] Guan Yu is a key character in classical Chinese historical novel *The Romance of Three Kingdom,* and a paradigmatic *wu* figure in Chinese imagination.

[71] Wen Suchen is the protagonist of *Yesou Puyan* (*The Humble Words of an Old Rustic*) by Xia Jingqu.

[72] Lu Xun created the character in the short story *The True Story of Ah Q / A Q Zhengzhuan*, published in 1921.

Asia" became pervasive through the image of the weak male in film and literature. In symbolic terms, "the absent father, father as loser, the single parent, the defunct family . . . signify the losing of the patriarchal state's grip on society and imagination" (Li 2008, 88).

Still, while the effete sentimentality of the *wen* protagonist made him seem frail, it also conferred a certain tragic romanticism. The weak male became a staple type of the Chinese filmic imagination, both as an object of desire, and as an emotionally self-indulgent counterpoint to the headlining female stars that dominated the cinema at that time. Scholar figures (in many instances played by actresses in male roles) proliferated in the period settings favoured by the Mandarin studios of the 1950s, cast opposite strong-willed or martially-powerful women. Toward the mid-1960s, the image of the Chinese male began to change, rejecting the self-defeating image of the effete man, and embracing a more assertive masculinity that reflected changing attitudes towards ethno-national spirit and anticolonial sentiment. Through the images of the swordsmen of the New Style *wuxia,* and the sculpted physiques of the kung fu fighters, the emerging, modern, affirmative Chinese identity of Hong Kong was being constructed in heavily masculinized terms.

Chang Cheh avowed that his films were responding to the feminine domination of the Hong Kong film industry since the postwar years – his attempt to return masculinity to a central role in cinema culture. However, the *wuxia* cinema's shift in tone away from the machismo of the *yanggang* aesthetic was not quite a pendulum swing back in the other direction. While making use of a *yin* aesthetic in his presentation of the swordplay imaginary, it is difficult to fully ascribe a 'feminine' characterization to Chor's works without touching upon the nuances of masculinity that also play a large role in his cinema. Here, the construct of *wu-wen* masculinity provides a useful, culturally-grounded metric for approaching and contextualizing the shifting identity of the *wuxia pian* at the point that Chor Yuen debuted his Gu Long film cycle. Besides the more conventional masculine-feminine dichotomy, there exists in Chor's work a discrete *wen* mode of softer, 'feminized' Chinese masculinity that provides insight into his auteur persona, and helps to locate his role in the development of the genre in relation to a filmmaker like Chang Cheh. Through this alternate invocation of Chinese identity, Chor eludes many of the gender proscriptions of *yanggang* cinematic machismo in order to create a more fluid and amenable 'dream of China' based on both hard and soft, the masculine and the feminine, and the *wu* and the *wen*.

The Yanggang Hero

The male heroes of Chang Cheh's films were not entirely devoid of romantic or tragic qualities. In Chang's early films, like *Trail of the Broken Blade* (1967) or *The One-Armed Swordsman* (1967) his protagonists are sometimes portrayed with an abundance of *wen* sentiment, as weak or melancholic young men who cannot assert their true *wu* spirit. Sam Ho has suggested that the romantic subplots found in these films were transitional attempts to retain some of the 'woman-centered' elements of the earlier cinema, noting that "Chang's heroes are often torn between male and female sensibilities, forced to make a choice between the *wuxia* and *wenyi*[73] ways of life" (Ho 2003, 116). In this way, Chang reinforced a binary opposition between the sexes that reflected a fatalistic incompatibility that drives men away from 'feminine' influences and excessive introspection.

The prioritizing of body-over-mind and action-over-reflection, in Chang's *wuxia* films has been described by Jerry Liu as an "altered state of mindlessness" (J. Liu 161). These heroes heedlessly commit themselves to an unwavering path of brotherhood, violence, and self-destructive righteousness, to the exclusion of all other concerns. In the *yanggang* iconography, forms of revenge and bodily suffering were essential to this act of masculinity. Vengeance must be served, preferably at great physical cost to the hero and with one's corporeal suffering commensurate with the necessity of retribution. Liu discussed the recurrence of "virile martyrdom" in Chang's works, tying this into an orgasmic release from repression that underscores the "recondite homosexuality" of the films (ibid. 160). While this has been a hotly debated aspect of Chang's work, I feel that this queer *frisson* is less germane than the way that Chang's predilection for martyrdom reinforces the *wu* ideal in his films.

Although romantic love was one of the new ingredients brought to the *wuxia* genre by the New School writers, sexual relationships were still largely forbidden to the martial artist due to the persistent trope that this would sap his fighting prowess (Liu, Damu, 58). In Chang's films, when women appear, they are usually relegated to a supportive or decorative function that represents the pull of society against the hero's urge to fulfill his *yanggang* destiny. Filial devotion and romantic love between men and women are subordinate to themes of male

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[73] 'Wenyi' literally means 'literary arts'. It is often used to describe the melodramatic mode in Chinese cinema, which is often considered a 'women's genre'

friendship, individualism, and righteousness (Law 2003, 139). As observed by Jie Lu, for the *wu* hero "homosocial space is a precondition: it reinforces ideologies of brotherhood and loyalty, and precludes female temptation through abstinence" (Lu 111). The broken body of the martyr is a performative means to attain *yanggang* ideals in the accommodating absence of women or heterosexual relationships that might compromise these heroes' status as martial *wu* paragons. In Lu's words, "violence dramatizes the body and constitutes the body as a symbolic terrain for representing masculinity" (ibid. 109). In this context, masculinity achieves its utmost embodiment only at the cusp of its destruction, by offering the circumstances to portray "physical strength and endurance, the experience of agency, and the heroism of dying for loyalty and righteousness" (ibid.).

In the malleable mythic domain of the *wuxia pian*, the theme of lionizing defeat takes on the dramatic distanciation of romantic tragedy – as history rewritten as a moral victory. In the act of self-sacrifice, whether in the name of nation or of personal ideals, the *xia* is validated, infused with a dignity befitting a doomed hero from the Peking opera stage. This stoic resignation to the wages of fate is especially important in the films of Chang Cheh. As articulated by Sek Kei, "death placed on such a lofty height is no longer a tragedy but self-fulfillment through sacrifice" (Kei 2004, 16). For Chang, no noble goal is obtained without violence and death. This coheres well with the anti-tradition, anti-establishment themes of his work, and the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s when Chang first molded his style.

In spite of the anti-traditional rebelliousness ascribed to the *yanggang* heroes, the iconoclasm attributed to Chang may be overstated. Underlying the act of rebellion in his *wuxia* works is also a reactionary call to recover a sense of Chinese pride from a reimagined crucible of the past. In the films of the New Style, heroes may be rebels loyal to a cause, students loyal to their teachers, or simply men loyal to their homosocial partners. Chang's heroes are often motivated by their personal honour and commitment to other men. These elective kinships are a fundamental component of the school loyalties of the *jianghu*. These reformulated filial bonds in Chang's films simply reflect a remixed variation of the old paternalistic orders, predicated on a recouped Chinese cultural chauvinism, and built on a social currency of bloody vengeance.

As noted earlier, Chang's characters are not necessarily exclusively stoic and masculine; Chang also showed a tendency to invest his male heroes with an ample share of melancholy and "*yin* softness". However, this *yin* dimension usually proved to be less an asset than a weakness

that needed to be overcome. As noted by Law Kar, these heroes "become born again through the guidance and encouragement of female and male friends, gradually regaining the confidence and self-respect to become *yanggang* again" (Law 2003, 140). The nationalist undercurrents present in Chang's vision of *yanggang* become rather weighty here. For Chang, the movement towards realizing a *wu* masculinity again (that is to say, becoming strong again) is the most important element of his characters, which associates youthful rebellion with the self-strengthening necessary for Chinese people to regain their ethnic pride. The means to achieve this are axiomatic for Chang. No matter how brooding or sentimental or weak the *yanggang* hero may begin, by the end, his actualization is attained in combative masculinity. The ultimate goal is a martyrdom to this ideal. Chang's enshrinement of individualism is complicated by this ideal of a horizontal brotherhood of self-empowering men who deliver China from weakness and institutional domination. This cannot be treated apolitically. When such a hero dies in a *wuxia* film, his 'brothers' will avenge him, and finish the job he started. Likewise, when a hero dies (martyred, defiant, righteous) at a film's conclusion, the torch is implicitly is passed to the audience, as if asking "he died boldly for his ideals; can you do any less?"

Stephen Teo has argued that Chang's films should not be seen as nationalistic, but rather that "the aesthetics of violence and the individualism of death override any sense of nationalism" (Teo 2009, 98). Teo adds the caveat that these films may be culturalist or historicist, as facets of an "abstract nationalism" (ibid.), but here I feel that these ideas are nonetheless bound together into a form of cultural chauvinism. While superseding the sense of a historical or geopolitical 'nation', this still engages in in the act of self-defining through a rhetoric of aggression. In this sense, Chang's films may be seen as empowering in their relation to Hong Kong's quasi-national identity, but even such abstract nationalisms carry with them the dangers of a re-essentialized Chinese superiority, in terms that occlude women, and deny other identitary striations in this 'new heroism' complex. In short, Chang's *yanggang* works romanticize masculine power and validate death in the pursuit of a cause. For Chang this offers an opportunity to transcend a corrupt world with uncompromising glory, and leave an example for others to follow.

By contrast the heroes in Chor Yuen's works typically eschew this kind of didacticism or valorized fatalism. These films often underscore the human cost of vengeance, and the ultimate futility of violence as a means of actualizing positive outcomes. Death, in other words, is not meaningful, and revenge is no longer redemptive. This comes across potently in films like *The*

Jade Tiger (1977) and *Death Duel* (1977), which feature apocalyptic outcomes where the sense of waste and loss seems to overwhelm any feeling of triumph. Similarly, in *Full Moon Scimitar* (1979) the hero's quest to avenge his family name only leads him along a path of corruption. The underlying philosophy in Chor's *wuxia* films cleaves toward the humanist dilemmas of living in a flawed world. For Chor, individualism does not lead back to a masculine strengthening of society. His *xia* do not walk the 'hard' path of resistance, but instead follow a 'soft' path of inward retreat from the cannibalistic ecosystem of the *jianghu.* Unyielding self-sacrifice and transcendence through a commitment to archaic militaristic ideals does not change society for the better. Heroes in Chor's films are not, as in Chang's, simply looking for a good death.

Chor Yuen and the Romantic Hero

Throughout his career, Chor Yuen favoured the *wen* aesthetic for his male protagonists, demonstrating a marked affection for sentimentality, intellectualism, soft manners, and poetic melancholy. Prior to the 1960s, this was already a conventional portrayal of masculinity in Chinese movies, but the model of the masculine romantic does not necessarily evaporate from Chor's work in deference to fashion. As implemented by Chor, the *wen* male type was more than just a token of disempowerment like the 'Ah Q' persona, or a prop to emphasize the glamorous power of a popular starlet; the romantic frivolity of these sentimental swordsmen instead provided a perfect foil for the hypocrisy of society. Chor's swordsmen tend to follow a tragic mode, but they differ from the doomed mythic martyrs found in Chang Cheh's canon. They are defined by their commitment to live on in a world full of intrigues and illusion, rather than by an enraptured, violent deliverance from the same. Rather than exhibiting traits of *yanggang* rigidity, their tendencies are more yielding, pliant to the influences of emotion, sentiment, whimsy, and reason. Honour is secondary to peace and self-reflection. Even as this makes them more flexible, it also makes them vulnerable; they are romantically flawed figures, whose passions might still consume them. Through Chor's *wuxia* films, the sensitive male becomes transfigured (but not erased) by the traditional masculine trappings of the martial arts genre, and is reborn as a reluctant warrior. Increasingly, the *wu* would be downplayed, and the *wen* aspect would become the core attribute of these characters.

Despite the violent setting of the *wuxia pian*, the quintessential Chor Yuen swordplay heroes are not rebels or soldiers of martial clans, but instead poets, free-thinkers, and

melancholic souls. These characters are defined by their aspect of what Teo identifies as *qing,* a Chinese term denoting emotion, "emphasising affection, tenderness, romanticism and a fateful, tragic essence of love" (Teo 2009, 152). This follows the thread of the male sentimental hero from Chor Yuen's melodramas; lovesick losers, writers, or artists; sophisticates too talented and too delicate for a dog-eat-dog world. Many of these *xia* also exhibit superficial weaknesses that contribute a touch of fragile humanity, as with the consumptive Li Xunhuan who periodically coughs blood into a delicate handkerchief (*The Sentimental Swordsman; Return of the Sentimental Swordsman*), or Chu Liuxiang who nurses a persistent sniffle due to a sinus condition (*Clans of Intrigue; Legend of the Bat; Perils of the Sentimental Swordsman*). Fu Hung-hsueh (from *Magic Blade*) and Li Xunhuan are portrayed as heartbroken drifters, drowning in past regrets, while Lu Xiaofeng (*Clan of Amazons; Duel of the Century*) is a hopeless philanderer. Across the spectrum, a predisposition for alcoholism prevails, but like their other 'weaknesses' these traits never impinge on the martial abilities of the heroes. They are merely tokens that enrich their tragic-romantic cachet.

The majority of Chor's protagonists are gentlemen; privileged, urbane, and possessing a personalized sense of civic duty that derives more from human empathy than from social propriety. Some of these men keep good company, like the effete master-thief Chu Liuxiang, or the rakish detective Lu Xiaofeng. Both Chu and Lu are frequently introduced onscreen hosting small intimate dinner gatherings of fellow expatriates or retirees from the *jianghu.* Others, like Third Master (*Death Duel*) or Li Xunhuan, have abandoned their estates and holdings and live in virtual fugue states of disillusionment and self-exile. In the film *The Jade Tiger,* the central character Zhao Wuji begins as a noble and dutiful son of a martial clan, but by the film's conclusion he renounces his name and flees the *jianghu,* arriving finally at the disaffected stage where many of Chor's other characters begin.

To emphasize the soft *wen* traits of Chor Yuen's swordsmen, the aspects of the *wu* in their visual presentations are usually conspicuously downplayed and replaced with visible signs that more closely evoke their refined *wen* manners. The wardrobe of Chang Cheh's *xia,* particularly in the latter 1970s, became almost circus-like in its eccentricities, with an array of sleeveless robes, colourful half-shirts, and odd tunics with cutaway chests, all the better to reveal the musculature of Chang's heroes. By contrast, Chor very rarely depicts his leading men in any garb that exposes their bodies, and the bronzed, oiled torsos of the kung fu fighters are nowhere

to be seen. Instead, Chor's swordsmen are often attired in rich garments; their soft pastel robes and decorative accessories never appear to get dirty (though artful bloodstains are sometimes permitted). Rough fabrics, furs, chains, or studded leather, long used as costume elements in martial arts films to indicate rugged living, practicality, and bestial power, are largely avoided in favour of the trappings of delicacy and elegance; flowing silks and satins, brocades and jewellery. This is especially evident with Third Master's shimmering golden robe in *Death Duel*, or Lu Xiaofeng's rainbow-stripped tunic in *Duel of the Century.* The image of the *xia* dressed all in black is sometimes used by Chor to depict solemn, pragmatic, or emotionally-guarded characters who appear as foils to the central hero, such as Yen Shi-san in *Death Duel,* or Yi Tienhong in *Clans of Intrigue* and *Legend of the Bat*). There are exceptions to this rule, as in the black-attired heroes of *Killer Clans* (1976) or *Magic Blade* (1976). In these cases, the colour is used to show an emotional transformation, with heroes who first appear stoic, but who are later revealed to possess an inner softness and sentimentality. For the most part, the *xia* heroes in Chor's pictures tend to be effusive in both their manner and in their sartorial presentation, which aligns them with the romantic, scintillating excess of their beautified and unreal environments.

This de-emphasis of the *wu* aspect is also demonstrated through the mise-en-scene in other ways. The strong association that *wuxia* heroes typically have with their weapons speaks to their military class identity, and acts as one of the primary forms of distinction between the *wuxia* and kung fu modes. Stephen Teo noted that the graceful sword-fighting styles of the *wuxia pian* were often considered inherently more feminine than the more physical and masculine kung fu styles (Teo 2009, 154), but Chor takes this aspect further with the design of his characters. Several of Chor's favourite swordsman protagonists do not carry swords at all. While capable of picking up whatever weapons might be available when necessary, they do not advertise their warlike qualities. Instead, they may carry implements with more genteel associations. Chu Luxiang does not carry a weapon, but instead a simple (though extraordinarily durable) folding fan. He uses this both unfurled as a 'soft' tool that redirects or deceives assailants, or folded as a 'hard' implement that can parry or strike, showing his flexibility between these two sensibilities. In *Clans of Intrigue* (1977), this causes much consternation for the ruthless but principled assassin Yi Tienhong who challenges Chu but is unable to land a hit. Eventually, the frustrated Yi Tienhong brings Chu a sword so they can finish their duel properly. "I prefer to attack with a sword, as it can define the strong and the weak" he says.

Another variation on this theme is seen with the eponymous hero of *The Sentimental Swordsman* films, Li Xunhuan. Nicknamed "Little Dagger Li", he also wields a folded fan, though one that conceals his 'flying daggers,' tiny darts that he can flick out with deadly accuracy. The suave but foppish detective Lu Xiaofeng carries no weapon at all, but is a master of the 'Linxi Fingers' technique, which allows him to catch opponents' blades daintily between his thumb and forefinger and hold them in a vice-like grip. When Chor's *xia* do carry obvious, 'manly' weapons, such as Fu Hung-hsueh's thick cleaver-like sword (*Magic Blade*), or Xiao Shiyilang's iron spear (*Swordsman and Enchantress*), even then things are rarely as they seem. For the *yanggang* style characters of Chang Cheh's films, weapons tend to reflect the straightforward, uncomplicated, masculine qualities of their users; typically they will wield a single, simple blade with no elaboration, while leaving gimmick weapons to the more crafty and sinister villains (Lui & Yiu, 169). The signature weapons used by Chor's heroes often reflect the *yin* qualities of the hidden or unseen. They may conceal deceptive mechanisms or traps that reveal themselves at the desperate climax of a film, as with Fu's sword that fires its blade attached to a length of chain, or Xiao's spear that contains an array of smaller weapons built into it. The thematic play of *yin* illusion and misdirection in this way becomes imbued into the fighting styles of even Chor's more macho-appearing heroes.

Tracing out the *wu-wen* dichotomy in Chor's *wuxia* heroes, it is clear that these characters also seem to possess ample quantities of *wu* traits in addition to their *wen* traits, as denoted by their generally exceptional fighting prowess. Naturally, such supposed binaries rarely perform flawlessly the exclusion of their Other. The traditional *xia* in literature and film has historically straddled such distinctions by exhibiting a balance of both *wu* and *wen*. This serves to emphasize the hero's level of accomplishment by fulfilling a classical ideal that all men are supposed to work towards (Louie 2011, 4). In the Hong Kong martial-arts cinema made after the mid-sixties, this balance, and the value placed upon it, tilted sharply towards *wu* masculinity. In this sense, Chor Yuen's Gu Long cycle reintroduced the aspects of 'soft' masculinity into the genre, providing for a more flexible mixing of identities. Although exhibiting both *wu* and *wen*, Chor's use of textual and stylistic themes demonstrate that it is the hero's *wen* attributes that are most important to his symbolic essence. This he places side-by-side with a feminine-coded imaginary and a stronger female presence in his films, in order to create a new 'dream of China'.

The Romantic Hero and Society

The romantic heroes in Chor's films are almost always outsiders with few connections to the *jianghu*. In addition to the scholar-gentleman models discussed above, other types include lone wolves like Fu Hung-hsueh (*Magic Blade*), Meng Shenyan (*Killer Clans*), and Xiao Shiyilang (*Swordsman and Enchantress*). These characters may come across as rugged and laconic at first, but their deeply romantic sides are revealed in due course. Other heroes may be naïve commoners like Ding Peng (*Full Moon Scimitar*) or Kao Chien-fei (*Heroes Shed No Tears*), who possess exceptional skills but are easily entangled in the *jianghu*'s politics and deceptions. Ainu, the protagonist in *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan* provides a female corollary to this type. Overall, these characters are all defined by their independence or detachment from the sociological structures and strictures surrounding them. While this idea of separation is common in *wuxia* literature in general, in order to create the division between the martial world and polite civilian society, Chor's *xia* often exist on the fringes of even the *jianghu*. The world at large is far away in Chor's films (sometimes seemingly nonexistent) but society and all of its ills are still reflected in the suffocating labyrinth of relationships and loyalties that make up the *jianghu*. In general, Chor's protagonists are neither outcasts, nor do they belong inherently to the fringes of their insular society. Their exiles are typically self-imposed and voluntary, a retreat from conventional obligations and responsibilities. Whether they are brooding loners or self-indulgent playboys, they tend to stand apart from the mainstreams of martial society, owing fealty to no particular masters or martial schools. These *xia* do not strike out on their own to pursue material ambitions, self-improvement through training, or metaphysical enlightenment; it is their whims and temperaments that lead to their solitude.

The notion of the 'name' – one's social identity and public standing – is a recurrent motif in Chor's works. In most cases, the 'name' functions as a source of anxiety, one that pursues characters and attempts to bind them to the martial world. In some films (*Magic Blade; Death Duel*) it represents one's selfish drive for status; swordsmen build up their skills in order to be known as 'the best' only to be overwhelmed by regrets along the way, finding that their hard-won reputation is now a curse. In other cases (*Full Moon Scimitar; The Jade Tiger*) a hero's desire to honour the name of his father or his clan leads him to sorrow and ruin. Names represent the past; this may be seen either in terms of personal history, signalling the hero's unhappy life marked by violence and loss, or in terms of a heavier weight of familial, school, or societal ties

(symbolizing the burdens of Chinese identity itself), which confine the individual with obligations and strictures that smother basic human needs and desires. A common adage of the swordplay genre is often repeated as a lament in Chor's films: "In the *jianghu* a man does not belong to himself."

Shirking the filial ties of the feudal hierarchy, and unbound by notions of nation or an overriding martial brotherhood, Chor's heroes are usually reluctant fighters who act less out of duty or bellicose spirit than out of human kindness. Often these men are forced into action by circumstances, particularly if their fame makes them the target of intrigues, as with Fu Hung-hsueh in *Magic Blade*. Other times, it seems as if martial adventure is treated simply as a relief from the indolent boredom of their lifestyles, as with the wealthy Chu Liuxiang in *Clans of Intrigue*, or the lackadaisical vagrant Xiao Shiyilang in *Swordsman and Enchantress*. It is against their independent impulses that these characters are drawn into clan politics and intrigue. When they do become involved it is motivated by a basic moral sense of right and wrong, or by bonds of love or affection for others. These sentimental bonds can also work against them, as the social dimension of the *jianghu* is fraught with illusions and mind-games, and the manipulation of emotions is as deadly as any secret weapon or technique. Conflicts usually involve the hero's resistance against the internal pressures of society, rather than threats from without. These pressures may be expressed through notions of propriety that tear lovers apart (as with the doomed romantic triangle in *Swordsman and Enchantress*), or simply the persistent and destructive lure of power and status (as seen in *Full Moon Scimitar,* when the hero sends away his magical 'fox wife' in order to pursue greater standing in the *jianghu*). These forces are often identified with the entrenched and slowly decaying architecture of feudalism, or with the consolidation of hegemonic power in the hands of seemingly respected figures who are always revealed to be greedy and duplicitous.

However, it is in the code of the *xia* that one does not shrink from one's moral duty. The swordsman protagonists of Chor Yuen's *jianghu* seem to embody and reflect this recurrent conflict between the philosopher-dreamer, who lives for beauty and emotion (profound happiness and profound sadness being essential tokens of the same poetic excess), and the material realities and exigencies of a vicious and competitive society that attempts to enlist, constrain, and confuse him. Despite their isolation, the men in Chor Yuen's martial-arts films act on an underlying sense of human spirit or a common good. Once a threat to the social order is neutralized, these heroes

return to their prior lives of self-indulgence, introspection, or melancholy. At a film's conclusion, they are rarely reconstituted into the social fabric through heterosexual love, familial integration, or social reconstitution. Their civic duty stops short of endorsing society to the extent of rejoining it.

These heroes are not disenfranchised by class or creed, rising up against oppressive governments for a piece of the pie that was denied to them. Instead, they are outsiders by choice or inclination. For Chor Yuen, the recuperation of *jianghu* society is not only unimportant and uninteresting; it is often not conceivable due to the heedless cascade of violence and shocking revelations that precede the ultimate confrontations in his films. These are most frequently focused on the treachery of a paternalist figure and the failure of conventional institutions, such as family, brotherhood, filial piety, government, or the rule of law. Picking up the pieces is unnecessary. The hero may cooperate with the remnants of society to radically expel the villain, but when a villain is no less than a pillar of that same society, it signifies an inherent tautology. Often the implication remains that the resolution of such conflicts leads only to more strife; in *Killer Clans* and *The Jade Tiger*, the victorious restitution of clan order is tainted by the now-acute awareness of a profound and callous dysfunction in the status quo. In the finale of both films, the implication is that the romantic hero cannot remain a part of this world, lest he become corrupted by it.

Chor Yuen's *wuxia* films, and indeed most of the martial arts films of the mid-1960s onward, display a distinct paternal anxiety. In the conventional kung fu revenge narrative, this tension retains some ambivalence. Despite the emphasis on youthful heroes striking out on their own, the dynamic between the ubiquitous 'good' and 'bad' masters (and the need to avenge one's fallen teacher) still reinforces patriarchal and filial bonds. In the New Style *wuxia pian*, with its lesser focus on didacticism and self-strengthening through instruction, the obligations to paternal teacher figures are displaced instead onto bonds with fellow male *xia*. The formation of these brotherhoods may be read as anti-traditional, but they would seem to stop short of challenging the fundamentals of patriarchy. Instead they provide a nationalizing form of Chinese male solidarity, expressed in the culturally revisionist terms of a mythopoeic historicism.

However, in Chor Yuen's reiteration of the New Style *wuxia pian*, the romanticism is less directed to the formation of these bonds, or to the reconstitution of the *jianghu*. Instead, these bonds are dissolved by ambition, by desire, and by deception. Paternalistic institutions cannot be

redeemed through violence or set to order in any permanent sense. If the authority figures in Chor's swordplay stories (most often scheming, duplicitous older men) are to be seen in contradistinction with the protagonist (always implicitly identified with Hong Kong) how then should this inform our reading? The traditional community leaders of the *jianghu* – those elders ostensibly representing wisdom and power, and who almost invariably are exposed as murderous intriguers – may reflect Chor's desire to break with the traditional feudal values of the past that remain threaded through Chinese identity. They may also represent Hong Kong's ambivalent relationship with paternalistic institutions like the colonial British government, and most especially with Communist China, where the iconic face of Chairman Mao evokes equally a benevolent patriarch and a cultural destroyer. Reading Chor's heroes as a reflection of the hybridized and increasingly middle-class identity of Hong Kong, these villains suggest Chor's mistrust of rampant capitalism and upper-class plutocrats who advance their own financial agendas at the expense of others.

In any case, even as escapism, Chor Yuen's *wuxia* fantasies retain a cynical charge. The subtext of his work seems to condemn ambition and deny faith in professed cultural ideals. He presents instead the ambivalence inherent in a system that is fundamentally broken, wherein money and power, the markers of status and success, are inevitably corrupting. If the *wuxia* film otherwise evokes an idealized, time-lost 'Chinese garden' safe from modern entanglements, where Chinese people might revisit a dream of cultural unity, then in these films, the figure of the patriarchal intriguer must surely be the serpent in this garden, one which defies any reassurances one might take in this vision of progress.

There is some question as to the kind of nationalism that the *wuxia pian* represents. As noted by Teo, the imaginary of the swordplay setting evokes China in abstracted terms, but these also have the power to transmit constructed ideas of what it means to be Chinese in a modernizing world. In early forms of the genre, the hero conventionally espoused Confucian virtues, taking on the responsibility of protecting the national interest in times of tumult. In this way, the tribulations of the heroes personified the perseverance of the Chinese people in a unified cause. In the New School *wuxia* writing of Jin Yong, China is a territory riven by regional, ethnic, and cultural divides that a hero must navigate and bring to order. At the same time that this expresses a form of Chinese manifest destiny, his stories also promote a syncretic self-regulating Chinese unity, rather than a formal state collected under a central authority. Likewise,

King Hu's *xia* are always embroiled in politics of state. His swordplay films resemble spy thrillers above all else, with heroes either confounding the intrigues of corrupt government factions, or repelling incursions by outside threats like the Japanese. The personal is downplayed for Hu's *xia*; instead they evoke a stoic ideal in the pursuit of civil or patriotic goals.

In the martial arts films of both Chang Cheh, and Chor Yuen, the *xia*`s stoicism and commitment to an implied nationalist ideal is complicated by a vein of fervent individualism and a pronounced distrust of all of society's institutions. In Chang's *yanggang*-style works, this feels simultaneously revolutionary *and* reactionary, leading back to nationalism through the rubrics of defiant Chinese chauvinism, masculine self-strengthening, and the forging of stable bonds of brotherhood above all else. Conversely, in Chor's oeuvre, the deconstruction of any sense of a unitary Chineseness feels more complete, if also somewhat more ambivalent. Here, there is a sense of melancholy, but not despair; the hero in Chor's films mourns the loss of love, the loss of time, and the loss of human life, but society's institutions and traditional hierarchies of kinship, whether the family, the martial school, or the Chinese state, are rarely treated with any importance. In fact, the 'nation' as an identifiable entity almost never appears in these films. Instead, the world is defined within the confines of the *jianghu*, both in metaphorical and existential terms, a China divorced from history and geography, and for the most part presented as an abstract monoculture. Central authority, government, and senses of any ethnic identity are either nonexistent, or conveyed by similarly fantasized markers of difference. In that sense, one may only inhabit this 'China' in binary terms – inside or outside – with the implied value judgement of Chor Yuen's films usually pointing to 'outside' as the desirable outcome.

There are exceptions to this historical abstraction of 'China.' In Chor's first *wuxia* film, *Cold Blade,* the influence of King Hu and the themes of Chinese unity are quite strongly felt. The framing conflict involves two sword-brothers who are attempting to fulfill their patriotic duty to the ethnically-Han Song Dynasty against the Mongolian Yuan Dynasty usurpers. However, even in this narrative the dynamics of personal drama take center stage, casting patriotic duty into doubt. Chor's *Duel of the Century / Lu Xiaofeng Zhi Juezhan Qianhou* (1981) recounts a palace intrigue involving a plot against the Chinese emperor, a rare intersection between Chor's *xia* and

identifiable signs of a Chinese imperial government.[74] Here, the Forbidden City serves only as another exoticized social complex, a 'sub-*jianghu*' with its own interiority, personal conflicts, and colourful denizens. Rather than an authentic object, this locale becomes a further example of the 'imaginative geography' of orientalist imagining (Said 55), a displaced icon that signals a bygone China, and a self-contained backdrop for a detective whodunit. Like the stately family manors which so often host the final confrontations of Chor's films, it is an ornate, illusive imitation of history, to be dismantled, destroyed, or rendered false. By the end of the film, the Emperor's authority is cancelled out, obscured behind a tragic web of obligations between *xia* who are not bound by civil laws, but by their own emotions and the self-destructive pursuit of personal honour. When the Emperor attempts to assert any control over circumstances, he is flatly told by the swordsmen dueling in his courtyard "You are king only because you were born so. You are nothing special." It is a refutation not only of traditional social hierarchies, but also of the entire institution of China's national, dynastic, and symbolic history.

The disaffection of Chor's heroes, and the reflexive play of orientalism that pervades his mise-en-scene, acts as a form of subversive rejection of the *wuxia* mythology seen in earlier New Style films. In those, a sense of a self-justifying Chinese spirit becomes concretized through its fusion with history (as in King Hu), or through the symbolic immolation of doomed hero-martyrs (as with Chang Cheh). The rebellious *xia* of the *yanggang* type are both iconoclastic and conservative, struggling against a treacherous and degraded socio-political order that requires an ultimate defiant sacrifice in order to re-awaken the slumbering pride of the masculine Chinese hero. Hu's visions also typically depict a China shot through with intrigue and state oppression, but in both directors' works, the role of the *xia* in the *jianghu* is to represent cultural ideals and unity, or to forge a new ethnic identity in blood. For them, the peripheral world of the *jianghu* is where the recovery of ethno-national values is found.

By contrast, Chor Yuen embraces a far more nihilistic view of these collective identities, where politicized action and loyalty to anchored value systems are doomed to fall into established cycles of corruption and decay. The *jianghu* is itself simply a reflection of the political world, and every bit as sinister and toxic. It is not the home of comradery and goodwill, of heroes given to pure motives or brotherly love; it can instead only pervert and destroy such

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[74]   The novel by Jin Yong that inspired *Duel of the Century* serves as possibly the only instance in Gu Long's literary works that suggests a specific historical era. In this case, the Forbidden City was only built as the seat of Imperial rule during the Ming Dynasty.

things. So unreliable are appearances of traditional virtue in Chor's films, one can never be certain if such ideals ever truly existed, or if they were just another illusion engendered by a nostalgic backwards gaze.

Not all of Chor's films express such a wholly pessimistic outlook, however. In several of Chor's adaptations, there also appear alternative communities, such as the 'Hate-Free Hall in *The Jade Tiger,* or the false fox-spirit clan in *Full Moon Scimitar*, that are made up of *xia* who have abandoned their names and egos in order to live peacefully in reclusion. Films like *Clan of Amazons* (1978) or *Murder Plot* (1979) feature heroes who may be willing to shake themselves out of their doldrums in order to combat forces of intrigue and hegemony, or to suspend their more decadent pursuits to act out of a sense of community responsibility. Even so, the importance of the individual remains paramount, with an associated ambivalence towards all forms of political solidarity.

This speaks to the ways in which Chor's *jianghu* functions as a metonym representing a sum total of Chinese history and tradition, interpenetrated with all the temptations and sins of a modern capitalist meritocracy. Non-participation in this system is presented as the only truly emancipated way of life. The question of the individual's relation to society is one of the foundational schisms in the knight-errant as a cultural ideal; while living on the outside of society at large, participation in the alternative social order of the *jianghu* is still prescriptive. The quintessential *xia* are still defined by their sense of civic responsibility, their filial ties to their clans, and their devotion to the protection of the Chinese nation. In Chor Yuen's works, all of these qualities are re-evaluated, individualized, and presented as coming with pre-attached cynicism and uncertainty. The *jianghu* in Chor's films is never at rest, and the rivers and lakes navigated by Chor's *xia* heroes never run still. The state of tumult is endemic to the system.

While the focus on the powerful male body in the kung fu genre and Chang's *yanggang* films may be seen to represent an empowering physicality for colonized, working-class Chinese going forward from the 1960s, the *wen* aesthetics of Chor's *wuxia pian* indicate a further modernizing and hybridizing evolution: an aspiration to middle-class identity, and the social mobility that is otherwise tacitly denied to the 'rebellious' heroes and martyrs of the *yanggang* tradition. As observed by Jie Lu, such masculine icons carried associations of empowerment on both an ethnic and local level. However, these archetypes were still inherently linked to the underclass, which served to disturb the credibility of this idealized power fetish (Lu 103). As a

result, these figures become purely symbolic because they cannot assert their "hegemonic masculinity" in circumstances other than those which reproduce their oppression, and which they transcend only through romantic defeat (the stoic death) and violent cinematic fantasy, rather than through socially productive means.

Adversity is a necessary component of the *wu* hero; the defiance that solidifies him is only possible in a state of alterity and oppression. Therefore the dynamic of empowerment is reliant on disempowerment, a state of perpetual resistance, and an inherent self-conception in subordinate terms. In other words, the 'non-hegemonic' hero can only be defined by his underdog status. This is not the same for the *wen* hero, whose status is defined by a cultural and philosophical cultivation that suggests class privilege, and a more comfortable fluidity in the gendered context of civil society. In this way, the *wen* hero operates from a place of greater independence. His goal is not radical social change, but to understand his place in the social order, while contributing to the betterment of the community. In this sense, the romantic swordsmen of Chor Yuen's *wuxia* may be seen to represent a shift to a middle class sensibility, rather than carrying a banner for nationalistic or anti-colonial struggle. As such, this reflects the ambivalent material and political self-satisfaction of Hong Kong in the late 1970s, interrupted only by a melancholy of existential anxiety.

Chang Cheh's authorial obsessions can be treated as a form of politicized identitary act. When a hero dies in his films, this issues a call-to-arms to all other like-minded, fiery-hearted men to stand in brotherhood against… ultimately what? By the mid-1970s, the growing pains of the colony had mostly subsided, and settled once again into a state of economic prosperity with only a distantly-looming political malaise. This perhaps illustrates Chang Cheh's increasing irrelevance in the latter seventies, his blood-soaked male-bonding tales evoking not rebels without a cause, but rebels whose cause had passed. Without the sharp taste of cultural urgency that surrounded his films in the 1960s, his later works represented a less grounded, more perfunctory sense of male adolescent restlessness, undirected anger, and narcissistic empowerment fantasy.

This raises the question of whether the romantic hero of Chor Yuen's films can be said to reflect a truly progressive outlook. The romantic hero, in his blithe disenchantment with the world (the *jianghu*) operates as a critique of society and tradition. At the same time, he also denies the generative value of social action or historical identity, resting instead upon a state of

equilibrium enabled by Hong Kong's colonial and economic status. Here lies the conflict between seeking to better society, while still enjoying the benefits of a social standing that is made possible through aggressive capitalism and globalism. Perhaps this is the source of malaise of the sentimental hero, expressing both the ennui of the middle class and the price of cultural hybridity.

CHAPTER 5

Chor Yuen and Visual Style

The reputation of the Hong Kong cinema is one based largely on its energetic stylism and formal (and often informal) innovations in the action film mode. The kinetic energy of martial arts and the rhythmic motion of the Chinese Opera both mixed with adopted practices from Hollywood, Europe and Japan to produce a truly distinctive local tradition that has become imitated worldwide in turn. David Bordwell has advanced the argument[75] that "martial-arts film was Hong Kong's greatest collective contribution to the aesthetics of film" (Bordwell 2009, "Another Shaw"). It may then seem surprising that the most salient aspects of Chor Yuen's directorial style do not generally pertain to action aesthetics, or to his able exposition of the martial arts. This is not to say that Chor did not absorb many of the lessons of King Hu's rapid constructive (and deconstructive) montage, Chang Cheh's agonized exploitation of slow motion, or Lau Kar-leung's rhythmic mode of percussive combat. Chor's films display a comfortable and permissive engagement with a sundry list of techniques associated with the martial arts form – hand-held action, crashing zooms, low-angle framing, one-by-one tracking shots,[76] jarring shifts in speed, swooping wirework – but with a fairly irregular and case-by-case application.

Chor Yuen worked closely with the celebrated Shaw action choreographer Tang Chia[77] throughout his cycle of *wuxia* films. Tang was noted for both his intricate and dynamic fight choreography, and his penchant for devising weird and imaginative new fantasy weapons to add to the imaginary arsenal of cinematic martial arts. As was the norm at Shaw, Chor's finales invariably feature confrontations between heroes and villains, exalted through spectacular physical performances, and the action sequences provided by Tang are reliably graceful, flamboyant, and exciting explosions of swordplay and acrobatic ability. Even so, the depiction of

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[75] For a more detailed discussion of the influence and stylistic virtuosity of Hong Kong martial arts cinema, see David Bordwell in *Planet Hong Kong* (Bordwell 2000, 127—156).

[76] The 'one-by-one' tracking shot, after Bordwell, refers to the mounting of a large fight sequence by way of long lateral tracking movements, usually in medium shot size, that follow a fighter through a fray, dispatching each opponent in turn and letting them lunge in, and then careen out of, the boundaries of the frame. Bordwell identifies this as one of the many conventions borrowed from the *chanbara* genre (Bordwell 2009, "Another Shaw")

[77] Tang Chia's name also sometimes appears credited as 'Tong Gai'.

martial action and violence as a primary structuring motif never seemed to be Chor's main interest as a director. His fight sequences rarely become physicalized dialogues between duelling methodologies of martial arts (as they do with Lau Kar-leung) or high-velocity showpieces for a dizzying repertoire of camera angles and visual techniques (as in the *wuxia* films of Sun Chung). In a Chor Yuen swordplay film, it might be observed simply that 'fighting happens'; it functions as a dramatic device, a form of genre-specific punctuation that occurs in interludes – when characters meet, when conflicts arise, or when accounts must be settled – but then swords return quickly to their sheaths, and the films move on to pursue other contortions and intricacies, usually of a more social or emotional variety. It may be argued that, in his formal predilections, Chor Yuen is not truly an 'action auteur.'

As a genre director, Chor Yuen's style was identifiable but not static. Even while core elements of his style persisted, he was also experimental, developing his formal and technical language to suit the different genres he worked in. In the kung fu film *The Bastard* (1973) his mise-en-scene on the whole is plainer and less glamorous, reflecting the poverty of his protagonist. He matches this with looser, unpolished hand-held camerawork and an over-indulgence in the quick zooms characteristic to the kung fu genre. His *Chaozhou*-dialect opera adaptation *Farewell to a Warrior* (1976) opened up the space of his sets to convey a more specific evocation of stage backdrops and operatic performance. For *House of 72 Tenants* (1973), he created a more vertical aesthetic arranged around a central courtyard, to capture the congested, staggered, self-contained universe of Hong Kong tenement dwellers. In his late "kung fu noir" *Convict Killer / Cha Chi Nan Fei* (1980) Chor engaged a bleak, streamlined, and expressionistic style, with deep space flattening into bold, graphical compositions carved out of light and dark. During his tenure with Shaw we see the versatility of a studio director who selects his tools to suit his material. Stylistic flexibility notwithstanding, it is unquestionably his many works in the *wuxia* genre that are most emblematic of his time at Shaw Brothers, and here the intersection between the director's style and genre attains a particular and meaningful balance.

The principal means by which Chor Yuen distinguished his swordplay cinema from the dominant traditions of the Mandarin New Style was through a regime of increased formal stylization and reflexive techniques that effected a subtle deconstruction and reorientation of the *wuxia* genre. The rest of this chapter is devoted to elaborating upon Chor's use of reflexive style in his films, and the ways in which these visual and thematic strategies contributed to the

production of a semiotic distance between the Hong Kong subject, and the martial arts genre as an anchored Chinese historical identity. In this way, the reflexive gaze facilitates the self-orientalizing gaze, by trading 'China' for a more flexible and self-aware identitary fiction.

Robert Stam identifies illusionism as the key component of conventional narrative exposition. He notes that illusionism "pretends that stories pre-exist their telling, that the events of the story actually transpired and are therefore researchable, verifiable like the positivist's truth" (Stam 139). It is precisely this kind of illusionism that is often undermined through Chor's directorial approach to his subjects, most especially those pertaining to the idealization of China's past, traditions, and hegemonizing nationalist myths. Reflexivity, as a stylistic mode, "subverts the assumption that art can be a transparent medium of communication; a window on the world" (ibid. xi). The illusionism of cinema – that is, the common assertion that films may convey the illusion of reality – may be disrupted through reflexive, anti-illusionist devices.

In his shift towards a more metaphorical style of *wuxia*, Chor Yuen upset the paradigmatic 'realism' of the swordplay genre at the moment that it was proving to be less of a draw to audiences in the 1970s. In the heat of Hong Kong's process of localization, the cultural nationalism and historicism of the New Style was still tethered to a Mainland-based conception of Chineseness, and the Shaw 'dream of China', was now much more remote in the minds of diasporic Chinese. By the same token, pure escapism was not the answer for the *wuxia* genre; a blithe return to the naïve traditionalism of the magical Cantonese style could only have seemed retrograde in the face of more savvy, cynical, and self-involved audiences. Chor's answer to this dilemma was to engage fantasy with a highly personalized sense of irony, using China not as an authentic object anchored in history, but rather as an artistic muse; a sensualized and defamiliarized Other that provided the alluring backdrop for his very contemporary meditations on the self, human desires, and society.

Chor Yuen was not the only Shaw artist of that time to reorient the 'dream of China' in such a way. For instance, Li Han Hsiang had returned to making female-centered dramas set in the age of Imperial antiquity with films like *The Empress Dowager / Ching Guo Ching Chen* (1975) and *The Last Tempest / Ying Tai Qi Xie* (1976). These new productions differed from before, gleefully eliding the historical aggrandizement of Li's earlier 'palace films' in favour of what Sam Ho calls a "fetishistic and voyeuristic view of China and its history" (Ho 2007, 88). This shift represented "the Hong Kong audience's changed perception of their increasingly

distanced homeland" and as well "channelled the Hong Kong people's fondness for sensorial indulgence and mind games" (ibid.). This description could apply equally to Chor Yuen's *wuxia pian*. As Stam observes, the function of the reflexive art is to "demystify fictions, and our naïve faith in fictions, and make of this demystification a source for new fictions" (Stam xi). The films of Chor's 'Gu Long cycle' could never be mistaken for histories; they are instead oriental fantasies for the modernized and westernized viewer, disinterred from the conceit of reality through Chor's provocative and reflexive manipulation of the form.

Stylistic virtuosity in and of itself may also be seen as one form of reflexive distanciation. Through the exaggerated and self-conscious use of style, the spectator of the film becomes "alert to the role of the director and the artifice on which all filmmaking . . . is predicated" (Pearson, Simpson 377). Especial (or excessive) attention to form, the foregrounding of style, and the play of self-aware aestheticism all announce the presence of the artist as the author of a work. By alluding to the means of production, to the conventions of dramaturgy, or to the deceptive nature of appearances, a reflexive work of art reminds us that 'Art' is by definition both a crafted, produced object, and also subjective in its meaning(s). The formal characteristics of Chor Yuen's *wuxia* films of the 1970s announce themselves to a spectator of martial arts cinema with a certain louche audacity. Rather than celebrating the credibility of the Shaw's reproduction of ancient China, or the masculine prowess of his heroes, Chor's approach to the *wuxia* imaginary relies upon a feminine (or better, *yin*) iconography and a lavish ornamentalism, as expressed through signifiers of beauty and sentimental romance; flowers and sunsets; silk and sequins; mist and moonlight; poetry and gardens. This results in a pungently overstated – and slightly ersatz – evocation of Chinese classical painting.

Through his mise-en-scene, Chor emphasizes a plasticity of the image and of the profilmic environment, evoking a more expressive and self-aware vocabulary of stage theatre and of two-dimensional mediums such as painting. Bordwell applies the term 'pictorialist' to a particular strain of cinematic style (which he traces to the influence of Josef von Sternberg), wherein the construction of each shot as a complex and autonomous composition is emphasized:

> . . . long shots predominate, deep space and deep-focus cinematography are common, décor and lighting create an abstract effect, and figures are typically subordinated to the overall design . . . dense, almost motionless tableaux that invite the spectator to scan the frame. At its limit, the style achieves great opacity, often blocking our vision

of faces or gestures . . . (Bordwell 1988, 23)

Following from this discussion, the term 'pictorialism' seems well-suited to Chor Yuen's sensibilities, especially in his approach to creating stunningly surreal, artful landscapes that seem to be frozen in time, emerging out of a confluence of intersecting and overlapping planes and obstructions. The leaping, flashing, flying figures of his duelling knights-errant, rather than taking the center spotlight, can often be found embedded – even obscured – in Chor's vistas, consigned to the roles of dynamic formal brush strokes upon an elaborate canvas. His approach to composition frequently creates a plenitude of frames that can obscure, entangle, and distract, imposing themselves as aesthetic formations upon the spectator, and enacting boundaries to immersion into the diegetic space. Narrative causality is greatly downplayed; here the 'just-because' logics of fantasy and the conceits of twisting serial-style storytelling subvert the components of genre, whether the methodical rationality of the detective genre, or the athletic spectacle of the martial arts film. At its most virtuosic, Chor's use of sets and expressionistic lighting takes on a psychological, carnivalesque absurdity, while still remaining tentatively anchored within the *wuxia*'s generic expectations.

To assert that Chor was unique in his usage of any one of these varied techniques would be misleading. However, it is the *density* of such stylistic elements in Chor's work that speaks to their saliency and that delineates his auteurist tendencies. Chor employs an array of visual strategies and stylistic tools to reinforce the reflexive experience of his films, including (but not limited to): pronounced artificiality in his use of sets and environments; spatiality expressed in abstract or compartmentalized terms; theatricality both thematically and in the overt use of stagecraft techniques; an expressionistic use of colour and lighting; the creation of visual and material obstructions in the picture plane to obscure action; aperture framing to partition the image into multiple frames; the recurrence of the frame-within-a-frame compositional motif; the use of variable focus zoom lenses to create abstracted compositions or flattening colour effects; and the use of unconventional 'autonomous' camera positions to disrupt the spectatorial sense of suture. Each element of Chor's mise-en-scene contributes to an expressionistic excess, which pressures the boundaries of the commercial film form and cultivates a distance between the viewer and the 'reality' presented on screen. Thus the diegetic universe becomes sublimated in an aesthetic of the artificial, rendering the concreteness and historicity of this China suspect, and exposing the *wuxia pian* itself as an orientalist simulacrum.

Theatricality and Studio Space

The choice of location and setting can tell us a great deal about the social and economic valences of the martial-arts films of the 1970s, from the working-class fists of the kung fu cheapies, to the self-conscious opulence of the Chinese historical epics that advertised big studio glamour. For Chor Yuen, even the most extravagant films in his *wuxia* repertoire reflect the Shaw Brothers' integrated industrial production mode. The reliance of the Shaws on their extensive backlot sets and interior studio facilities sometimes prompts an ambivalent response. For some these settings conjure the grandeur of a lost studio age, while others merely find the studio qualities make the films seem awkward and unconvincing. For some, the look of the Shaw films has contributed to their distinctive personality by lending them a B-movie charm. This somewhat condescending view nonetheless accounts for their wide recognition today in Western markets, if not always in a purely complimentary way.

Due to the congested and continuously expanding landscape of Hong Kong's urban and economic miracle, the use of credible outdoor location shooting and authentic natural vistas (in keeping with the 'realistic' aesthetic associated with the New Style *wuxia pian*) was considerably hampered. While contemporary subjects like crime stories or melodramas could make use of the urban industrial surroundings of the city itself, period films were more reliant on constructed sets or natural settings away from the clutter of the city. For these reasons, the spare, shallow, and sometimes unapologetically phoney studio sets became emblematic of the Shaw martial-arts film of the seventies and eighties. The traditional Hollywood studios that had provided the blueprint for the Shaw Movietown were themselves changing step, and the selfsame streamlined production model that had enabled Shaw Brothers to mount their elaborate history spectacles and deploy their modern technological achievements, was now contributing to a stage-bound, dated, and stuffy flavour that seemed increasingly at odds with the currents in world cinema.

However, Chor Yuen was among those directors at Shaw Brothers who seemed to flourish in this setting, shooting extensively in interior locations and stages. In spite of these limitations, or perhaps because of them, Chor Yuen's work remains distinctive and reflective of his particular directorial persona; bound up in the trappings of an artistic sentimentality, yet subtly subversive, and exuding a winking, flamboyant, pop-minded visual panache. Shaw Brothers period productions typically made judicious use of their studio settings, mixed liberally

with backlot and location shooting. Scenes were often constructed in open courtyards, cavernous interior spaces, and bustling open-air city streets, granting the benefits of deep space. In the films of Chor Yuen, there is rarely such an ambience of a larger world. Instead, his densely-packed settings are framed and reframed by decorative devices, creating beautiful but cluttered compositions that frequently eschew spatial continuities between camera positions. This is not to say that Chor did not also compose images in depth; the fantastical domains he depicts in films like *Heaven Sword and Dragon Sabre* (fig.1) and *Full Moon Scimitar* (fig.2) rely on truly immense interior sets that stretch into the distance.

Figure 1: *Heaven Sword and Dragon Sabre* (1978)

Figure 2: The 'magical' fox-world in *Full Moon Scimitar* (1979)

However, Chor frequently de-emphasized the sense of depth in these images by composing them in layers of fog and flora that accentuate their unreal qualities, or by using zoom lenses to press foreground elements into blurred hazes that flatten the image into more painterly abstractions (fig.3). On other occasions, his large interior sets are interrupted by a complicated arrangement of barriers; in these environments, Chor's lateral tracking shots capture characters

as they step in and out of series of openings and sub-frames created by the space (fig.4) Chor Yuen preferred to shoot in the studio; for him, the constraints of the studio setting imposed fewer limits on his style, and allowed him to exert a complete control over the profilmic world, refashioning it to suit the needs of his personal aesthetic vision.[78] From his early stylized melodramas to his reimagined New Style *wuxia pian* at Shaw, the pursuit of realism was never Chor Yuen's goal.

Figure 3: Long lenses used to create abstract forms in *The Emperor and his Brother* (1981)

Figure 4: The camera tracks swordsmen through a series of geometric frames in *Murder Plot* (1979)

It is in the swordplay genre – invested as it is with both the stuff of a romantic cultural history and of shifting Chinese identity – that Chor Yuen's affinity for theatricality and formal self-reflexivity resonates most pointedly. Naturalism held little appeal for Chor's cinematic eye; instead he embraced the stage-bound necessities of the Shaw sets and costumes, and pushed the artificiality of this profilmic world forward in ways that unlock the emotional affect and

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[78] In Chor Yuen's words, "…I pay no heed to location shooting. I am just as happy with film sets. When they tell me that the props and sets all indicate that continuity is not right, I simply shrug it off" (Chor 49).

symbolic meaning of his films. This disregard for realism permeates both form and content. Thematically and stylistically, Chor Yuen privileges ethereality over viscerality, sentiment over pragmatism, and aesthetic composition over the illusion of space. Narratively, this evanescent reality can take the form of the bizarre, often whiplash-inducing plot twists and revelations that destabilize conventional storytelling in almost all of his films. Chor features recurrent scenarios of entrapment, entanglement, and enclosure (fig.5) that echo his characters' tendencies to become trapped or lost navigating the vagaries of both their world and the plot. Gothic deceptions are also frequent subjects, incorporating elements of the supernatural that disrupt our relationship to what is real or fantasy within the genre, and deny any the certainty of meaning (fig.6).

Figure 5: Framing used to reinforce entrapment in *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan* (1972)

Figure 6: Supernatural colours and mysterious mists in *Full Moon Scimitar* (1979)

In his mise-en-scene, Chor liked to employ obscuring hazes of dry ice, stage-like presentations, and graphical interventions into the picture plane, all of which help to break down the world presented in his films into heightened self-reflexive or symbolic dimensions. In

contrast with the intensive accuracy and attention to period detail that was enacted in the films of King Hu, or the earlier works of Li Han-hsiang, Chor Yuen seems determined to undermine any primacy of history or realism in his films. Even by the standards of the *wuxia* genre, Chor Yuen's approach is staunchly ahistorical. Time, historical anchor-points, and authentic geographical locations are largely obviated in order to present a detached society with an abstracted social interiority made up of tightly contained clan and familial relations and an eerily depopulated China. The *jianghu* in Chor's *wuxia* pictures is not a fringe space or hidden world; it often seems like it is the *only* world, little more than an interlocking series of theatrical sets. Of course, this is what the Shaw studio sets effectively *were*, but the self-consciousness with which the illusionism of the studio environment is both embraced and subverted in these films contributes to Chor Yuen's self-reflexive act.

Hence, the studio locale is not simply a prescription of budgetary consideration, but a mercurial world that allowed Chor Yuen to indulge in these abstractions. Sek Kei acknowledges Chor's studio expertise, and his creation of an "ever-changing ambivalent mise-en-scene which is part fantasy, part real" (Kei 2006, 82), but adds the caveat that the studio also limited Chor, leading him to become "more and more insular and self-indulgent" (ibid. 83). I suggest instead that, in discarding the 'real' and embracing the artificiality of the studio format, the mise-en-scene takes on a greater polysemy, creating meaning beyond the simple evocation of illusionistic realism. In other martial arts films, the location shoots in the natural vistas of Hong Kong's New Territories bespeak the authority of an authentic Chinese landscape for the New Style *wuxia*'s claim to realism. Likewise, the seemingly ubiquitous dirt roads and dusty, banal rock quarries of the bare-bones kung fu films reflect notions of lived experience, real space, class identity, and the emergence from parochial serfdom into industrial modernity. Conversely, in the films of Chor Yuen, we can see how the constraints of the ornamentally cluttered, mist-shrouded, and aestheticized soundstage are pushed beyond simple utility. Instead it serves as a device towards creating a mythopoeia of China and Chinese history, pliable and distant for the audience's socio-cultural needs and desires. In this way, it speaks volumes on Chineseness as an ethno-symbolic construct, while saying nothing about (and indeed, asking nothing of) China itself.

The use of reflexivity was not exactly new to the action format in Hong Kong. Chang Cheh famously mixed theatrical dramaturgy and reality in his Shaw film *Vengeance! / Baochou* (1970). Set during the Republican era, *Vengeance!* is ambivalent in generic terms. This is due to

its intersections with the gangster genre, and its appearance in the transitional moment before the streams of the *wuxia pian* and the kung fu movie had become fully delineated, but in many ways it served as a thematic genotype for later films in both genres. In a key scene, a proud Peking opera performer Yu Lou (Ti Lung) fights to the death against an axe-wielding gang. At the moment of Yu Lou's demise, blinded and disembowelled by his assailants, Chang intercuts the action with flashbacks to Yu Lou portraying the death of a heroic character on the Peking opera stage. As Yu Lou finally falls dead, Chang cuts back to a shot of him as an actor onstage, lying still with a plume of red silk spilling from his belt (a theatrical representation of a fatal gut wound). In a wide shot, the curtain draws across the stage, closing him off from the audience-within-the-film. This invocation of theatricality enshrines the struggle of the protagonist, making permeable the boundaries between common man and legend by aligning him with a lineage of mythic heroism. For Chang Cheh, the Peking opera was a fundamentally revolutionary cultural form,[79] an 'Art' which validated the 'Real.' In *Vengeance!* the play of reflexivity functions less to subvert than to allegorize and exalt the generic reality of the film.

In Chor Yuen's films, the use of theatrical reflexivity is usually less overt and more integrated, slyly undermining the genre's more axiomatic tendencies. Stretching back to his Cantonese cinema days, themes like the subjective nature of truth and the unseating of tradition have often served as the pretext for his stylistic departures from social realism, his experimentations with technique, and his indulgence in the excesses of melodrama. Sometimes stylistic elements only gently transgress against tacit realist norms in discreet ways. Other times they play on convention, such the presence of a narrator, onscreen or in voice-over (sometimes Chor himself), who introduces the story and acts as a mediator by direct address to the audience, as seen in films like *The Joys and Sorrows of Youth* (1969) or *Duel for Gold* (1971). As well, theatrical tropes such as curtains or stage-style lighting may be employed in the dramatic presentation of characters or events. This can be nuanced, simply by composing shots in ways that suggest stage devices, or aggressive, as with the film *The Emperor and his Brother / Shu Jian Enchou Lu* (1981) wherein a powerful moment (a father killing his child to appease family honour) becomes a static tableau (fig.7); the actors freeze, the lights suddenly dim, and a center spotlight falls upon the act of infanticide, suspending the moment in staged time (fig.8).

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[79] For more on Chang Cheh and Peking (Beijing) Opera, see *Chang Cheh: A Memoir* (pp139—152)

Figure 7: from *The Emperor and his Brother.* The patriarch kills his young son. The onlookers freeze in tableau…

Figure 8: ... the house lights go down, and the moment of violence is illuminated in a theatrical spotlight.

Play-acted scenarios – performances within performances – may also intrude into Chor's diegetic worlds, often in jarring or discordant ways that lay bare the contrivances of the film. *Heroes Shed No Tears* (1980) features a scene wherein a famed beauty gives a prolonged dance performance at a *jianghu* gathering, featuring spotlights, dry ice, and discotheque-like colours that create a dissonance between the conceit of the presentation and the historical setting (fig.9). Another variation of the stage-managed performance theme occurs in *Full Moon Scimitar* (1979), when the hero Ding finds a sultry woman in an unlikely forest location, complete with her own performance space; a lush, fully furnished pavilion. After being seduced, he awakes to find not only that the girl has gone, but that the entire pavilion has been stripped bare, leaving him alone on an empty stage-like platform. Other times, these performances take the form of performative ruses the spectator is not made aware of until later in the film. In another example from *Full Moon Scimitar*, Ching Ching, the 'magical fox-wife of Ding, initiates an extensive subplot by tricking Ding's enemy into believing his house is haunted. The charade is seemingly disrupted by the appearance of another fox-woman (Ching Ching's vengeful sister), who helps the man

turn the tables on Ching Ching. Later, it is revealed that this new character is simply human, a paid actress who was part of Ching Ching's plan all along. None of her 'fox powers' or any of the ghostly effects of the feigned poltergeist are ever given any explanation, leaving the spectator uncertain as to which parts of the film were 'real' or not. This creates a strange tension between the purported illusionism of the performance within the film, and the taken-for-granted illusionism that allows cinema to create these fantastical images for its audience.

Concealing the inauthenticity of portions of the story from the spectator is one way to shake our sense of investment in the narrative, but a similar effect may also be achieved through transparency. The opening scene of *Perils of the Sentimental Swordsman* (1982) begins with Chu Liuxiang and a lord discussing their plan to stage the lord's assassination in order to grant Chu access to a secret criminal community. Immediately afterward, they execute the plan; Chu sneaks into the prince's bedchamber, 'murders' him in this sleep (complete with simulated gore), and escapes unseen. At no point is this simulation witnessed diegetically by other characters, leaving the odd, alienating impression of characters rehearsing and then performing for an unseen audience, implicitly the audience behind the 'fourth wall' of the cinematic space. Through all such scenes, the common motifs of performance, deception, and subjective reality are repeated in Chor Yuen's films, reinforcing that appearances cannot be trusted.

Another way Chor achieves this uncanny effect is through the convention of the theatrical scenic space, as arranged around the concept of an abstract, contained spatiality like a performance stage. This becomes hostile to the notion of filmic illusionist reality. In Stam's words "the rectangular slice of profilmic reality included within the frame is assumed, by the laws of diegetic implication, to extend beyond the four edges of the frame and to the space behind the set and behind the camera" (Stam 139). Chor's films often reinforce instead a theatrical abstraction of reality, wherein scenes often become discrete spaces, cordoned off from a contiguous, realist continuum on one or more sides by framing devices formed from artfully arranged buildings, shrubbery, or tree boughs (fig.10). It is rare in Chor Yuen's movies to see characters travelling through spatial and geographical locales in ways that denote real time and space. Even the conventional concision of the temporal ellipses is usually obviated. Characters simply arrive and depart, as if making their appearances on an operatic stage.

Figure 9: An acrobatic dance number with pulsing lights in *Heroes Shed No Tears* (1980)

Figure 10: A compositional border on top and bottom encloses a *xia* in *Perils of the Sentimental Swordsman* (1982)

Some of this, of course, is part of the distinct conventional language that is so specific to the *wuxia pian*, and its array of quasi-magical skills. Even without constructive, elliptical editing, the weightless abilities of the *xia* create a new spatial anatomy of movement, via the convention of the wire-assisted or reverse-motion leaping escape. When a character leaves the space of the cinematic frame vertically in this way, they are simply gone, and generally no further attempts are made to pursue them. Few other generic forms allow characters, as a matter of course, to simply exit, stage *up*. Many of Chor's films will make almost egregious use of this convention in order to quickly move along their manic, fishtailing plots, twist-by-twist. In a film like *The Murder Plot* (1979), characters sometimes feel as if they are human yo-yos, due to the frequency with which they are literally dropped into and lifted out of the stage space. Characters who leave the frame, who travel off-stage, do not so much move through space, but effectively cease to exist, disrupting any illusion of a profilmic reality that extends beyond the bounds of the frame. Similarly, when characters travel between spaces and locations, they often seem to simply jump 'between stages' in the theatrical sense. Time is contained not only within the discrete unit of the

scene, but within the physical constraints of the 'studio-stage'. In this way, the fundamental convention of the cinematic ellipse is pushed to a stylized extreme that pronounces its contrivance.

In early film criticism, theatricality in cinema was traditionally treated with some skepticism; the line between film and other art forms required firm boundaries, and as Galt observes, "theatricality in particular was usually read as a sign of an insufficiently worked out cinematic form" (Galt 155). However, Chor Yuen's use of theatricality would seem to be more self-referential and flexible. It is not arbitrarily locked into the fixity of a 'filmed play' format. Rather, it cooperates with a plasticity of the image, achieved through mobile framing and shot composition, to create a multiplicity of autonomous frames. Chor draws upon a diverse film language of cinematic techniques, theatrical devices, and visual arts. I suggest that these elements are orchestrated through patterns of visual or narrative interruption, to the end of breaking the viewer's sense of suture with that interior world, and replacing it with the affective power of a beautified frame – a fantasy perceived, but not lived.

The Multiplying Frame: Obstructions, Partitions, and Mise-en-Abyme

As a director, Chor Yuen was noted for setting his own camera positions on shoots, always taking the time to arrange the frame to his liking. This predilection was unusual within the Shaw Brothers studio apparatus, where the professional roles on-set were highly delineated (Chor 47), and speaks to the persistence of his distinctive visual style over his career. The characteristic approach to composition in Chor's films is among the immediately identifiable traits of his visual style, exhibiting particular framing tendencies that persist throughout his oeuvre. Primarily this may be described as the use of sets and staging to create obstructions and interruptions in the picture plane, fragmenting or 'redrawing' the dimensions of the rectangular anamorphic frame, or compressing the frame into one or more sub-frames. This can be used to conceal or emphasize elements of the staging, to create an effect of frames-within-frames, or *mise-en-abyme.* Depending on the arrangements, these compositions can also serve to abstract the sense of space, making the image seem flattened or unnatural. David Bordwell has described this practice as a form of *aperture framing.*[80] Noting that the practice dates from the early days of cinema, he identifies these fragmentations of space and blocked views as being especially

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[80] For a discussion of aperture framing in Japanese cinema, see David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (347-351).

characteristic devices in the Japanese cinema of the 1960s (Bordwell 2008, 348).

While Noel Burch's observations on the inherent 'subversive' modernism of Japanese aesthetics (Burch 89) have elicited criticism from other scholars over the years,[81] I would nonetheless argue that in the case of Chor Yuen's implementation of aperture framing, it does perform a kind of modernist function. Through the concealing and revealing of screen space, the selective focus created by aperture framing can often "press us to the limits of visibility" (Bordwell 2008, 348) by making the ostensibly 'important' story matters of the film obscure or hidden. In this sense, the spectator is obliged to explore the composition "as a visual design as well as a transmitter of story information (ibid. 349). Not all of Chor's framings are designed to conceal, but his affinity for dividing his screen space through framing elements certainly draws attention to the artistic construction of his shots as discrete images, and contributes to the awareness of the artist's presence in the work.

At Shaw Brothers, other directors have used aperture framing to varying degrees. One audacious example is found in the opening scene of Chang Cheh's *Golden Swallow / Jin Yanzi* (1968), wherein an entire two-minute swordfight sequence is shown (or rather, barely shown) through small 'windows' in a completely black, abstract field. The actions of the characters are shown only in tiny squares, or in extremely narrow rectangular slots, arranged horizontally, vertically, or diagonally in the picture plane. Sometimes these 'apertures' serve to highlight key movements or props; in others they frustrate the eye, emphasizing just how *little* of an action they are able to see. The effect is jarring and enigmatic, if not entirely compelling. What is most striking about Chang's use of this technique is its brazen detachment from diegetic logics. The slot views do not reflect actual or implied objects, or points-of-view that are located within the narrative space. Achieved by simple placing black mattes in front of the camera lens, this becomes instead a purely formal and graphical device. Chang's use of this radical approach to aperture framing was fleeting; restricted to a one-time use in this sequence in *Golden Swallow,* it suggests an experimental caprice rather than a salient aspect of his work on the whole.

By contrast, the application of this visual tactic in Chor Yuen's films is less confrontational but far more pervasive. It emerges over dozens of films in his oeuvre in more subtle ways, representing a predominant tendency in his aesthetic repertoire. The placement of

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[81] For a discussion of Burch and Japanese aesthetics, see Yoshimoto, "The Difficulty of Being Radical" in *Asian Cinemas: A Reader and Guide* (27-40).

graphically obstructing or intersecting forms into the picture plane is an observable technique used throughout his career, but it is perhaps especially notable in his swordplay films at Shaw in the late 1970s.[82] I would loosely classify these compositional devices along four interrelated categories: (1) the arrangement of diegetic elements within the frame to create structuring partitions, usually around characters, (2) the placement of elements around the boundaries of the screen space in order to create an 'inner frame' that encloses the onscreen space; (3) physical objects and obstructions placed in shallow space to create implicit barriers between the audience and the 'interior' space of the film, often obscuring the view of onscreen action; (4) the use of variable focus zoom lenses to push objects in the extreme foreground into blurred forms that eat up the image space, or super-impose themselves transparently over characters in the middle ground, creating a flattening or abstracting effect.

Figure 11: Images drawn with light on a screen within a screen in *Murder Plot* (1979)

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[82] The predominance of this visual motif in Chor Yuen's work at Shaw Brothers may relate to the studio's access to the new variable focus zoom lenses. In its most ostentatious form, the zoom lens is now seen as one of the staple tools of the Shaw style. However, the flexibility of these lenses also led to other stylistic applications, such as those used by Chor Yuen in his compressed compositions.

   Bordwell has also noted aperture framing and zoom lens photography as being among the additions brought to the Shaw Brothers film repertoire during their technological modernization of the 1960s, when the studio hired Japanese directors and film technicians in the effort to better compete with Japanese product (Bordwell 2009, "Another Shaw"). It is my feeling that we might just as easily look west, to the works of directors like Italy's Mario Bava during the same period, for similar standout examples of aperture framing and *mise-en-abyme* composition.

Figure 12: Overlapping screens break the frame into multiple frames in *Perils of the Sentimental Swordsman* (1982)

Although all of the above methods are variations on the idea of using foreground elements to create compositional interruptions, the first three mentioned also relate directly to the restructuring of the frame in ways that use aperture framing to create an effect of *mise-en-abyme.* The recreation of the frame (or frames) within the frame of the onscreen space tends to be a reflexive gesture, one that obliges the spectator to become more aware of the bounds of the image. As Stam observed, "rectilinear compositions and abstract framing force us to contemplate rather than 'enter' the image, while the inclusion of two-dimensional materials . . . call attention to the screen as a two-dimensional surface" (Stam 255). In Chor's period films, the appearance of the Chinese painted screen almost always serves to reframe the action of the film in a format that closely echoes the dimensions of the widescreen projection, sometimes turning characters into hazy figures drawn with light (fig.11). When multiple screens overlap, the sensation of *mise-en-abyme* is strongest (fig.12) It recalls the effect of a cinematic frame filled with framed photographs or paintings – flat reproductions within a flat filmic image – that challenges the illusion of deep space. The construction of these frames echoes the director's act of cinematographic composition, and redoubles it within the diegetic space, smudging the normally invisible lines between the filmic image's presentation of reality, and the means of its conception.

Figure 13: Décor as framing. *Clans of Intrigue* (1977)

Figure 14: An artful branch steals our attention in *Duel for Gold* (1971)

Unlike in the earlier example of *Golden Swallow*, the apertures, frames, and interruptions found in Chor Yuen's shot compositions are ostensibly created by objects that belong to the filmed space, rather than being nondiegetically applied. As elements in the profilmic universe, they frequently operate as a graphical barrier that rests ambiguously somewhere between the spectator and the diegetic world. Chor makes frequent use of people's bodies, architectural forms, furniture, and elements of décor to shape visual partitions in the image (fig.13). As well, he commonly uses organic forms and foliage to evoke or replicate archetypical tropes of Chinese art, such as a single asymmetrical branch that bisects the frame, as in (fig.14), or a floral arrangement that looms into the image, threatening to overwhelm the actors onscreen (fig.15). Geometric structures like latticed windows or pieces of furniture are also used to create harsher structural divisions that section off portions of the frame, and isolate characters both from each other and from the space around them (fig.16).

Figure 15: Encroaching flowers in *The Bastard* (1973)

Figure 16: Geometric lattice structure to create apertures in the frame. *Clan of Amazons* (1978)

Another aspect of these compositions is the way in which they can disrupt the expected angles and perspectives of the shot-countershot editing pattern. While Chor relies mostly on the 180 degree system to construct dialogue scenes between his actors, departures from that convention can surprise the audience, reminding us that we are not in control of what we see, but are subject to the director's artistic whimsy. In these cases, it often seems as if Chor's camera eye lurks on the outside of conversations or action scenes, locating itself behind bushes, beneath chairs (fig.17) or gazing through painted screens (fig.18). The effect that this conveys is one of a peculiar voyeurism, as if the spectator is spying on the goings-on of the swordplay world from some hidden or removed location. This produces a brief rupture in the sense of suture, and a sense of uncertain subjectivity. We might well ask whose point-of-view we are experiencing.

Figure 17: Slotted framing lurking from under a decorative stool. *Clans of Intrigue* (1977)

Figure 18: A fight scene from the other side of a calligraphy screen. *Clan of Amazons* (1978)

These angles often seem to originate from the most unlikely positions, using shapes in the studio environment to create carefully composed graphical arrangements. Rather than the notion of an invisible observer's viewpoint that sutures us into the space of the film, it could be argued that this represents the 'artist's eye' which provides a view that does not necessarily facilitate the primacy of plot, or serve naturalism. Rather, this subjugates the view of the filmic world to an increasingly abstracted compositional sense that flattens, obscures, and reframes spaces and characters within various squares, vertical slots, diagonals, and keyholes (fig.19). Rather than treating these formations as fully abstract geometric forms and voids, Chor Yuen will often retain a sense of his world's florid decorative texture in his framing devices. As putative components of the diegetic world – even if they only serve in many cases to mark the boundaries of the 'fourth wall' – they are often thick with the surface of Chineseness. Adorned with gilt devices, elegant blossoms, jeweled beads, or poetic calligraphy, these forms serve to overstate Chor's presentation of a 'dream of China' to a both sentimentalizing and alienating degree. The overwhelming effect becomes one of *peering into* the film, and enjoying this colourful, artificial world as one might approach a cabinet of curiosities.

Figure 19: A non-POV shot composed through a decorative eyelet. *The Roving Swordsman* (1983)

Figure 20: Peering at the world through sheer screens and decorative framing. *The Sentimental Swordsman* (1977)

These types of framing devices create a self-conscious aestheticization, wherein each shot can become individualized by its contrivance; representing a discrete, 'autonomous' composition that often defies the requirements of spatial realism or continuity. If the decorative legs of an antique table jut into frame to enclose dueling swordsmen, or if a fringe of flowers intrudes to bracket the face of a hero, these objects may have no readily apparent corresponding referents in a wider establishing shot. These formal 'cheats' rarely carry any true relationship to the concrete spatiality of objects in the diegetic world. Instead they function as covertly ephemeral devices that rearrange themselves to suit the decorative needs of Chor's image on a shot-by-shot basis. Cheating space to create an autonomously appealing image is nothing new in cinema. Stephen Heath observed that "the fiction film disrespects space in order to construct a unity that will bind spectator and film in its fiction" (Heath 101). In Chor's case, it is the unity that disrespects reality; the cumulative effect of his treatment of the image binds the spectator into his dreamlike film world, while also pointing to its fiction.

Colour and Abstraction

Chor Yuen frequently employs a heightened degree of colour to denote the chimerical qualities of the diegetic environment. Reflexively, extreme use of colour can be used to flatten the image plane or "to call attention to the artificiality of filmic colour" (Stam 256). Like everything in Chor's mise-en-scene, colour is defined by its excessive nature, either in its profusion (fig.21), or in its stark contrast when used as an accent (fig.22). In his garden-like sets, naturalistic colours become accentuated and intensified, pushed to melodramatic extremes in order to evoke the maximal sentimentality of an erotic daydream, or an autumnal nostalgia (fig.23). The deployment of unreal or excessive colour, even while wringing a surface affect out of the audience, also inevitably reminds viewers of the incongruities between 'real' colour and 'screen' colour, breaking the realist spell (ibid.). Typically, Chor achieves his most expressionistic colour effects through coloured lighting and filters, often (but not always) to indicate a heightened psychological state or an encounter with the supernatural.

Figure 21: *Clans of Intrigue* (1977)

Figure 22: Colour contrast in *Full Moon Scimitar* (1979)

Figure 23: Perpetual 'golden hour' in *Death Duel* (1977)

Figure 24: Something wicked this way comes. Expressionistic colour use in *The Enchantress* (1983).

In addition to his frequent use of coloured lights, Chor also treats colour as a compositional tool through in-camera means, by using his lenses to blur the lines between abstract colour and form. By the outset of the 1970s, the variable focus zoom lens was already a cherished and oft-employed item in the Shaw technical toolbox. Many directors, notably Chang Cheh, "bombarded the sets with quick zooms that violated the integrity of the space" (Ho 2003, 120). While Chor Yuen was certainly was not above using the notorious Hong Kong quick-zoom to punctuate dramatic moments with sudden expressive motion, on the whole his use of the zoom was more about its power to create distortions in the image. In the realist mode of the filmmaking, the play of depth, of subject and foreground, creates a sense of spatiality. Instead, a favourite tactic used by Chor was to compress the planar fields of figure and foreground together to produce an effect that differs from conventional juxtapositions of recognizable subjects.

Figure 25: Abstract colour fields in *Swordsman and Enchantress* (1978)

Figure 26: *Killer Clans* (1976)

Not quite satisfied with simply using décor to intrude into the picture plane, Chor Yuen often pushed the rack-focus shot beyond its logical limit, casting foreground objects (often colourful items such as flowers) against close-ups of his actors with such a shallow depth of field, that the resulting distortion and blurring of the foreground reached an ultimate and abstract diffusion. The result of this technique transforms objects into colour fields that occupy frame space (fig.25). Alternately, it can be used to create a semi-translucent colour effect that seems to rest on top of the image, flattening depth and tinting his subjects (fig.26). This leads to a compositional restructuring of the frame, forcing Chor's actors into the abstract psychological spaces defined by these colourful 'auras'. Like the *mise-en-abyme* discussed above, this amorphous colour aura can intensify our attention towards the actors in the shot, while also adding an additional degree of compositional dynamism to an otherwise conventional close-up shot. I suggest that, in keeping with Chor's self-reflexive style, this creates a formal void, or another 'screen', which can flatten space, obscure faces, or interrupt the naturalist reading of the screen space with the play of expressionist colour. This technique effectively turns material

décor – the very stuff of Chor Yuen's artfully orientalist world – the painterly flowers, verdant leaves, and ornamental fixtures – into floating forms or hazes of coloured light, liquefying them into a raw, psychic, non-representational space around his actors (fig.27). In some sense, it performs a similar semiotic function to the swirling dry-ice fogs and coloured light gels employed by Chor Yuen in his construction of a fantastical, plastic, and inherently counterfeit environment. It underscores the dreamlike mutability of the world as a hallucinogenic token of Chineseness, inauthentic and therefore pliable to the needs of the viewer.

Figure 27: *Swordsman and Enchantress* (1978)

Figure vs Ground: Martial Spectacle and Visual Occlusion

The use of elements of the mise-en-scene as visual interruptions or obstructions can serve metaphorically to emphasize the thematic importance of deception, disorientation, and falseness over conventional martial exploits or physical virtuosity. The ways that Chor Yuen's warriors must navigate through and around the studio spaces, with their aesthetic, sometimes oneiric, contortions and barriers, is sometimes more important to the eye of the camera than to the visual gratification offered by physicalized martial-arts action. Although the *wuxia pian* as a genre has traditionally emphasized the elements of sociality, chivalry, and fantasy over authentic martial arts, the action is still treated as a spectacle. However, ensconced in the maze of ornate Chinese mansions, ruined temples, and lush indoor forests that compose Chor Yuen's *jianghu*, the perfunctory role of sensational martial display (even when most gracefully choreographed) can very often be sublimated to the gyrations of obfuscation and revelation.

A Chor Yuen battle-royale differs from those of his contemporaries. While King Hu orchestrated his space through editing, and the choreographed motion of his characters around

obstacles, the *xia* as performer was still emphasized. Chang Cheh, for his part, fixated on the interactions (physical and emotional) between his male characters, with space subordinated by minimal use of establishing shots, and heroes who "move through the sets during fight scenes . . . mostly in medium shots that obscure the background" (Ho 2003, 120). Lau Kar-leung tended to exalt the physical displays of prowess through the use of open 'performance spaces' in the mise-en-scene, or in an energetic montage that exploded the action with precise close-ups in order to highlight the complexity of the fight choreography. By contrast, Chor Yuen's combatants are invariably enfolded in a game of concealing and revealing; they are obscured behind bushes, hemmed in by architecture, or rendered indistinct by layers of sheer drapery. The thrill of a mortal combat thus becomes seconded to the relative movement of the historical curios around them. Chor's environments are typified by obstruction: this may be created through a profusion of space, such as in his labyrinthine Chinese manors, segregated by screens, drapes, partitions, and furniture; or through a compression of space with foregrounds that press into or occlude easy access to the film's world.

Chor Yuen's fragmentation of the frame and his visual occlusion tactics become intertwined in his use of mobile framing. This is most evocatively displayed by Chor's affection for long lenses and long lateral tracking motions that attempt to keep pace with characters as they walk, run, bound, or fight their way through the decoratively congested horizontal domains of the impressive studio stages, creating "layers of pulsing foreground movement that yield intermittent views of his protagonists" (Bordwell, Thompson, "A Many Splendored Thing"). Conventionally, action captured in wide shots and long takes is associated with the aesthetics of realism, a least in the Bazin-ian sense. This is also pertinent to the martial arts cinema on the whole in the way that it facilitates capturing the skilled physical performances of their players, bolstering the appeal to realism through the authenticity of 'real' martial arts athleticism. By contrast, in the fight sequences of Chor Yuen's films, these types of tracking shots invariably encounter a series of barriers and objects that obstruct or interrupt our view of events.

For some time, the directors of the New Style had been employing the method of littering their frames with foreground and background activity, as other combatants dart past the camera, or maneuver in and around the center of the action. A realist reading of this tendency might suggest that it creates an ambiguity that challenges the privileged view of the spectator, in order to give the impression of an expansive world around the actors, beyond the borders of the frame.

In Chor's case, however, he instead seems to take pleasure in placing actual barriers between the spectator and his combatants as they move through space. Whatever conflicted debt Chor's use of spatiality and camera movement might seem to owe to realist space and the spectacle of authentic fight choreography, I feel it must be undone by the ways in which panels, objects, or walls often serve to conceal and break up the choreography of the performers into brief snapshots of bodies and limbs in motion; fragments of time that provide clipped views of incomplete gestures.

Discussing the montage techniques of King Hu, Bordwell observed that Hu calls upon "constructive editing, which is supposed to lay out the action clearly, and then does all he can to sabotage it" (Bordwell 2000, 163). In Hu's case, this is achieved through jump-cuts or by shaving frames out of shots to create a jarring disjuncture in our perception of conventional cinematic space and time, contributing to the sensorial effect of a 'glimpse'. Chor Yuen achieves a similar conceptual effect through the staging of objects and décor, and using them to disrupt the exposition of narrative action. Two primary methods emerge in the way he films action; the use of framing devices that split the picture plane into a multiplicity of discrete 'spaces' within the temporal unit of the shot; and the use of the mobile frame to create a rapid scrolling of the structural foreground. This provides a dynamic fragmentation that interrupts the movement of characters through their space, leaving us with only a flickering series of glimpses in alternation with the material blockages of sight. Walter Benjamin, writing on Brecht and the 'alienating'' effect of Brechtian 'epic theatre', noted that it was in the interruption of action – in the unnatural arresting of motion into individual gestures – that the illusionism of the fiction was broken, prompting a reflexive awareness.[83] The dialectic purpose of Brechtian theatre methods was to defamiliarize the illusionism of the medium, and to remind viewers that what they were engaged with was not truth but only an imperfect representation. For Benjamin, the potency of the gesture was quantitative and cumulative, concluding that "the more frequently we interrupt someone engaged in an action, the more gestures we obtain" (Benjamin 3).

It must be acknowledged that Brecht's self-aware 'epic theatre' often called for absurdist disjunctures and confrontational shifts in register to signal its reflexivity, and this is a

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[83]   Benjamin called upon the example of the physical filmstrip of a motion picture reel – the chain of fixed gestures, stripped of the naturalism of movement, -- to illustrate Brecht's premise: "Indeed, this strict frame-like, enclosed nature of each moment of an attitude which, after all, is as a whole in a state of living flux, is one of the basic dialectical characteristics of the gesture . . . it is the retarding quality of these interruptions and the episodic quality of this framing of action which allows the gestural theater to become epic theatre" (Benjamin 3-4).

methodology that is difficult to recuperate into the commercial format of the studio mass entertainment film. Nonetheless, Chor's tendency to conceal the swordplay onscreen, sometimes offering only furtive views of the fights through various impediments, serves in part to frustrate the spectator's eye, by hiding what would otherwise be presumed to be the central allure of the martial-chivalry film. Bordwell mused on the viewing process, as encouraged by aperture framing: "we must strain to pick out the characters and follow their action, all the while appreciating how graphic modulations within the grid are created by shifts in character position" (Bordwell 2008, 349). By advertising the formal aestheticization of his framing, and the choreography of his figures through these spaces of visual occlusion, Chor unseats narrative and generic expectations in favour of his formalistic distractions or ornamental beautifications. In the moment of voyeuristic disorientation, the spectator disengages (if only slightly; briefly) from the compulsions of the narrative just long enough to recognize the full artful contrivance of the frame.

Ornamentalism and Material Orientalism

Chor Yuen's camera seems to whenever possible take up a position that is slightly removed from the story space of the film, outside of the border-like, often decorative structures that he constructs around the edges of his frames, to occupy an interstitial space between the audience and the diegetic world. Chor's treatment of space often seems to refuse both historical naturalism and the authority of the characters within that space. Instead the environment becomes an aesthetically autonomous entity, reconfiguring itself to suit the requirements of thematic obscurity and deception. It often antagonizes the swordsmen who must dodge around or chop their way through the silk veils and ornamental fixtures as if they were a dense jungle, providing what Teo notes is an appropriate metaphor for Chor's themes of feudal intrigue and traditions (Teo 2009, 154). Chor subverts notions of subjectivity by framing, reframing, or interfering with the spectator's view of the story. The ponderous boughs of flowers or oriental antiquities allegorize history as, at best, an affective beautifying construct, and at worst, an impediment, a suffocating enclosure that must be escaped from.

Arif Dirlik used the term *localized orientalism* to refer to Chinese decorations in modern 'western' architecture in China, to convey a sense of Chineseness in a neutral-Western space (Dirlik 1994, 123). The 'material orientalism' in the *wuxia* films of Chor Yuen serves a similar

function. It conjures a signification of an eternal and mystical China, in counterpoint to the Hong Kong viewer's context, lifestyle, and indeed, the modernist underpinnings of Chor's films themselves. However, the material orientalism of Chor's mise-en-scene is not content to merely *suggest* Chineseness; rather, its character is overdetermined by the density of materials on display. Chor presents a world that is at the saturation point of Chinesenesss, straining against credibility.

Chor Yuen frequently constructs his frames in terms of visual obstructions, relying upon natural, ornamental, or architectural forms that speak of a sensuous, opulent Orient, a 'land of many perfumes'. Rosalind Galt observed that, "the Orient, like the feminine, is associated with an excess of pleasure in material things, particularly decorative, sensual, pretty things" (Galt 145). Our view is often occluded by those objects that are seen to be most reminiscent of a mythical or historical China. In one sense, this suggests a primacy of Chinese cultural sentiment, an injection of 'oriental flavour' into his images. At the same time, the reflexive qualities of Chor Yuen's style, and the environs he constructs, perform a self-conscious act of modernist interruption. One cannot insert themselves into the filmic world, because the way is always blocked, reinforcing the barrier between reality and fantasy. The culturalist dream-as-landscape contains and constricts the characters and the narrative, and reinforces their value as signs.

Figure 28: *Swordsman and Enchantress* (1978)

Such formal techniques work hand-in-hand with Chor's affinity for decorative excesses and the use of, to borrow Galt's phrasing, "an overwhelming accumulation of costumes, sets, props, and colour to hold realism at bay" (Galt 141). The deployment of ornamentalism to a surplus degree has the effect of distracting the spectator from the plausibility of the surroundings,

immersing them in the purely aesthetic, sensory realm of artistic over-stimulation. When Chor Yuen's heroes fight their way through the ornate gardens and interlocking chambers of a mansion, they do not navigate these spaces and the assembly of paintings, screens, statuary, and furniture that fills them. Instead they violently transcend it; crashing into it, diving through it, kicking it over, and sweeping it aside with their sword strokes. If Li Han-hsiang's meticulous arrangements of decorative antiques in his history films displayed the expository care of a museum curator, Chor's treatment of the ornamental, encrusted memorabilia of China's cultural past often becomes an act of literal iconoclasm.

The play of figure and ground is not limited to the lordly interior settings. Chor acknowledged the influences of the 'poetic lyricism' of Chinese painting on his composition and set designs (Chor 47), and this is nowhere more evident than in his recreation of the picturesque landscapes of the timeless *wuxia* setting. In the studio-reproduced outdoor spaces of Chor Yuen's films we find a world expressly arranged to recreate the stylized craggy rocks, luxuriant flora, gurgling streams, and misty pastel luminescence of traditional Chinese landscape art. The question of Chinese art as representation and as a sign for China becomes interesting here. In his discussion of the aesthetics of King Hu, Hector Rodriguez described the underlying premises of traditional Chinese art:

> Chinese art is not centrally but at best only peripherally or optionally concerned with referentiality. Its goal is not to provide accurate information about actual people and places. A Chinese artwork shifts our attention away from denotative content toward its principles of stylistic construction and, more specifically, toward the spirit or state of mind embodied or "lodged" in its style. King Hu has thus described the formative principle underlying Chinese landscape painting and theater as a purely aesthetic interest in "expressing art in itself (Rodriguez 80).

In Chor's case, elements of nature, most often flowers or tree branches laden with maple leaves, will assert themselves artfully into the frame, continually vying for attention with the actors themselves. On one hand this unseats narrative expectations from their classically privileged focus, and asks us to contemplate the unchanging splendour of the natural world in contrast with the transitory concerns of human conflicts, rendered small, nonsensical, or futile when framed by more elegant beauty.

Figure 29: *Heroes Shed No Tears* (1980)

Figure 30: *Heaven Sword and Dragon Sabre Part 2* (1978)

Of course, these compositional devices may not always serve a connotative semiotic value. A sprig of autumnal foliage may not always be a sign for the natural world; a flower is not always a signification of pure love. As purely formal constructs, these shapes play to a more expressionistic interest, one that unseats reality in pursuit of affective abstraction. By the same token, the contrivance and inherent artificiality of these objects cannot be wholly discounted. Chor Yuen rarely makes use of non-diegetic images of nature for us to meditate upon. Indeed, his natural objects are themselves always ersatz; too colourful, too picturesque, and too specialized in their shapes to truly impress any sense of naturalism upon the spectator. Rodriguez was careful to add a caveat to his conceptual question of 'Chinese aesthetics', noting how easily such generalized conversations can lead back to an essentialism that "eternalizes the national culture by treating it as an ahistorical, unitary reality reducible to a few distinctive and pervasive traits" (Rodriguez 74). This seems to be of little concern to Chor Yuen; indeed, it is precisely his use of such hyperbolized and essentialized iconography that unlocks the affective orientalist appeal of these culturalist symbols, and lends them their seductive and uncanny air. His

cinematic world is one that cannot, in the eyes of the spectator, loosen itself from the armatures of formal artistic caprice, or exist outside the confines of the frame. Nature, in verisimilar terms, cannot exist here; instead there is only the simulacrum, the aestheticized caricature of Chinese art, expressing an imitation of its own stylized artifice.

Figure 31: *Descendant of the Sun* (1983)

Through the adoption of an orientalist stance towards 'China' – fundamentally an artificial, idiomatic construct of cultural identity – Chor's films present the character of Chinese history as all too theatrical, too excessive, and too ridiculous. Chor achieves this predominantly through the employment of reflexive techniques and a self-conscious artistic formalism, that continuously reiterate an alienating, orientalizing distance between viewer and its subject. The result is a climate of penetrating romantic ennui, projected upon an orientalist screen – that is to say, an image of China as escapist emotional reverie rather than as a tie to a concrete ethnic history or sense of belonging. This space never purports to take one back to one's roots, never attempts to instill an assertive ethnic pride, and never incites cognitive dissonance between history, ethnicity, and politics. This is a place of exotic abandon, a commodified simulacrum of China that may be possessed by the diasporic Chinese spectator, as they were an outsider, and enjoyed for its sensual and otherworldly dreaminess.

Reflexivity and Genre Fantasy

Extricating the elements of style – particularly those seen as self-reflexive or 'antirealist' – from a broader vocabulary of generic conventions can be a complicated affair. Stephen Neale argued that the term 'verisimilitude' becomes ambiguous when used to describe films,

particularly with regard to how genres are assessed according to their relationship with objective notions of realism. Instead, he advises a separation based along the notions of 'generic verisimilitude' (based upon audience expectations of what should or must happen in films of a certain genre), and 'cultural verisimilitude' (that which is culturally understood to be possible in life) (Neale 1990, 47). This brings forward the question of how deeply we can delineate the boundary between what is self-reflexive, and what is accepted as part of the paradigm of 'generic verisimilitude' within the conventions of a given genre. The claim to realism in the *wuxia pian* is complicated; martial-arts folklore has established different cultural expectations of what may be considered believable in the generic and historically-displaced setting. Therefore, the fantastic wire-assisted leaps, strange powers, and superlative dexterity of the *xia* characters, while perhaps transcending cultural verisimilitude, remain well within the bounds of the generic verisimilitude of the *wuxia pian*.

However, following Neale's view of genres as processes of systematization,[84] the parameters of generic verisimilitude are not permanently fixed, and may be reshaped by challenges to these systems of expectation made by new strains of the same genre. In the early phase of the *wuxia shenguai* film, the display of magical powers in the overt form of hand-drawn, animated representations of flying blades and internal chi energies was a normalized convention for expressing the specialized and refined martial-arts prowess of the literary *xia* knights in a visual medium. Likewise, the use of in-camera super-impositions could be used to impart high-flying abilities to the heroes and heroines of the early *wuxia* cinema without disrupting the expectations of the audiences. However, spurred by the New School *wuxia* literature movement of the 1950s, which placed a more realistic and action-oriented spin on the old mystical conventions, studios like Shaw Brothers followed suit with their 'modernized and realistic' brand of *wuxia pian*. Magical powers were toned down, becoming less brazen and flashy, and instead more suggestive in their depictions. The stagey, performative style of the Cantonese *wuxia* was replaced by the Shaws' New Style, employing larger naturalistic settings, more camera mobility, and a more somatic type of combat based (nominally) on practical, 'authentic' martial arts and a pronounced, gory viscerality. In this way, the New Style represented a pointed shift in the systems of generic verisimilitude within the *wuxia* genre.

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[84] See the discussion of Neale and genre in Chapter 2, page 21 of this paper.

Placing Chor Yuen's swordplay films on this stylistic genre continuum, we see how some aspects of the older Cantonese *wuxia pian* found their way back into his more luxuriously-mounted Shaw films. With his densely decorated sets and ornamental compositions, Chor created simultaneously an exotic, numinous vision of China, and also a reinscription of an older, discarded Cantonese film iconography of the fantastic. In his use of tightly-contained, highly expressionistic, and playfully unreal spaces, he presented to audiences an image not just of a monumental, mythologized China, but also the less-ancient memory of a cinematic past with a local dimension. Teo observed that for the Cantonese *wuxia* cycle, "the fantastic ingredients were basic to its culture and formalistically transhistorical, somehow reflecting the Cantonese identity of Hong Kong and its existence on the margin of China" (Teo 2009, 90). Indeed, I would go further to suggest that the mystical ambience of Chor Yuen's *wuxia pian* can be seen as a carrying forward of his Cantonese sensibility through his Mandarin swordplay films, transforming the genre in the process, and contributing to the climate of cultural convergence occurring in the colony at that time. In this sense, the cultural nostalgia in his films provides a dual function, as both the enshrinement of a symbolic indentitary ideal – in this case a progressively more localized form of the 'dream of China' – and a tacit self-awareness of this dream being also its own subject.

Of course, the fanciful, stage-bound, and artificial bent of the earlier Cantonese *wuxia* cycle was likely not an outright attack on verisimilitude, but in some measure a natural growth out of theatrical traditions, and a function of budgetary and technological limitations. Its purpose was almost certainly not the modernist subversion of its topic. Its theatricality was instead contained by its chronological and economic specificities. In the *wuxia* films of Chor Yuen – particularly those made in the late 1970s, a full decade after the advent of the Shaws' revisionist New Style – the affected, decorative falseness of the setting and action draws attention to itself. Chor does not evoke the fantastic by way of immersing the spectator in a verisimilar world of the marvellous, but by inducing instead an awareness of its carefully-composed fabrication; a facsimile of both mythic China, and of the Cantonese *wuxia shenguai* film. In doing so, he invests the swordplay genre with a revised mode of generic verisimilitude, one that echoes not only art and theatre, but also cinema itself. In this way, his deployment of fantasy and artificiality in the high-concept studio context of the 1970s enacts an increased distance from the *wuxia* genre's putative origins in China's material history, while also alluding to its own caricature.

The reflexive tendency in Chor Yuen's cinema is not exclusive to his swordplay films. Instead, it is observable across his filmography, acting as a type of visual signature on his work. However, it is in his *wuxia pian* that the use of these self-aware elements became most energized in its union with the *wuxia* genre's potent transhistorical mythology. The dictums of the Mandarin New Style prescribed a regime of realism to *re-naturalize* the youth of Hong Kong and the diaspora back to the 'dream of China' as a cultural point-of-origin. Chor's works happily upended this in favour of a more aesthetically effusive and playful treatment of such historical identities. This reflexivity operates in concert with his themes of illusion, subjectivity, disaffection, and romantic escapism, contributing to an orientalist depiction of a feminized, consumable China that is naturalized instead to Hong Kong.

Andrew Sarris once wrote of the ambiguous metrics that must come into play when attempting to delineate the quality of a cinematic auteur.[85] Leaning toward the example provided by the studio system, he suggests that, when placed under the constraint of subjects that are not exclusively of the director's own choosing, the auteur's personality will assert itself through the treatment of form. Over a body of work this produces a discernible stylistic consistency that becomes identifiable with that director. According to Sarris, the 'interior meaning' of such works is to be discerned in the tension generated between the personality of a director and his or her material. It is elusive because a "part of it is imbedded in the stuff of the cinema and cannot be rendered in noncinematic terms" (Sarris 562). In the case of Chor Yuen, the energy released by this tension occurs at the meeting of his romantic sensibility with the very stuff of genre. Seizing the interior meaning in his work can be a fraught process, shot through with experimentation, playful visuality, and deceptive affectation, to say nothing of the overarching cultural streams that his works were immersed in. Through the preceding section, I have attempted to provide a preliminary overview and investigation of Chor's formal tactics and tendencies, in order to better tease out the fibres of correlation between 'meaning' and style in his films.

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[85] See Andrew Sarris in "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" (pp561-564).

CHAPTER 6

Film Discussions

In the following chapter, I have selected four films from Chor Yuen's *wuxia pian* oeuvre to serve as signal films for analysis. *Cold Blade / Long* Muxiang (1970) is Chor's very first work in the swordplay form, made during his brief period with Cathay. Nonetheless, this film establishes many of the distinct elements of his personal aesthetic that will be seen to persist through to his later works in his Gu Long cycle, establishing Chor's strong auteurist sensibility prior to becoming part of the Shaw studio machine. *Duel for Gold / Huobing* (1971), Chor Yuen's first film with Shaw Brothers serves as an early example of his approach to the *wuxia,* displaying his early interest in the thematic use of emotion and deception as a weapon, as well as an array of reflexive structures and aesthetics to destabilize the moral and political stability of the traditional chivalric setting. *Magic Blade / Tianya Minyue Dao* (1976) was Chor's second Gu Long adaptation, presenting a thematically stylized and metaphorical take on the tropes of the swordplay film, with a powerful current of identity crisis and destabilizing reflexivity running throughout. In *Death Duel / San Shaoye De Jian* (1977) Chor's social sensibility and critique of history is brought to the fore through his use of an intensified romanticist and orientalist mise-en-scene, anchoring the chimerical and artificial aesthetic that would define his Gu Long cycle.

<u>Cold Blade</u>

"Although Cold Blade was my first swordsman film, I established my style. Those of the same genre that followed were actually very much the same, stylistically. To speak the truth, without the maple leaves and dry ice, I would be lost." – Chor Yuen [86]

Before Chor Yuen joined the Cathay Organization in 1971, he had never touched the swordplay genre as such. The *wuxia* films he would go on to make during his years with Shaw Brothers have become the most defining chapter of his career, representative of an evolution of the genre propelled by Chor's own personal themes and sensibilities. Through a self-conscious romanticism, Chor Yuen helped to reshape the *wuxia* paradigm and provide an alternative vision

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[86] From *Chor Yuen, Director,* p.35

of the martial-arts film in contrast to the more machismo-driven models that had become dominant since the mid-1960s. While Chor's contributions to the swordplay canon are very nearly exclusively a product of his involvement with the Shaws[87], *Cold Blade / Long* Muxiang (1970) is the notable exception, and a telling testament to the uniqueness of his vision. Despite the temptation to attribute much of Chor Yuen's *wuxia* style to the overwhelming influence of Shaw Brothers' powerful production machine, if we may judge by the example of *Cold Blade* – made during his brief stint at Cathay it becomes apparent that Chor's distinctive approach to the swordplay genre was already close to its mature form. By 1970, the Shaws' 'colour *wuxia* century' project had firmly established the New Style *wuxia pian*, and largely pushed the Cantonese industry into collapse. In Chor's mise-en-scene, we can detect the influence of the New Style *wuxia* films, perhaps most notably from *Come Drink with Me*. The prominent appearance of a female knight in male drag, the vertical staging of a confrontation in a two-level inn, and the frenetic explosions of constructive montage all seem to be nods to the work of King Hu. Nonetheless, Chor Yuen's flair for the genre is immediately his own. Contrary to the gritty and unvarnished tone espoused by the New Style swordplay, *Cold Blade* quickly announces an exotic, magical tenor. The opening credit sequence introduces the heroes of the film, the "Wind and Thunder Swordsmen," who practice their sword stances in an otherworldly studio-created mountain setting. Blossoms crowd the foreground and unnatural purple mists swirl around the swordsmen as they perform a slow-motion, gravity-defying ballet. Here, the film asserts a definitive break from the tone of realism and the generalized historicity found in those settings favoured by the New Style *wuxia*. Here, the fantastical context is rendered digestible through a visual language of expressionist stylization and a degree of abstract formalism that borrows heavily from Chinese painting traditions. The 'dream of China' represented by the *wuxia pian* here becomes more literally oneiric in style; there can be no mistaking that this dream is stuff of myth, and depicts a Chinese history that is not just tacitly disappeared, but wholly artificial, well and truly berthed in the plastic domain of a Hong Kong soundstage.

These technical flourishes may not immediately recall Chor Yuen's early bent toward social realism, but it could be argued that the unreality of the *wuxia pian* was a natural extension

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[87] During the very brief interlude between Cathay and Shaw Brothers, Chor Yuen has one credited film as scriptwriter and co-director: *The Ghost's Revenge / Yijian Gouhun*, released in 1971, attributed to the Eng Kin production company. (*Director Chor Yuen* 106) Although, it is a film in the *wuxia* style, a lack of availability unfortunately precludes its discussion in this study.

for Chor. The romantic and expressionistic charge of his domestic melodramas, and the breezy convolutions of his spy capers would seem to transition easily to this form, where excess emotion and surplus affect are *de rigeur*. The extravagant gestures, unfettered expression, aesthetic hyperbolism, and pressurized sentimentality of Chor Yuen's colourful *wuxia* world were in full effect in his first foray into the genre.

Rather than adapting a story from the Old or New School *wuxia* literary canon, *Cold Blade* is based on an original screenplay by Chor Yuen. The plot follows the two sword-brothers, Ling and Tsai, who are sent down from the mountains (the traditional abode of demigods and martial mystics), charged by their wizened master with an important quest: they are to secure a lost treasure in order to aid the patriotic effort to bolster the Song Dynasty against the encroaching Mongol Yuan Dynasty. The fantasy quest narrative and the treasure-hunt aspect represent a collision between the norms of the earlier Cantonese *wuxia* films (with their themes of Confucian loyalty between master and student) and the more individualistic (and materialistic) subjects of the New Style *wuxia*, where lust for money and power often featured prominently. These elements are bound together within a narrative of national empowerment, with ethnic Chinese standing together against a foreign power, represented by the Yuans. A sense of Chinese solidarity was a key element in the historicism of the earliest New Style swordplay films. In the works of Chang Cheh, the ultimate apotheosis of *xia* ideals is achieved through unwavering and suicidal defiance in the face of oppressive forces, also reinforcing a militaristic form of idealism. However, in *Cold Blade*, these broad tropes become disturbed by the intercession of a more personal and emotional dimension that highlights the inherent humanity of his protagonists.

Unconventionally, Ling, the eldest of the two young knights, is rebellious, ambitious, and romantic, while his brother-in-arms Tsai is restrained and dutiful, staunchly committed to the defence of the ethnic Chinese nation, as represented by the Song Dynasty (in this case, history will not be on his side). Here the brothers express a neat binary division between a Confucian sense of duty to master and to country, and the pull of individual desires and interests. The conflicted duality inherent in this pairing is further reinforced by semiotic tokens of the story; each brother receives one half of the secret treasure map, so that only together can they succeed in their mission. As well, the "Wind and Thunder" sword-style they practice requires both brothers to coordinate their actions in unison to unlock a mystical flying-sword technique that makes them all but unbeatable. The Ling and Tsai are functionally and metaphorically unified

into the figure of the traditional *xia* hero, signifying the Chinese national spirit, but divided into thematic halves. In the opening sequence to *Cold Blade,* Chor Yuen presents the two heroes, standing shoulder-to-shoulder in profile, each facing away from the other in Janus-like solemnity. This compositional arrangement, which recurs throughout *Cold Blade* at key moments, introduces one of Chor's distinctive visual motifs. Seen throughout his swordplay works at Shaw Brothers, the recurrent image of two *xia* (sometimes male, sometimes female) speaking to one another while standing back-to-back while gazing in opposite directions, becomes a potent externalization of a hero's interior conflict through a form of implicit doubling.

Over the course of their twist-laden journey, the swordsmen Ling and Tsai encounter a flavourful array of characters and antagonists, all of them seeking the treasure maps. In addition to Yuan conspirators and Song loyalist rebels, they also meet the eponymous Long Muxiang (of the film's Chinese title), an alluring, androgynous swordswoman travelling in male guise. In a scene that prefigures those seen in Chor Yuen's later swordplay films, the elder brother Ling meets Muxiang in a moonlit garden laden with boughs of brilliant orange leaves. As Muxiang plays the lute, they trade verses of melancholic poetry [88] and Ling becomes smitten. Unlike Tsai, Ling is disinterested in the machinations of government and nation. Instead he prefers to forge his own path to renown and riches through martial exploits. In Muxiang he finds a kindred spirit of sorts; the men's clothes she wears reflect her desire to be free of those strictures and expectations placed upon her as a woman. She too seeks adventure, to excel in her own terms, rather than to play the dutiful daughter or mother that tradition would dictate.

In spite of his rebellious and pugnacious manner, in his scenes with Muxiang, we see that Ling is far removed from the taciturn, stoic, or cynical swordsmen of the New Style *yanggang* swordplay film. His romantic individualism is expressed through his sensitivity and love of the literary arts, which presents a *wen* side to his initially brash persona. His encounter with Muxiang leads him to further question the obligations of tradition and nation. At the same time, the dark side of this individualism is ego and materialism. After Ling and Tsai meet with their contacts, a gang of Song loyalists, he becomes disenchanted with the rhetorics of patriotic self-sacrifice, and decides to follow his heart (and Muxiang) instead. He abandons Tsai and his quest in favour of striking out on his own.

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[88] The verses are excerpts from the works of Li Yu, a poet and ruler from the Five Kingdoms period. Li Yu's poetry also features prominently later *wuxia* films by Chor Yuen, notably in similar scenes in *Killer Clans* (1976) and *Return of the Sentimental Swordsman* (1981)

This leads to one of Chor Yuen's customary twists. After reuniting with Muxiang and leading her back to the hide-out of the Song loyalists, Muxiang reveals her true identity as a Yuan princess travelling in disguise. The entire charade was a means for the Mongols to uncover the patriots' plan and obtain the treasure for themselves. Even as she betrays Ling, Muxiang confesses that she has fallen in love with him. As will be demonstrated throughout Chor's *wuxia* oeuvre, nothing is as it seems, and the sword provides no defense when love is used as a weapon. By the end, Ling and Tsai reunite and race to stop the Mongols. In the action finale, Muxiang and Ling must reluctantly face each other in battle; each agonized by the conflict between their feelings for each other, and their loyalties to their respective abstractions of nation.

The historical specificity of the storyline and its implicit patriotic message at first seems unusual in consideration of Chor's later works in the *wuxia pian*. While other New Style directors (King Hu perhaps most notably) embraced the historicist backdrop of swordplay genre as a means to convey an authenticity to their retrospective view of Chinese identity, in *Cold Blade* the history finds itself at odds with Chor's presentation, one wreathed in aestheticized culturalist fantasy. Despite the presentation of the story as a historical anecdote, *Cold Blade* does not exhibit a researched depiction of its subject, the Song Dynasty. Indeed, the flavour of the mise-en-scene is much the same as in any of Chor's *wuxia* works, a hazy and romantic 'generic' China, fixed in a vague state of antiquity. The invading Yuans depict a panoply of imaginative ethnic costumes, alternately luxuriant and barbaric, with a full helping of orientalist romanticism. This contributes to a sort of orientalist double-vision, where both the Chinese and the foreign interlopers distinguish themselves as overdetermined cartoons of ethnic character, adding to the playful and fanciful exoticism of this unreal world.

The nationalistic currents that run through *Cold Blade* feel perfunctory in their way, providing a somewhat arbitrary patriotic crisis, itself motivated by a materialistic hunt for lost treasure. This conflict enables Chor to recount not an inspiring tale of national struggle, but a tragic 'Romeo & Juliet' story that provides an ambivalent deconstruction – rather than affirmation – of the sinicizing rhetorics of Chinese unity. In the film's conclusion, the two brothers unite their swords again to defeat the Mongol princess, showing the power of their Chinese unity against a foreign power (and in this case, the power of brotherhood against a feminine Other). The action is spectacular, but the outcome is not triumphant. It is tinged with powerlessness and regret, lamenting the monolithic structuring boundaries (politics; nation; ethnicity) that make

people into enemies, and foreclose upon love as a possible avenue of reconciliation. Ling and Muxiang are forced to destroy each other by their ties to these formations. "Why was I born in the Yuan and you in the Song?" Muxiang asks Ling before they enter into their last duel to the death.

As noted by Stephen Teo, in *Cold Blade* "the 'nationalism' of the genre takes on a tragic-ironic edge" (Teo 2009, 108) that offers some challenge to the conventional metonymy linking the swordplay hero (or heroine) with a unifying Chinese spirit. Rather than re-registering the Chinese masculine self-identity in the New Style's empowering or defiant terms, Chor instead offers a dissonant uncertainty and anxiety. After the battle, the Tsai declares "Brother, the destiny of China is in your hands… mustn't let mere love ruin the country!" Ling, dissatisfied and despondent, asks "Why?" In reply, his brother simply offers "You'd better ask Heaven." The futility and the insufficiency of this answer is underscored by the final shots of *Cold Blade*, ending on a bittersweet flashback to Ling and Muxiang, exchanging their verses of poetry in the garden – a paean to what is lost.

As history will attest, the Song Dynasty will succumb to the Yuan Dynasty, casting all the sacrifices into a nihilistic light. Ethnic pride, the quest for wealth, and the codified obligations of the *xia* to their school/nation, become hollow values when they are negated by the vagaries of history. Much lip service is paid to lofty ideals like the defense of nation, but ultimately the two brothers serve to illustrate a fundamental rift between needs of the individual and the tragic sublimation of the human self under the exigencies of political identity. For Ling, his membership in this order is symbolized by his enforced partnership with his brother in order to manifest the 'Wind and Thunder Sword' technique, a loss of self in the polity of China. Martial-arts as a complex becomes an analog for China, a burden of culture and history as obstacle for human self-realization. In this way, *Cold Blade* foreshadows the subversive apathy to nationalizing impulses that would be seen in Chor's later, highly apolitical Gu Long films.

Duel for Gold

Upon first consideration, the bloody and nihilistic *Duel for Gold* seems unlike the films that would later define Chor Yuen's style at Shaw Brothers. As a *wuxia* film, the harsh mood and lack of sympathetic characters seems at odds with the outright aestheticism and the romantic, phantasmagorical sensibility of the earlier *Cold Blade*. However, in the careful visual

arrangement of his layered compositions, and in the serpentine path of the narrative construction, *Duel for Gold* still presages the reflexive aesthetics and air of peripeteian mystery of his Gu Long *wuxia* cycle from the late 1970s. In the film, a seemingly upstanding swordsman named Wen (Chan Chun) works as the house guard at a notoriously prosperous bank. Two conniving martial-artist sisters (played by Ivy Ling Po and Wong Ping), their respective husbands, and a debonair bandit named Lone Shadow (played by Lo Lieh) conspire amongst each other to outsmart Wen, and make off with the large gold reserves in the bank. After the successful heist, double-crosses become triple-crosses, and the small association of thieves quickly begin to destroy themselves through a dizzying chain of betrayals and murder.

The grotesque attention to gory violence, as well as the characters' stubborn, masochistic persistence even (or especially) in the face of bodily mutilation, all feel like hallmarks of Chang Cheh's *yanggang* martial-arts films. However, *Duel for Gold* also departs from Chang's model in several ways. Rather than focusing on bonds of brotherhood between strident masculine heroes in the face of a decaying society, this film presents instead a battle-of-the-sexes of sorts, by casting the two swordswomen as equal and deadly partners in the proceedings, whose martial skills and capacity for violence make them equal to the men. As the various schemes unfold, loyalties shift between the women and their male lovers, creating a chaotic rotation of ambiguous and queer-tinged allegiances, with emotional manipulation as the dominant mode of attack. The traditional filial bonds of loyalty between family (the sisters), between the various male *xia,* and between these men and their female counterparts, all become both interchangeable and meaningless, as all the players are equally treacherous.

Not only does this serve to liquefy the genre's core values of chivalry and male fraternity, but as well it presents a historicized martial-world that is fundamentally rotten and dysfunctional, with no champion or carrier for traditional virtues. The conventional currencies of the *jianghu* – duty, righteousness, love, and even the pursuit of personal status – all become subjugated to the vulgar lure of money. There are no upright *xia* here who represent chivalric values; instead the ostensible hero Wen is revealed to be as duplicitous and cruel as the "villains" of the piece. In this sense, the film becomes a savage morality play, where the real "hero" remains unclear to the audience throughout most of the plot, and finally can only be defined only as a lesser of evils. This also presents a world practically devoid of an anchored or consistent point of audience sympathy or subjectivity. The motifs of deception and intrigue, already a common obstacle for

the heroes of the New Style *wuxia pian*, here become the very substance of the genre in the absence of a true *xia* figure.

Chor's revisionism is instilled into the fabric of his formal style, as exemplified in the very first sequence of *Duel for Gold.* Many New Style *wuxia* films make use of stylized, performative opening credit sequences that introduce the heroes and their martial abilities. One early and influential example may be seen in Chang Cheh's *Magnificent Trio/Bian Cheng San Xia* (1966), which uses dramatic slow-motion to showcase the three titular heroes in re-enactments of key moments in their story. This sequence is presented against a mist-filled and abstracted theatrical set, enthroning the characters' deeds and raising them up to icon status, like noble figures out of Chinese opera. *Duel for Gold* also features an extensive credit sequence, though one that operates on a more radical visual and narrative aesthetic. The film opens on an establishing shot depicting the aftermath of a ransacked gold caravan, held in frozen tableau. Chor Yuen follows this with shots of an acrobatic swordfight in extreme slow-motion, composed in very shallow focus. The foregrounds are dominated by elegant close-ups of rocks, branches, and swaying grasses, while the airborne fighters are little more than hazy blurs in the background. Each of these dreamy reveries are interspersed with sequences of jolting, blink-fast montage, featuring a stream of inserts of bloodstained gold and contorted dead bodies, with shots lasting only a few frames. The effect is both rhythmic and jarring; the inversion of the usual figure-ground relationship in the slow-motion shots seems to efface the combatants and their struggle, and instead recreate serene nature compositions reminiscent of traditional Chinese painting. The radical bursts of montage shatter this culturalist dream with harsh detonations of modernist speed and fragmentation.

Figure 32: The opening flash-forward credit sequence in *Duel for Gold* (1971)

Figure 33: Shallow focus on foreground elements while a slow motion battle rages behind. *Duel for Gold* (1971)

Structurally, the very beginning of *Duel for Gold* is also the film's ending. Here Chor takes a page from his Cantonese productions like *The Mad Woman, The Natural Son* and *The Joys and Sorrows of Youth*, in which a narrator appears (typically Chor Yuen himself) to introduce the audience to the story about to be recounted onscreen. Here, the narrator is off-camera and speaks Mandarin, but the effect is the same. Surveying the aftermath of the battle half-shown during the opening sequence, the storyteller explains that the story has already finished, but that he would be happy to recount it to the viewers. While this device offsets the initial disorientation caused by the flashback structure and eases the audience into the narrative, it also performs a more subtle, subversive function. Through the reflexive presence of the storyteller, the fiction of the film itself is made all the more apparent, dethroning the sense of an authoritative voice and giving question to the presumption of historicity.

By *Duel for Gold's* apocalyptic conclusion, the gold lays unclaimed on the road by a desolate temple, all the main characters are dead, and any semblance of *xia* virtue has been long-since stripped away from them. Here, the idea of a historical and cultural Chinese past that provides a recoverable source for values and identity is instead aggressively deconstructed as myth. In the last moments of the film, a squad of official investigators arrives at the scene of carnage. As the amused narrator informs us, they conclude that the treacherous swordsman Wen must have died protecting the gold from the others. "People judge matters from outward appearances while no one often knows the real truth" the storyteller muses, and the film closes on the image of the officials ceremoniously bowing their heads to honour Wen's passing as a venerable knight. With this cynical turn, the nature of truth collapses under the weight of surfaces, by implication leaving the entire heroic genre in a state of entropy. In *Duel* we see how

very early on at Shaw Brothers, Chor Yuen's work was already, in aesthetic style and in narrative content, inducing a confrontation between the romanticism and traditional resonance of the *wuxia* genre, and a modern, more subversive iconoclasm.

Magic Blade

Following immediately upon the success of *Killer Clans*,(1976) Chor Yuen's next *wuxia* film, *Magic Blade* (1976) goes even further with its revisionist depiction of the *jianghu.* Working again from a Gu Long story, Chor takes a more baroque and existential path. Rather than depicting the martial world as a labyrinth of familial dysfunction and treacherous ambition on a model of organized crime, here it appears as an ersatz, nightmarish kind of limbo, full of lost souls and ghoulish schemers. The story follows Fu Hung-hsueh (played by Ti Lung), a notorious but reclusive master swordsman who lives on the margins of *wuxia* society, and who practices an unconventional sword style (a blade worn on his hip, with a handle on its side, brandished like a blend of six-gun and police baton). Yen Nan-Fei (Lo Lieh) is a refined gentleman knight of means, who was defeated by Fu a year earlier. Yen requests a rematch, and Fu re-emerges from his self-imposed obscurity to accept. Although Fu wins the rematch, both men then immediately find themselves the target of assassins sent by the mysterious Master Yu, a hidden figure who seeks the "domination of the world of martial arts." Fu and Yen suspend their rivalry and set out to prevent the villainous Yu from stealing the most powerful object in the martial world, the Peacock Dart. After the duo foils an attack on Peacock Manor, the dying custodian of the Peacock Dart bestows the weapon upon Fu, asking him to protect both the Dart and his now-orphaned daughter Miss Chiu (Cheng Li).

From this point forward, *Magic Blade* unfolds into an episodic chain of encounters between the swordsmen and Yu's minions, each incident themed on symbolic motifs derived from Chinese art forms (such as poetry, chess, calligraphy, or painting) and each more surreal than the last. Over the course of these scenes, Yen is presumed killed and Miss Chiu is captured. Fu travels to Master Yu's mansion in order to trade the Peacock Dart for Miss Chiu's life. Here, Fu must overcome a series of temptations, riddles, and deceptions arranged by Yu's sultry concubine Ming, a femme fatale who was earlier believed to be an ally. Fu finally secures Miss Chiu's freedom by surrendering the Dart, and soon after he confronts the masked Master Yu and his gang of assassins. During the fighting, the mask is cut from Yu's face, and he is exposed as

Yen, who then explains how he faked his own death and manipulated Fu at each step of the journey. This revelation however is also quickly proven false; after Fu kills Yen, the 'real' Yu finally appears. The true mastermind Yu is revealed to be an old man, a martial patriarch who spent his whole life playing the powers of the *jianghu* against each other to achieve total control. He offers Fu a chance to join him, but Fu refuses. When Yu attempts to use the Peacock Dart on him, Fu defeats it with a previously unknown device, the Peacock Robe, and in the subsequent duel, Yu is finally killed. Ming then appears to inform Fu that now he has inherited Master Yu's name, riches, and empire. Fu refuses outright; leaving it all behind, he foreswears the world of martial arts once and for all.

A synopsis of *Magic Blade* can scarcely do justice to the twisting, idiosyncratic structure of the film. The themes of deception, performance, and dissimulation run throughout. At every turn and in every scene, the audience is rocked by subterfuge and false revelations which reinforce the sense of a world where everything must eventually be exposed as a performance and nothing can be considered wholly real. It is in this manner that *Magic Blade* functions as one of Chor Yuen's most subversively self-reflexive films. While never fully eschewing the conceits of dramatic logic or narrative construction (the hallmarks of a commercially viable studio project), these themes of unreality and artifice are thoroughly embedded into both the narrative and the elements of the mise-en-scene, contributing to a tone of surrealism and allegory that pervades the normal structures and conventions of the *wuxia pian*. The motif of theatricality (and its impostures) recurs throughout the *Magic Blade* in the form of several highly stage-managed encounters that can be seen as self-conscious disruptions of generic verisimilitude.

The most pointed example of this effect comes in the opening scene of the film, where Chor depicts what can be best described as an almost literal setting of Said's orientalist stage. Opening on a ramshackle village in the dead of night (complete with Hollywood western-style tumbleweeds blowing through), the disembodied voice of a narrator welcomes the audience to the deserted Phoenix Town. The eerie silence is then broken by the fading in of traditional music and Chinese opera cymbals. Growing louder, the festive music is revealed to be diegetic, as a cavalcade of musicians and other extras in courtly period costumes quickly file into the gates of the town, and set about building a performance space. Lights are hoisted; carpets are laid down; flowers, furniture, ornate *chinoiseries*, and other props are carried in by hand, changing the setting from a dark, desolate ruin, and into a lavish banquet venue over a the course of a brisk

montage. Swordsman Yen's name is announced by a courtier, and he appears in frame on cue, before striding down the middle of a symmetrical, frontal stage-like tableau flanked by servants and guests. As he takes his seat on the viewing platform, a troupe of dancing girls in colourful raiment begin performing a traditional dance number for both Yen and the film audience, framed by floral arrangements and Chinese lanterns. Abruptly, Fu appears as a backlit silhouette on the outskirts of the scene, accompanied by an ominous roll of percussion and a jolting zoom to indicate Yen's sudden awareness of his presence. Yen dismisses his party, and the music and dancing stop. In seconds the performers rapidly 'strike' their set, rolling up carpets, removing the lights, and packing up their props. They retreat into the night, leaving Yen and Fu alone on a once more windswept street in an empty town. With both main characters present, the stage is set (or rather, *un-set*) for a completely different scene, that of an archetypal western showdown, and the men begin their sword duel.

In this opening sequence, Yen is established as a richly-dressed aesthete, who orchestrates his own elaborate party before his possibly fatal duel, a grandiose gesture that casts him into stark contrast with the drably-attired and solitary Fu. While serving to illustrate the differences between the lead characters, this radical transformation of the scene, and the subsequent deconstructive *reversal* of this act, also self-consciously highlights the pointedly *artificed* nature of the narrative space and the audience's place in it. The emphasis on the process of mounting a quaint oriental showpiece (the dance number) under such oddly discordant circumstances within the spectacle of the film story, serves as a slyly Brechtian episode that immediately sets the tone for the rest of the film, blurring distinctions between the diegetic and non-diegetic worlds.

Throughout *Magic Blade* Chor Yuen builds the various episodes around similar themes of theatrical presentation. Each of Yu's strange assassins makes his or her appearance upon some kind of stage, in many cases in quite literal terms. These confrontations always place a pronounced emphasis on the constructed nature of their facade. In one scene, Fu and his companions arrive at a small night market to rest. When the whole encampment is discovered to be a trap set by the villain Yu, the merchants dim the lights of their stalls, as the lights go up on an outdoor stage to reveal a killer who is a chess-master. This appearance of the villain is presented not simply as a stylistic flourish achieved with cinematic techniques, but as a dramaturgical *coup-de-théatre* orchestrated within the diegetic world. The chess-master invites

Fu to play with him, at which point his minions quickly rearrange their market set, don costumes, and rapidly draw out the lines of a Chinese chessboard around the heroes. This places Fu and his friends at the center of a bizarre trap, where all their opponents follow the prescribed movements of the chess pieces they are dressed to represent. In another scene, the idea of performance takes on a layered aspect. Fu and Yen arrive at a country inn only to find that all the people in it are dead, but have had their bodies artfully rearranged in a frozen imitation of bustling daily life. Amongst the dead are the killers, sitting motionless around a chessboard waiting for their moment to strike; living men pretending to be dead men who are pretending to be living men.[89]

In a later sequence, Fu must confront a mighty armoured warrior, attired like a deified general out of classical Chinese mythology and carrying an immense sword in its scabbard. Fu fights his way through the general's entourage of acrobatic swordsman, whose fanciful formations involve the spelling out of the word 'sword' in calligraphy with their own bodies. When Fu advances on the general, the man breaks down, revealing that his giant sword is a fake, and that he is in fact only an actor with no martial skills who was hired to intimidate Fu. These motifs of performance and artifice are repeated over and over again in *Magic Blade,* taking on by way of repetition an absurdist and sometimes satirical quality. While some of these scenarios feel playful, the themes of illusion and deception permeate, lending the entire world through which Fu travels a quality of uncanny falseness.

Apart from the overt invocations of reflexive theatricality and performance, the theme of the untrustworthiness of appearances is at the core of *Magic Blade.* Yen's deception throughout the film functions to dispel the romantic notion of male mutual admiration and friendship that traditionally arises in New Style films when martial artists meet and test themselves against each other. Here, the masculine brotherhood of the *jianghu* and the sense of a righteous order that exists through these interpersonal bonds are shown to be a lie. Even when Yen is shown to be the ultimate architect of the film's treacherous gyrations, he too is then revealed to be a false face, an actor playing a part, while playing another part. Even the McGuffin of the Peacock Dart is initially revealed to be a lie. After a prolonged exposition of Peacock Manor's most secure vaults, which are eventually breached by Yu's men, the true Dart is instead hidden in plain sight, as a gaudy bauble in the throne room's opulent set dressing, fully visible throughout earlier sequences.

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[89] Chor would later revisit (and virtually recycle) this concept with an extremely similar scene in his later gothic-psychedelic *wuxia* thriller *Bat Without Wings* (1980).

Here the film demonstrates its subversive attention to surfaces, while pointing characters and the audience in all the wrong directions. "The secret place is the most un-secret. The safest place is the most unsafe" quips the master of Peacock Manor. In the film's finale, the play of falseness is echoed by the Dart – the ultimate weapon of the martial world and the ostensible object of the film's plot – and its negation with the Peacock Robe, rendering it again nothing but a bauble. Both objects – a shimmering gown and a gilded decorative feather – are realized as ornamentation, as signs of artifice that are ultimately empty of substance.

Magic Blade also marks an important stage in Chor Yuen's revision of the wuxia hero type. Fu Hung-hsueh, as played by Ti Lung (a longtime muse of Chang Cheh) evokes at first a strong wu sensibility. Fu is a solemn, indecorous swordsman; with his shabby poncho and crust of stubble, his style channels Clint Eastwood's 'man with no name' gunfighter character from the westerns of Sergio Leone. As such, he seems the epitome of the rugged masculine individual, and a clear counterpoint to Yen's decadence and splendour (throwing a party before his duel, and going to the most expensive restaurants). In this sense, Fu appears to be quite different from the more refined and gentlemanly roles Ti Lung become known for in Chor Yuen's later Gu Long pieces. Still, in spite of appearances, Fu betrays the traits of the wen scholar hero as the film proceeds. Belying his rough surface, he is exceedingly perceptive and well-educated, quickly deciphering clues and confounding the various traps set for him. Frequently, he will act first, but then afterwards explain his impulsive-seeming actions with deductive reasoning. Although evoking the image of the scruffy cowboy, this makes him far more akin to the swordsman-detective figure of gongan fiction. The structure of the story also relies upon the mechanics of the detective genre, with a trail of clues that make use of poetry, painting, and chess knowledge. The thematic placement of the arts at the heart of the story encourages a wen reading of Fu's character.

Fu's character possesses a strong wen romantic aspect. In one scene he shares a moment with Miss Chiu in a ruined moonlit courtyard overgrown with fronds and russet leaves. Here, Fu reveals that after leaving his true love to seek fame in the jianghu, he returned to his hometown years later to find that she had tired of waiting for him, and left the village to marry another man. In the garden of yellow flowers they had once tended, the plants had wilted, and on the walls were written the verse: *"In lust of power and wealth, the hair grey goes. / On mountains old, the pine and bamboo grows."* Beneath his hard exterior, Fu reveals a soft sensibility. He nurses a

wounded heart, and now wanders the world, not in search of martial renown, but pining for his lost love. He expresses the loneliness of one who climbed to the top of the swordplay world only to lose what was truly important. The use of poetry and the yellow flower imagery enhance Fu's sentimental side, and here act as a counterpoint to the *wu* allure of the martial gallantry lifestyle.

The use of the colour yellow becomes a recurring motif for Fu's melancholy in *Magic Blade.* When he reminisces forlornly about the woman he failed to marry, Miss Chiu plucks a fresh yellow flower, and gives it to him, tearing it from its moorings in Fu's past, and placing it in his present. Later, when Fu finds a sickly orphan girl selling herself on the street, dressed in a yellow shift, he gives her food and money for medicine. When she asks his name, he presses a yellow flower into her hands, saying "My name isn't important. Just call me the Yellow Flower." Shortly after, the girl is injured in the crossfire between Fu and assassins. She dies cradling the bloodstained flower he gave to her. For Fu, the yellow flower can only represent bittersweet memories. This underscores Fu's unsuccessful attempts to escape from his nostalgia. Yellow is the colour of memory, but even the most cherished memories cannot be grasped; they can only live in the past, serving to remind us that time lost can never be regained.

In addition to the romantic softening of the hero, Chor Yuen also emphasizes a *yin* aesthetic in other ways in *Magic Blade.* Eroticism is introduced into the film when Fu reaches Master Yu's palace. He is greeted by the concubine Ming in a long yellow gown, and she encourages Fu to join with Master Yu to rule the martial world. She offers him riches, and then later in the night, she offers him her body, tempting him across the courtyard as she bathes near her open window. She attempts to seduce him first with the presentation of her naked handmaidens writhing and cavorting on his bed, and then by disrobing and pressing her own exposed body against his chest. She teases him, saying "When I am naked, as I am now, few men can resist temptation." Fu pauses, and then replies "I suppose I must be one of those few." Here Chor again employs elements of sexuality in his remolding of the *wuxia pian* model and uses the taboo charge of nudity and lesbianism to energize the sense of temptation Ming presents.

In true *wen* fashion, and unlike the *wu* type, Fu does not treat the presence of women as a threat to his resolve, nor does he violently reject them. Instead his forbearance is found in the cultivation of his mind over his body, illustrating how the *wen* male "demonstrates masculinity by giving up erotic desires in order to fulfill ethical obligations" (Lu 101). Fu states that he only desires Miss Chiu, and agrees to give up the Peacock Dart only if she is brought to him. Once

they are alone, Chiu removes her blue dress to reveal a golden yellow robe underneath, and then begins to undress behind a gauzy calligraphic screen that creates a voyeuristic frame around her. The scene ends with the implication that Fu and Chiu consummate their love, but we discover later that this was in fact a ruse. Facing the true Master Yu in battle, Fu produces the golden robe and wraps it around himself. The secret of Chiu's golden Peacock Robe is explained; it is the only thing in the martial world that can protect someone against the power of the fearsome Peacock Dart. Suddenly Fu and Chiu's tryst is cast in a new light, revealing the act of sexual transgression itself to be yet another deception, one played against both Master Yu and the spectator.

Figure 34: Dead brush encircles a tiny, off-centre battle for supreme swordsmanship. *Magic Blade* (1976)
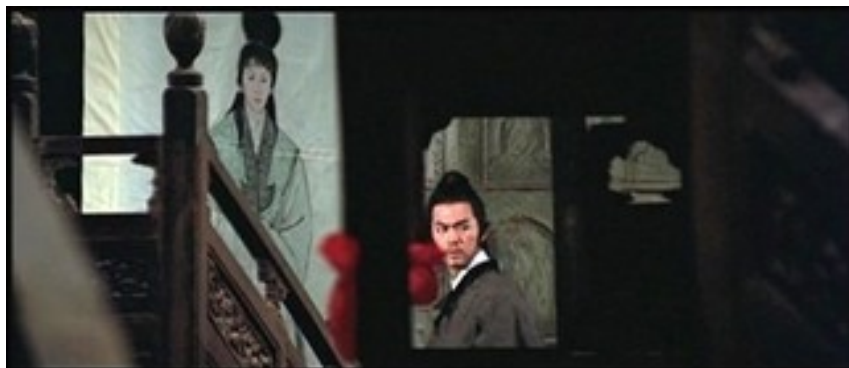

Figure 35: Aperture framing in *Magic Blade* (1976)

In Yu's palace, Chor makes use of large sheer rectangular screens and painted decorative panels to create a plenitude of frames (fig.36). By re-composing the characters, in this way they become incorporated into these 'flat' spaces, as if they were painted figures on the surface, or even 'electric shadows' flickering on a movie screen (fig.37).

Figure 36: *Mise-en-abyme* framing through screens in *Magic Blade* (1976)

Figure 37: A moving painting. *Magic Blade* (1976)

Where Fu as the central hero is largely colourless in his simple black attire and grey poncho, Chor deploys colour through *Magic Blade* in either quick moody accents, or occasionally in bursts of splashy opulence. In the opening duel, when Yen draws his sword, he becomes drenched in an unnaturalistic and mystical red light (fig.38), expressing the semiotic linkages between the sword (the sign of the *xia*) and the cycle of violence represented by this lifestyle. In other instances, yellow flowers and women in yellow dresses recur through the film to signal Fu's tragic-romantic past, and his regret for decisions made long ago. In the Peacock Mansion segment, the interiors feature elaborate, decorations flooded by stylized purple and green lighting. Chor's penchant for orientalist excess in this particular environment mixes with the unreal colour palette, highlighting the sense of fantasy. Peacock castle is also a space of mechanical traps, secret doors, and supernatural weaponry, including the Peacock Dart itself. This strange weapon consists of a fan of gilded, bejewelled peacock features, which when thrown can slay multiple enemies through magical explosions of coloured light and smoke. All

of these elements not only emphasize the imaginary, mythical qualities of the story, but also serve to recall the tropes of the old Cantonese *wuxia* films.

Figure 38: Expressionistic lighting prompted by violence in *Magic Blade* (1976)

Even so, in this film, the condensed, pastel-drenched decorative settings that would come to epitomize Chor's style are less in evidence. Instead *Magic Blade* favours a more graphical expressionism that composes scenes in open fields, courtyards and plazas. These sequences frequently occur at night, where bright swaths of artificial lighting define the space of the action, and everything else falls into inky blackness. It is in such places that various assassins construct their deathtraps-cum-performance spaces; creating stages within a stage, outside of which there is only a void of darkness. This view externalizes the viewer by a degree, where the construction of the scene within the illuminated profilmic space is revealed, while the world beyond is neutralized into an un-rendered abstraction. Outside the immediacy of the plot and the illumination of the floodlights, the existence of anything else becomes suspect. Scene changes and tone changes are almost instantaneous in *Magic Blade,* bridging spatial gaps between set-pieces in a way that denies integration into a larger world. This reflects both the pre-eminence of the psychology of the characters over their environments, and the abstraction of reality that occurs in by creating these contiguous 'scenic spaces'.

The world in *Magic Blade* feels curiously depopulated, presenting a post-apocalyptic vision where it often seems as if only the only people left alive are the denizens of the *jianghu*, as if no other world exists beyond its reaches. This nihilism underscores the abstracted nature of the sets and scenarios, and places the story in a constrictive realm that functions largely in metaphorical terms. Here, the themes of ambition and domination of the martial world take on a particularly hollow ring. As noted by Tony Rayns, the setting of *Magic Blade* is wholly different

from the fantasized historical settings in earlier *wuxia pian*, marking the shift in the 1970s "when the sword becomes its own negation, when the rhetoric surrounding the sword self-consciously divorces itself from any other reality" (Rayns 156). Indeed, *Magic Blade* treats itself partially as expressionistic journey that turns the psychology of the *wuxia* hero in upon itself.

Fu's tragic essence and his rejection of the *jianghu* are also expressed through a meta-textual allusion. While the invocation of the western gunslinger was not uncommon in the early days of the New Style *wuxia,* in this case, a decade later, his appearance takes on a more postmodern touch. Here, Chor's quotation from the revisionist western canon merges the figure of Fu with the iconic 'man with no name' played by Eastwood. The irony is of course that his 'name' – that is to say, his past and his *jianghu* status – is precisely the cause of his sorrows. As the number one swordsman in the martial world, he is constantly sought by ambitious rivals, and in the context of the film, his fame makes him the prime target of Master Yu's plans. A recurring motif that emerges in *Magic Blade* is the phrase "Fu Hung-hsueh is Fu Hung-hsueh," expressing his adversaries' appreciation that Fu lives up to his formidable reputation. Ultimately, Fu does not seek membership in this masculine order; his melancholy stems from his desire for love and for life, both of which may be foreclosed by his past. The repetition of "Fu Hung-hsueh is Fu Hung-hsueh" only re-iterates Fu's attempts to escape his own name, and foretells the conclusion, where the riddle of 'Master Yu' takes on its most existential tone.

The last act of the film highlights the tension between the unreality of the *wuxia pian*, and its ideological undercurrents. After unmasking and defeating Yen, Fu demands to see the real Yu. Ming points to Yu's throne, and a giant, ornate, polished-gold mirror is lowered from the ceiling before them. "What do you see in the image?" she asks him. Fu looks into the distorted reflection and replies that he sees himself. "No, it's Master Yu" she explains "Master Yu is only an image. It represents wealth and power" (fig.39). Here, the mirror demonstrates the duality of the swordsman hero, laying bare the underlying symmetry between meritocratic *jianghu* society, and the capitalism of the modernizing Chinese diaspora; whoever is the best in the world of martial arts sits at the top, but they must be ruthless and uncompromising in order to retain that seat.

Figure 39: The golden mirror (*Magic Blade* (1976)

Ming offers Fu her own carnal body, the regal palace, boundless wealth, and the very identity of 'Yu' the master of the martial world, but Fu simply turns to leave. Here, through the symbol of the mirror, and the excoriation of the 'self' from 'name', the deconstruction of the genre becomes almost complete. The temptations that Fu overcomes – money, sex, fame, and power – are in fact those things that a traditional knight errant is expected to eschew. Fu's demonstration of his *xia* virtue is both complicated and exemplified by his final renunciation of the *xia* lifestyle. His answer to Ming is simple and emphatic "I want to live. I take no interest in money and power."

When the 'true' Master Yu makes his appearance, it is first as a disembodied voice that stops Fu in his tracks. The voice urges him to accept the mantle of 'Master Yu', as if emanating from the recesses of Fu's own ego. Then, in a symbolically spectacularly gesture, the master erupts from behind the gold mirror, smashing through the brick wall emblazoned with his name. Brandishing the Peacock Dart, the revealed Master Yu declares "If you hadn't seen the Peacock Dart, you would have seen my grey hair, which has grown with fighting for money and power!" His phrasing echoes the poetic words written on the walls of Fu's withered garden and bespeaks the time irrevocably lost in the pursuit of glory following the 'way of the sword.' The existential dimension of Fu and Yu's last battle is thus put into stark relief, with Yu as both an externalization the inner ambitions that led Fu to abandon his lover, and as the grizzled ghost of Fu's future, should he fail to turn away from this path. This final duel is furious and fantastical, with Yu exhibiting an array of weird magical abilities, and relying on mechanical traps built into his palace. The set itself is cast into shades of hazy purple light that suggest the unreal and symbolic mode of the sequence.

In the end, Fu triumphs, and the closing of the film frames him leaving the palace, seen through the bars of a gilded cage. This dissolves to the final shot: a bloodstained golden throne hanging from chains inside the cage and surrounded by bodies. With this last image, Chor Yuen shows the symbolic prize (a secret throne occupied by the cypher Yu) as another illusion, empty of true meaning. The ending of *Magic blade* thus offers both a correlative critique of modern hyper-competitive capitalist culture, and a meditation on the anxieties of political statelessness. Fu rejects the mantle of Master Yu, and in doing so, refuses to inherit the 'name of the father.' Instead he prefers to go nameless, and reject the historicized imposture of China that this *jianghu* represents.

The imbricated levels of artifice and thematic deception in *Magic Blade* defamiliarize the culturalist fantasy and redraw it in terms of alienation and genre pastiche. By dispelling the hero's resolve to participate in this degraded chivalric society, this depiction of the *jianghu* seems to negate the potential for recuperating values from an ostensibly nativist mythology like the *wuxia pian*, and Fu's exile from *jianghu* society is self-imposed, a factor of his disillusionment and regret. Rather than a stoic hero fixing his gaze forward and accepting his fate, he is instead a lovelorn nostalgic, meandering in search of a lost past. As a tragic-romantic figure, Fu acts as an epilogue for the young heroes portrayed in earlier *wuxia* films like Chang Cheh's *One-Armed Swordsman* (1967) or *Golden Swallow* (1968) who choose not to suppress their *yanggang* values and thirst for action. Instead, there is no brotherly order of *xia,* no redemption in death, and no recompense to be found in wasting the best years of one's life; instead there is only regret, from which is born a primal desire: *I want to live.*

Death Duel

One of the most visually striking films in Chor Yuen's Gu Long cycle, *Death Duel* (1977) functions as a discursive meditation on the swordplay form, through Chor Yuen's use of formal and thematic dichotomies. With the use of a stylized pattern of lighting, cinematography, and set-design, Chor reinforces the domain of the *wuxia pian* as a culturalist 'dream of China'. As opposed to films like *Magic Blade* (1976) or *Swordsman and Enchantress* (1978) where there is a sense of the *jianghu* as being the *only* world, a self-contained existential construct with no tether to reality, in *Death Duel* Chor creates a *jianghu* fantasy that exists in opposition to a parallel society of ordinary people. By crafting this distinct yet unreal psychological space, and

contrasting it with class elements reminiscent of his social dramas, Chor here reflects a sense of identity as it is pulled in two directions.

The story begins with an ambitious swordsman-in-black named Yen Shi-san who seeks to prove himself the top fighter of the martial world by defeating the famous Third Master. Chiu-Ti, the female leader of the sinister Mu-Yung clan, tells Yen where to find Third Master, but upon arriving at his home, he learns that his target has already died. Demoralized, Yen retreats from the *jianghu*. We soon learn that Third Master has only faked his death in order to start a new life as 'Hopeless Ah Chi', a peasant with neither sword nor riches to his name. Ah Chi meets Hsiao, a gentle courtesan, and love blossoms between them. He is taken in by a poor family, but soon finds himself pursued again by would-be challengers and Chiu-Ti's assassins. After one such encounter, Ah Chi is poisoned and given just three days to live. He leaves to find an antidote, but promises Hsiao that he will return to marry her if he survives. Near death, he seeks out a reclusive herbalist, only to find a retired, brooding Yen, who now lives as a nameless hermit. Neither man identifies the other, and after Yen treats Ah Chi's wounds, the two part company as kindred spirits. Returning to his peasant family, Ah Chi learns that Hsiao has been slain by an unknown swordsman. Enraged, he takes up the name of Third Master again, and seeks out the murderer. He finds a swordsman in black, but after a short fight, he recognizes him as Yen. Chiu-Ti arrives,, revealing that she killed Hsiao in order to arrange their duel. She unleashes her brother, a supernatural madman driven insane by practising 'forbidden martial arts', but instead the young man goes berserk and slaughters his sister and her minions. In the wake of this carnage, Yen declares that he and Ah Chi must still fight, in order to prove which of them is truly the best. Ah Chi refuses, but Yen insists. After a furious duel, Ah Chi reluctantly kills Yen. Abandoning his sword, he leaves the *jianghu* once and for all, with the knowledge that it has now cost him the lives of both his lover and his friend.

In the mise-en-scene of *Death Duel,* the world becomes sharply divided along the lines of the 'real' – the domain of the common people; dusty, gray, and rough-hewn – and the 'unreal' – the sphere of the *jianghu*, which explodes with unnatural colours, and is swathed in gilded finery and rich fabrics. This division is reinforced by the use of outdoor locations and natural lighting for many of the street scenes of the 'normal' civil society, while the world of swordplay is depicted exclusively as a detached and dreamy realm of invented studio landscapes, bathed in swirling mists (fig.40).

Figure 40: The misty world of the *wulin* in *Death Duel (*1977)

Structurally, the film is bookended by two duelling sequences that both occur in a fanciful grove, laden with boughs of scarlet leaves, and with hazy vistas of pagodas against pastel skies that are visible beyond the trees. This is a place where the accounts of the *jianghu* are settled, and where lavishly-attired swordsmen seem to appear and disappear at will like figures out of a fairy tale. This recurrent setting becomes a reification of the abstract concept of the *wulin* – the 'martial forest' – as an autumnal time-lost orchard, locked into a perpetual sunset ambience (fig.41), a place with "no seasons, no nationality, and no concrete history."[90] This evokes a reverie that is more fantasy than memory, a beautiful orientalist hallucination of a Chinese cultural past in saturated and unchanging terms. The intense artificiality of this space forms a binary opposition with the muted tones and relative banality of the 'real' world Ah Chi inhabits while living among the common people. The *wulin* instead seems to exist just beyond the veil of quotidian life. While its world is alluring and sensual, it is also a patently false construction, where romantic beauty only conceals treachery, spite, and false ideals that drive men to empty glory.

With the sword-fighting sequences that occur in these fantastical spaces, Chor performs a curious stylistic subversion, framing shots of the action in unusual ways that seem to disavow the importance of the martial arts display by instead foregrounding elements of the elegant landscape around the two swordsmen as they spin, leap, and lunge at one another. This tendency to

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[90]   From Lo Wai-luk, speaking on the fantastical setting of the early Cantonese *wuxia pian* in his *Rulai Shenzhang Yishu Biji*, p.10 (as cited in Teo 2009, 90).

Figure 41: *Death Duel (*1977)

privilege self-consciously beautiful or abstracted compositions is observable throughout Chor's *wuxia* films, but in these sequences in *Death Duel,* it becomes especially pronounced. Throughout the fast-paced and briskly edited final fight sequence, the combatants are constantly under threat of becoming obscured or overwhelmed by their environment. Thick mists may cover them, or clusters of coppery thickets may loom in front of the camera, yielding fleeting or obstructed views of the deadly combat. Canopies of leaves seem to press down upon them, almost closing them off from the spectator's view. Other times, Chor makes these men and their battle seem small by using extremely long shots and foreground intrusions to place them into distant or enclosed portions of the frame (fig.42), and leave them dwarfed by the counterfeit natural beauty of the luxuriant sets (fig.43). The overall effect is one that both enthralls and alienates the spectator in equal measures. By emphasizing the artistic excesses of the constructed and mythical environment, the performers become lost in this dreamlike space, turning them into just another formal element of the aestheticized frame.

With the story of Ah Chi/Third Master, Chor Yuen exposes the conflict between human free choice and the obligations and compulsions of a toxic society. Here Chor makes frequent use of two-shots to emphasize the duality inherent in this rift, constructing scenes that place characters from different philosophical paths in the frame together, speaking to each other, but while facing in opposite directions. This constitutes the crack in the mirror; *xia* society is superficially glamourous, while also fostering a narcissistic and sociopathic lifestyle that is fed by ambition and competition. Ah Chi flees from the phantasm of the *wulin* in order to find his grounding in the simple labour of quotidian life. Of course, the 'real' world has its hardships as

Figure 40: A triangular partition fragments the final battle in *Death Duel (*1977)

Figure 41: A swordfight caught between two immense maple leaves. *Death Duel (*1977)

well, but in the face of life's pragmatic concerns, acts of kindness by ordinary people are emphasized. When Ah Chi is found suffering on the streets with nothing to eat, it is another poor person who takes him in. Ah Chi later learns that this is also the home of the prostitute Hsiao, who uses her brothel money to sustain her family. There is no judgment within this unconventional family unit. Such transgressions against tradition are instead treated as quiet necessities in the real world, and 'love' is valued above propriety. Ah Chi asserts that he does not look down upon her either; "Poor people and the rich all have dignity." These scenes of simple emotional acceptance alternate with scenes of the *jianghu* society, which is drenched in opulence, yet obsessed with power and status, and engaged in deadly squabbles for dominance. Chivalry and honour, like the picturesque mirage of the film's *wulin*, is simply a lie the *xia* reflect back upon themselves.

In the film's opening scene, the symbolic *wulin* domain is where Third Master's name is first mentioned. Symmetrically, in film's final scene, it is where Ah Chi appears as Third Master for the first time, not in his shabby peasant's clothing, but in a glittering golden robe. This

reinforces the threshold between 'ordinary life' and the dream-world of the *wulin,* and the transformation of the self that is required to traverse these boundaries. When Ah Chi is confronted by swordsmen earlier in the film, they ask him where the famous Third Master's sword is. Ah Chi takes up a leafy reed instead, and uses it to defeat them. "I've changed. So has my sword." he replies, affirming the symbolic metonymy between the *xia* and his weapon. Ah Chi is no longer a hardened, forged weapon, but something alive and growing.

In *Death Duel,* like in many of Chor's *wuxia* films, the 'name' is treated as both a burden and a source of anxiety. While empoisoned and searching for a cure, Ah Chi is helped by a woodcutter with no name. In actuality, he is the former master swordsman of the martial world, Fu Hung-hsueh (Ti Lung in a cameo, reprising his role from *Magic Blade*). He now lives a simple life, with neither name nor sword, and cautions Ah Chi that it is never good to be too famous. Chiu-Ti's brother is driven mad by practicing forbidden martial arts with the ambition of becoming number one in the *jianghu*. When Chiu-Ti instructs him to kill Yen and Ah Chi to bring glory to their family name, it is this invocation that causes the young man to snap and turn upon his own clan.

Here one's 'name' in the martial world becomes a symbolic carrier for an inherited cultural history that prevents human growth and progress. When Ah Chi first meets Yen, both had forsaken their names and positions in the martial world in order to live peaceful lives. Later, both take up these names again, with only tragic results. After Hsiao's death, Ah Chi renounces his peasant identity before he embarks upon the path of revenge as Third Master. This act of retribution is negated at the film's conclusion, when he not only fails to avenge Hsiao (her murderer is instead slain by her own brother) but also must kill his new friend. Yen too, feels this crisis of identity, a rift between his heart, and his name which ties him to the *wulin*. When Ah Chi asks why they must fight, Yen replies that he only hated one person's name in this world; his own. "Had it not been for that name, I could have left here and we wouldn't have had to fight in front of the dead" he tells his friend. Unlike Ah Chi, Yen is unable to shed his *xia* identity and is instead destroyed by it. Ah Chi swears this will be his last duel; his final strike breaks off the end of his sword, leaving it embedded in Yen's heart. The act of killing Yen is also his final act as Third Master, leaving his broken sword as a cenotaph marking his severance from the world of martial arts.

CONCLUSION

Although he spent almost his entire career working within the studio systems of Hong Kong, Chor Yuen cannot be simply relegated to the role of a studio '*metteur-en-scene*'. Instead, through his filmography we can see structural consistencies and a prevalence of personal style that mark him not only as an auteur in his own right, but also as an important figure of the Hong Kong cinema whose influences may be traced through the industry's heyday and into the present moment. The *wuxia pian* has not only grown in terms of its international recognition, but also in terms of its power as a global signifier of Chinese identity. Although he has largely eluded serious study, Chor Yuen is arguably as important to the development of the *wuxia* genre as Chang Cheh or King Hu. Just as the New Style works are seen as critical and formative in the moment of the 1960s, by the latter half of the seventies Chor Yuen's swordplay works exerted a similar force. Chor's influence, however, echoed more softly in the scholarship of martial arts film due to the relative inaccessibility of his work during the period of the late nineties when Hong Kong's cinema history was being most fervently re-evaluated.

What is remarkable about Chor's work is the way in which his swordplay films both perpetuated and transformed the existing trends at Shaw Brothers, which promoted a cultural-nationalist nostalgia through the use of period settings and historical topics. Instead, Chor's works exhibit a slyly reflexive and self-orientalizing tendency that interrupts and complicates conventional readings of orientalism and nationalistic myth-making. This becomes particularly significant when considered against the backdrop of Hong Kong's evolving relationship to Mainland China and its sense of an increasingly independent Chinese identity.

A Revisionist 'Dream of China

Sek Kei once described the cinematic output of Shaw Brothers studios as revolving around two main modes of cultural production, which he dubbed "the China dream" and "Hong Kong sentiments."[91] This reflected the Shaws' efforts to appeal to their Chinese audiences, both in Hong Kong and around the world, through two largely discrete approaches. With their

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[91]   Kei 2003, *Shaw Movie Town* (pp37-47)

'traditional' genres and stately period backlot sets, they exalted China's old customs and rich cultural history in order to create a 'China dream' that fostered a primal sense of attachment to a universal and glorious Chinese identity, excavated from an essentialized iconography of the past. On the other hand, by depicting settings, situations, and attitudes that reflected the colony – its language, its history, its youth, and its urban specificities – the Shaws also attempted to capture the 'Hong Kong sentiments' of the localizing and modernizing populace which, through its rising economic status and a generational drift, was forging a new Chinese identity for itself. While Shaw Brothers, with their contemporary subjects, contributed significantly to the development of Hong Kong's local character, it must be said that the Shaws always leaned most heavily upon their 'dream of China', operating on the assumption that this appeal to a mythic cultural nostalgia would transcend the times.

With the New Style *wuxia* cinema, they renewed their vision of the past through an injection of modern violence and anti-traditionalist rebellion. For a time, this struck a chord with local audiences, but by the early 1970s, attitudes were cooling; the middle class was expanding, and Hong Kong was settling into a state of comfort, growth, and apolitical self-interest. Cantonese media culture was surging, and the allure of the imperial past was giving way to an appetite for cinema that reflected the new colonial lifestyle; urban comedies, gambling movies, true crime, soft erotica, and irreverent kung-fu pictures. These films didn't allude to a faraway land or play upon an ethnic filial bond to a long lost Chinese nation. Instead, they appealed to modern Hong Kong sensibilities, local people who nonetheless saw themselves as 'citizens of the world', caught up in the streams of capitalism, entertainment, and instant gratification. 'Hong Kong sentiments' were beating out a 'Chinese dream' that was beginning to feel increasingly outmoded and irrelevant.

David Bordwell quipped that "if the auteur thoughtfully meditates upon local culture, mass-produced cinema blindly reproduces it" (Bordwell 2011, 28). However, this does not truly account for how Chor Yuen's work has apparently achieved the former, while in the context (and at the pace of production) of the latter. Chor is among those auteurs that worked within – and were in their way defined by – the mass-produced commercial cinema milieu. Chor's swordplay films were expected to satisfy the Shaw Brothers' commercial, transnational, and cultural nationalist ambitions, but at the same time, the ideological significance of a text or a genre, according to Neale, is always context-specific; "it cannot simply be deduced from the nature of

the institution responsible for its production and circulation, nor can it ever be known in advance" (Neale 1990, 65).

The stylistic approach that would come to characterize Chor Yuen's *wuxia pian* did not spring solely from the Shaw vision of a cultural 'dream of China' or from the writings of Gu Long, but also may be seen as emerging from Chor's background in the Cantonese cinema. Chor Yuen was himself a southerner and an avowed cinephile; in combination with his self-education in European literature and film theory, these traits had already lent his films a hybridized sensibility. By the time Chor was contracted to Shaw Brothers, the new action style ushered in with the Colour *Wuxia* Century by directors like Chang Cheh was the dominant form. The swordplay film at that time was seen as a powerfully Mandarin object, both in its cultural associations with the North, and in practical terms, since Cantonese dialect *wuxia* cinema was virtually extinct. However, even so, within a few years of Chor joining the studio, they were once again producing Cantonese content for the local market, thanks to the success of *House of 72 Tenants*. In an environment as dynamic as Hong Kong in the seventies, the interpenetration of Mandarin and Cantonese cultural streams was inevitable, and in Chor Yuen's films we find an accelerant for this process. A Cantonese tendency may be felt in Chor Yuen's *wuxia* films, forming a coherent trail back to the earlier Cantonese cinema. Drawing upon the social consciousness and modernity of his work at Kong Ngee, Chor re-engaged with the fantastical imaginary of the older swordplay cinema and integrated it with his romantic expressionistic style, helping to erode the indentitary barriers between Mandarin and Cantonese ownership of the *wuxia pian*'s form of Chineseness.

Chor Yuen's *wuxia* films distinguished themselves from the previous Mandarin swordplay films by way of subversive spirit, invoking traditional Chinese art forms and the mystical tropes of the old Cantonese *wuxia*, and binding them together with antirealist and anti-traditional elements to create a modern pastiche. These films pushed an increasingly dreamlike vision of the past where historical reference points were wholly ephemeral. Chor's environments were pliable expressionistic fabulations, aestheticized with an orientalist distanciation that increased the sense of fantasy and rendered a China that was at once enticing and absurd. Heroes wandered in a tangled, idiosyncratic *jianghu* reminiscent of the Cantonese serials, but where anchors of Confucian obligation and familial stability had become destabilized or upended, and replaced by a cutthroat economy of greed and political jockeying.

Chor Yuen's swordplay films were built upon the foundation of the Mandarin New Style, but were not satisfied to simply reproduce the same values and aesthetics set out by the ostensible architects of New Style swordplay like Chang Cheh or King Hu. Instead these films may be treated as constituting a transformative shift in style, representing a further permutation of the *wuxia pian*. Compared to the historicizing realism and sinicist belligerence of the New Style *wuxia* cinema, Chor Yuen's films of the Gu Long cycle encouraged a spectatorial distance from the subject of China, making it more appealing to a globalized middle-class identity which was no longer defined by colonized alterity but instead by an advantageous positioning between China and the world. These works offer, in a sense, a more postmodern, syncretic, diasporic Chineseness, one reflecting a rupture with history and traditional identity. By focusing on elements of the romantic and the emotional, the *wen* in preference to the *wu*, Chor Yuen's approach served to unfix the genre from the combative Chinese chauvinism and machismo that had fuelled both the *wuxia pian* and kung fu cinema out of the sixties. He replaced the working-class masculinized vocabulary of disempowerment-empowerment narratives with a polymorphous and feminized *yin* aesthetic, and a re-investiture of the Chinese hero with the qualities of *wen* masculinity. This suggests a renegotiated balance between masculine and feminine, that does not shut either out of the process of forming a new Chinese global identity.

These shifts are not without their class associations. The *yanggang* need to revolt against authority in such urgent, self-defining terms spoke to an anti-colonial and rebellious mindset emerging from a self-identifying underclass. However, in the flourish of Hong Kong's economic miracle, the sense of subordination was being dissolved in a growing middle class lifestyle, and in many ways, Chor's heroes reflect the concerns of bourgeois life. His films do not denote a harsh world of toil, but a place of relative comfort, where the luxury of introspection and personal self-indulgence prevails, if still interrupted by anxieties caused by the currents of internecine ambition and the threat of politicization (being forced to choose a side). The conflicts faced by his characters express not the practical needs of emancipation and the ethno-national struggle for recognition by a people kept on the periphery of the global economic community, but instead a malaise with the capitalist strictures of society, and a reflection upon the place of love and social responsibility *within* the community.

The underlying themes of Chor's films are expressed through a fanciful postmodern iconography of escapism with an exotic face. The 'cultural China' in Chor's films does not seek

to recover a sense of continuity with Chinese history, nor does it seek to reforge its sense of self in a re-mythologized past. Instead it invokes a far more abstract domain of Chineseness, one decentralized and freely meshed with contemporary sensibilities. These *wuxia* films perform a kind of deconstructive mockery of their iconography, which serves to empty it of meaning, leaving an exoticized ethnic caricature in its place. Its strangeness and its alienation, both from history and from its own genre, substitutes a purely metaphorical landscape in which to play out interior psychological questions. It recreates a China as viewed by one who sits comfortably on the outside. Just as the Orient of Edward Said was only a production of the West's own need for self-definition, an Other to use as a dark, fanciful mirror, the self-orientalism of Chor Yuen's *wuxia pian* produces Hong Kong's Other in the form of an ersatz Chinese culturalist oddity.

An Orientalist Gaze

The Orient of Chor Yuen's *wuxia* is in many ways a simulacrum, a copy without an original, the "generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard 166). Chor Yuen crafted his *wuxia* cinema through an engagement with a self-aware artificiality and a reflexive formalistic stylism. When applied to his intensified invocations of the iconography of an 'ancient China,' this stylistic approach served to defamiliarize the historicized myth of the *wuxia*, and offered it instead as a playful fiction. Ostentatious deployments of style – 'art for arts' sake' – are frequently interpreted as being both a symptom and a strategy of a postmodernist reflexivity. In this sense, it offers one possible tool with which the Hong Kong subject may articulate a subversion of the memory of an ethno-cultural China, sliding it out of its historical and geopolitical moorings on the Mainland, and into a more globalized milieu.

To this end, one means to contend with the schism between the diaspora and the Mainland, both in its lingering traditionalism and in its looming political implications, was to re-draw the parameters of the relationship, and to divorce the source culture from its problematic locality. By creating an orientalist subversion of China's history and its geopolitical immediacy, Chor's swordplay films concoct a 'dream of China' that is both alluringly ephemeral and atavistic. In the words of Stam, "it is precisely the normality of ideology that necessitates an art which makes things strange" (Stam 211). By dismantling the credibility of the *wuxia pian*'s essentializing mythology, Chor's films not only reinforced a skepticism of state-based powers and tradition, but also subverted the image of a coherent, unified, and substantive Chinese

historical identity. This shifted the focus away from China or ethnic based nationalisms, and towards a local and individualized sense of Chineseness based on the more immediate concerns of the middle class Hong Kong subject; the pursuit of happiness, social and sexual liberation, one's uncertain role in a capitalist economy, and above all, a freedom from prescribed memberships in overarching social orders. As with Brecht, the extravagant gestures and interruptions of Chor's style reminds the spectator that "both social life and art are human creations and therefore can be changed, that the laws of a predatory society are not divinely inscribed but subject to human intervention" (Stam 211).

It is difficult to say to what degree Chor drove this process, as opposed to simply being *in* the process, but regardless, in so far as processes gather speed and momentum through the circulation of ideas, his *wuxia* films were significant in remaking the genre, and as such, significant in helping to remake Chinese identity. In short, Chor Yuen's *wuxia* films both supplemented Run Run Shaw's cultural-nationalist project, through its highly essentialized and orientalized 'dream of China', while also introducing into this formula new strains of difference, representing alternatives to cultural-nationalist machismo, and offering criticism to both the traditionalism of the past, and the capitalist system of the present (which was in many ways, the very means of HK's cultural emancipation, by way of the economic miracle as one of the Four Asian Tigers).

Chor's films are apolitical, but they cannot be said to be without ideology. Instead, they reproduced the *wuxia pian* as an essentialized form of cultural nationalism, while at the same time undercutting this effect via stylistic choices that emphasize the artificiality of that affective project. By heightening the factitious, orientalist quotient of the nostalgic 'dream of China' Chor interrupted its capacity to work in ideologically nationalistic terms. This act also served to move China as an entity to the peripheral, backward, fictionalized status of Said's Orient. By these means, Chor aligned Hong Kong with the globalized, modern world-at-large, highlighting its quasi-national autonomy in relation to the Mainland, a practice that would become increasingly pronounced in the pre-handover years, and persisting into the films of certain directors still working in Hong Kong today , such as Tsui Hark and Johnnie To.

Self-orientalism is a tricky tool. The Shaw's self-orientalism was ethno-nationalistic – aimed at Chinese audiences and stemming from a cultural pride and nostalgia – and as well what Stephen Teo might call "postmodern self-orientalism" (Teo 2009, 188) – which is to say, aimed

at selling a stereotypical vision of China to Chinese audiences *and* to the global community. However, when Chor Yuen reimagined the Shaw *wuxia pian*, his orientalism can be seen to be, in its way, much closer to Edward Said's understanding of it as an oppressive structure. As observed by Petrus Liu, "colonialism reproduces itself as the anticolonial nationalist elite's attitude toward their own past" (P. Liu 14). By relegating China to a dislocated and artificial imaginary, and aligning Hong Kong with a globalized Western perspective, we see how the structures of European orientalism are replicated, turning China into an 'Other' for diasporic Chinese. Whether self-orientalism is used as a form of cultural capital, or as a form of self-repositioning, Arif Dirlik offers some concerns about this process of identity formation:

> Self-essentialization may serve the cause of mobilization against Western domination; but in the very process it also consolidates Western ideological hegemony by internalizing the historical assumptions of orientalism. At the same time, it contributes to internal hegemony by suppressing differences within the nation (Dirlik 1996, 114).

Dirlik questions the deployment of self-orientalism as a form of agency in transnational identity politics, due to the degree to which this form of nationalism only reinscribes, through these forms of cultural capital, the same underlying capitalist modernizing agendas that drove the colonial and imperial age (Dirlik 1996, 117). Nationalism, after all represents the chauvinistic impulse to iron out the inherent striations of ethnicity, class, gender, and other differences under a totalizing rubric of nation, and disavows the possibility of alterity.

A Legacy in the Hong Kong New Wave

Stylistically, the *wuxia* films of Chor Yuen may be seen as an influence on the Hong Kong New Wave directors of the eighties and nineties. In addition to overlaying the fantasy of the swordplay genre with sentimental, psychological and metaphorical dimensions, he also played a major role in un-anchoring the *wuxia pian* as a semiotic signifier of China, instead allowing it to become a signifier for Hong Kong. The *wuxia* film provided in the pre-handover era, just as it had in the Shaw days, an ideal vehicle for embodying Hong Kong's aspirations. Fusing cultural themes and technological modernity, cinema was a forceful means to communicate an authoritative vision of Chinese identity to the world. This defiant act of identity formation was all the more urgent in the narrowing margins before an anticipated dissolution into Communist China. Indeed, in the pre-1997 age, this self-defining emergence into the global

cultural community took on even greater urgency. Arguably, this practice of cinematic self-definition continued even after the handover in 1997, though the politics of inclusion became more striated. Did Hong Kong now speak for itself, for China, or for more a more universal Chineseness?

The Hong Kong New Wave's *wuxia* boom after *Chinese Ghost Story* (1987) and *Swordsman* (1990) reformulated the *wuxia pian* as something simultaneously nostalgic, transnational, and culturally exotic, while remaining assertively and self-affirmingly 'made in Hong Kong.' It sculpted its own stylistic and ethnic iconography, building on a cinephilic platform of the past. The stylistic echoes of Hong Kong auteurs like King Hu, Lau Kar Leung, Chor Yuen and Chang Cheh are all heard in the genres and filmmakers who followed them. The convention of the muscular and dynamic Hong Kong masculinity inherited from the kung fu heroes and *yanggang* knights persisted into the new wave with the images of John Woo's gunmen and Jackie Chan's athleticism, extolling Hong Kong's quasi-national confidence through the mix of modern, urban localities and outward-looking transnationalism. Films like Tsui Hark's *Once Upon a Time in China / Wong Fei Hong* (1991) placed the hero at the almost literal intersection of Chinese and Other, tradition and modernity, re-nationalizing him as a Chinese patriotic figure, while remaining indelibly southern. In this instance however, both the kung fu genre and Wong Fei Hong were merely continuing what was always a localized southern/Cantonese phenomenon and set of cultural markers.

The geopolitical identity of the *wuxia* film has a more contested history, making its Cantonese re-localization a far more politicized endeavour. Inculcating *wuxia* into Hong Kong's *bentu dianyang* ("local cinema") is tantamount to taking the reins of China's historical and cultural identity, and placing them into the hands of its exiles and emigres, its periphery, its southern inheritors, and its diasporic descendants. As such this disavows the PRC's lived experience as a 'cultural China,' and its ability to represent itself.

The presentation of feminine power as metaphor in the New Wave *wuxia* carries forward many of the qualities of ambiguity found in Chor Yuen's films, but with a more pressed overtone of anxiety. Across the board, this is perhaps most forcefully felt in the prolific undertakings of Tsui Hark as a director and producer. The fluidity and ambiguous nature of gendered identities in these films project an uncertainty of cultural identity framed by an exoticized, orientalized Chinese setting. In *Dragon Inn / Xin long men ke zhan* (directed by Tsui

Hark and Ching Siu-tung in 1992) the positioning of female leads Brigitte Lin (as a *xianü*) and Maggie Cheung (as an opportunistic, oversexed bandit/proprietor of a desert waystation) are used to reflect the divided Chinese nation and identity, struggling under the oppressive weight of their associations with tradition, authoritarian government, intrigue and violent power. The figure of Asia the Invincible, the gender-changing anti-hero from both *Swordsman 2 / Xiao ao jiang hu zhi dong fang bu bai* (Ching: 1992) and *The East is Red / Xiao ao jiang hu zhi dong fang bu bai* (Ching: 1993) (both produced by Tsui) may be seen as an expression of a hybrid but unstable nationalistic pride, simultaneously energetic and dangerously volatile.

The explosion of new, effects-laden Cantonese *wuxia* cinema through the pre-handover decade often presented China as an ephemeral construct, a geographically dislocated, transhistorical locale, where heroes defied forces of intrigue with fantastical magical powers. The films of directors like Ching and Tsui Hark "make a diagnosis of nationalism" (Teo 2002 152) while entrenching it in an essentialized Chinese iconography to make it appealing to outsiders; "all contemporary Chinese are also outsiders to, and voyeurs of, this earlier Chineseness" (ibid.). As in the cinema of Chor Yuen, these directors put forward a vision of an orientalized *jianghu* as a complex for China itself.

When Baudrillard wrote of simulacra and hyperreality, (166) he invoked Disneyland, and its uncanny, communicable experience of American-ness as his example. Beginning with the Shaw Brothers 'dream of China', and refashioned by Chor Yuen, we may now observe how, by turns, the *wuxia* genre, in its metaphorical dislocations from time or space, performs similarly for China, a transnational and transhistorical encapsulation of overdetermined Chineseness. Baudrillard wrote that "When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity" (171).

Chor Yuen may certainly be identified as an important transitional figure between Cantonese and Mandarin cinemas, and between the studio era and the Hong Kong New Wave. However, rather than affirming the value of his work in solely transitive terms, as if locked between two teleological save-states, I suggest we can treat Chor Yuen's films as both synchronic and transhistorical, as a free-standing artistic body of work located in its moment, *and* as discursive texts that recur and inform across the historical discontinuities vicissitudes of the genre.

In Chor Yuen's *wuxia,* we see a reformulation of genre that has remained both definitive, and as well quite conversant with subsequent expressions of the swordplay cinema, both through the nineties Hong Kong cycle, and also in the more contemporary iterations by Mainland directors like Zhang Yimou, whose sly evocation of *yin* aesthetics, spiralling intrigue, and ornamentalized orientalism are in evidence in films like *House of Flying Daggers / Shi Mian Mai Fu* (2004) and *Curse of the Golden Flower / Man Cheng Jin Dai Huang Jin Jia* (2006). In spite of this legacy, since the Hong Kong handover to the PRC in 1997, and since the Hollywood-Taiwan co-production *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon / Wo Hu Cang Long* (2000) brought *wuxia pian* fully into the global imaginary, China has been quick in seizing upon the genre as means to re-constitute the idea of a China-based identity, using high-concept *wuxia* films as a form of cultural capital. This is not so unlike Run Run Shaw's vision, though of course now both the abstract nationalism *and* the geopolitical nationalism of the genre are once again united. The nationalizing and historicizing power of the *wuxia pian* has largely lost its anxiety and ambivalence, and now is very much devoted to the act of myth-making, rather than myth-breaking.

The *wuxia pian* in the past decade of ostensibly reunified Chineseness is largely understood as a transnational commodity that deploys stylized artifice in the construction of Chinese invented histories, as in the case of Zhang Yimou's *Hero / Yin Xiong* (2002), but what end is now served by this totalized vision? It seems as if the edge of mockery and self-reflexivity has been replaced by one of orientalized reverence of an ethno-national myth, as noted by Teo:

> . . . as China has become a rising power on the world stage, the *wuxia* film seems to have become an instrument of the state: *wuxia* as a means to maintain the myth of a warrior tradition and its historicist concepts of chivalry and knight-errantry in order to justify the modern concept of the nation-state (Teo 2009, 8).

In light of the *wuxia pian* 'repatriation' to the Mainland, will the 'dream of China' as symbol and floating signifier be re-harnessed to the needs of such nationalisms? Or has it become simply a component of Teo's postmodern orientalism? Indeed, considering the role it played during Hong Kong's brief period of semi-independence, we might well ask whether the *wuxia* genre was ever truly unshackled from these questions. Perhaps Chor Yuen's cinema marked a time when the genre was simply stretching between a nostalgic diasporic nationalism and a truly stateless,

individualist, global Chinese identity, when it was re-mounted by the Hong Kong New Wave as an iconoclastic form of localized quasi-nationalism.

Reflexive Self-Orientalism and the cinema of Tsui Hark

In recent years, it appears that Tsui Hark has retained, or even redoubled, the qualities of orientalism and reflexivity in his most recent films, all large-scale blockbusters shot on the Mainland, and made with the tacit approval of the PRC government. By way of example, Tsui's *wuxia* film *Detective Dee and The Mystery of The Phantom Flame / Di Ren Jie Zhi Tong Tian Di Guo* (2010) shares striking structural and stylistic similarities with the films of Chor Yuen's Gu Long cycle at Shaw Brothers. These include a sophisticated but independent-minded *wen*-styled detective hero and a dizzying *gongan* mystery plot that leads him through an ornamentally decadent, highly imaginary, and often absurd caricature of Tang Imperial China, one that includes face-changing intriguers, killer puppets, martial arts-fighting deer, subterranean river-cities, deadly magical poisons, and a 1000-foot tall golden Buddha statue. Stylistically, Tsui employs a peculiar visuality; saturated colours and flattening planimetric overlapping compositions recall the graphism of Maoist propaganda imagery, and confront the viewer with an uncanny sense of pageant-like artificiality. This is accompanied by strong themes of social responsibility and skepticism of government authority. The tableau of queerness woven by Tsui in *Detective Dee* resonates with an added subtext; the *Judge Di* series of novels from which the movie takes its inspirations were not Chinese *wuxia* serials, but in fact written by the noted Dutch orientalist Robert van Gulik in the 1950s. In this way, Tsui reframes the film in a playful recursive intertextuality that places the Chinese viewer in the role of the orientalist, looking in on a facsimile of his or her own culture.

The reflexive distortion of history is even more aggressive in Tsui's most recent film, *The Taking of Tiger Mountain / Lin Hai Xue Yuan* (2014). In this case, the film is not based on a traditional *wuxia*, but rather upon the highly romanticized historical tale of the People's Liberation Army reclaiming the North from warlords after the Chinese Civil War, a story which was itself adapted into Peking opera. As one of the few operas that was not forbidden during the Cultural Revolution, the story of *Tiger Mountain* has a special place as one of the PRC's founding myths. Tsui toys with this status, by reimagining the military campaign as the idle fantasy of a Chinese student returning home to visit his family after accidentally catching a

snippet of the 1960s film adaptation of the opera in a karaoke bar in Manhattan. With an array of bizarre distancing techniques (such as characters immobilized in 'ambulatory' freeze-frames in the midst of action, making them resemble cardboard cut-outs), Tsui interrogates the nationalism inherent in his subject. This culminates in a finale that quite literally rewinds, rewrites, and replays the action-packed climax of the film (in order to make it 'more exciting'), demonstrating the capricious and arbitrary mutability of historicized propaganda. With both *Detective Dee* and *Tiger Mountain*, Tsui Hark gleefully subverts and throws into question the cherished nationalizing historical fictions of China, both Imperial and Communist.

Now in 2016, Hong Kong audiences await the release of Tsui Hark's latest project, a blockbuster *wuxia pian* remake of Chor Yuen's 1977 *Death Duel*. Produced by Tsui and directed by Derek Yee (who starred in the original), *The Sword Master / San Shao Ye De Jian* (2016) has been in production for almost two years, and has reportedly been a decade in the planning. Forty years after Chor Yuen initiated his romantic, surrealistic, self-aware Gu Long cycle, and deployed the genre towards a critique of Chinese history, it seems his lasting influence on the *wuxia pian* has not been forgotten.

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