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CULTURE REVIEW

Persistence Kung Fu

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As Hong Kong was recovering in 2004 from the SARS epidemic, financial crisis and mass demonstrations of the previous year, Johnnie To Kei-fung released *Throw Down*, a film about an alcoholic former judo champion recovering his will to fight and live. Bo Szeto (Louis Koo Tin-lok) scurries drunkenly between the dark, neon-streaked spaces of his karaoke bar and the games arcade where he steals from gangster Brother Savage (Cheung Siu-fai), a gambling table where he loses the money, and the shadowy alleys that form his habitat. Darkness is encroaching in Szeto himself as he goes blind from glaucoma. Slowly, he is dragged from depression by two energetic young strangers who enter his bar like fireflies and persist in hanging around: Mona (Cherrie Ying) dreams improbably of fame as a singer while Tony (Aaron Kwok Fu-shing), a current champion, simply wants Szeto to fight him. Around this odd trio are three figures lingering from Szeto's *judoka* past: his old teacher Master Cheng (Lo Hoi-pang); Cheng's dementia-afflicted son Ching (Calvin Choi Yat-chi); and Szeto's rival Kong Lee (Tony Leung Ka-fai), still demanding the fulfilment of a challenge match.

Throw Down is dedicated to Akira Kurosawa, 'the greatest filmmaker', and its chiaroscuro of small events in an old neighbourhood above Central on Hong Kong Island alludes to moments from Kurosawa's foundational martial arts film, *Sugata Sanshiro*, a.k.a. *The Judo Saga* (1943): there is a shoe lost in the street, a *satori* moment for Szeto, and a final fight in a field of reeds. These allusions are overlaid by Ching's vocal evocation of a 1970s Japanese TV series about Sanshiro that was popular in Hong Kong. Played by Calvin Choi Yat-chi of the long-running Canto-pop group 'Grasshopper' (formed in 1985), Ching happily greets everyone with 'I play Sanshiro, you play Higaki' and powerfully sings the haunting theme of the TV show at key moments of To's film.

While To has called *Throw Down* his personal favourite among his films, it is an oddity in the *oeuvre* of a director renowned internationally for his work in comedy and gangster genres but not in martial arts cinema. Understandably, many critics treat *Throw Down* as a singularity from one of Hong Kong's own 'greatest filmmakers' saluting another *auteur*. However, it is

also a precursor to a recent group of films that portray mature martial artists facing intimate dilemmas and social difficulties that they are not trained to deal with. *Throw Down* looks less eccentric alongside Dante Lam Chiu-yin's *Unbeatable* (2013), about a disgraced MMA champion hiding in Macau from his past; Teddy Chan Tak-sum's *Kung Fu Jungle* (2014), about a contest for supremacy between a kung fu master jailed for manslaughter and a serial killer of masters; and Chapman To Man-chak's *The Empty Hands* (2017), in which the listless karate heroine dreams of selling her father's dojo to make a killing in real estate.

These are films in which skilled practitioners struggle with life shocks striking from beyond their martial worlds: disease (*Throw Down*); family tragedies (*Unbeatable*); imprisonment, guilt, and humiliation (*Unbeatable*, *Kung Fu Jungle*); loneliness and low self-esteem (*The Empty Hands*). For the most part unimaginable within the melodramatic aesthetic of earlier kung fu cinema with its themes of sacrifice and revenge, these anxious affects form in the harsh political economy of contemporary Hong Kong and in contact with modern forms of life administration: social welfare agencies, police bureaucracies, border protection, housing squeeze. Redolent with the livelihood issues that spiralled with housing costs and mainland arrivals after 2003, spilled out in the Umbrella Movement of 2014, festered in the public mood of depression that followed the movement's apparent failure and then exploded within the broad uprising of 2019 still ongoing as I write, these grinding affects saturate the stressed fictional worlds through which Hong Kong filmmakers persist in maintaining a local cinema.

Kungfu in Cantonese broadly means 'technique' or 'skills' and these brief notes from a book I have been writing for years, persistently, with my Hong Kong colleague Stephen Ching-kiu Chan help me frame a response to the finality of this issue of *Cultural Studies Review*. Stress, I think, is a discipline mobilised by neo-liberal modes of governance to produce docility and it does so most efficiently in universities. Persistence is an energy that can contend with stress and other nefarious forces. This energy fluctuates with the ferocity of local conditions and the quality of strength it can draw from the outside of any situation in which *kungfu* is required to survive. Sometimes our persistence falls to a very low ebb, as many people felt after the end of the Umbrella Movement, but as all good kung fu stories remind us energy does not die. The technique of persisting, however, sometimes requires us to move on if we are to maintain our values and our spirit.

I have no idea why the Australian higher education system invests in stressing its academics into producing humanities research but refuses to sustain Australian journal publishing. I only know that the same syndrome helped cripple the Australian film industry from the 1970s and 1980s, when wonderful films were produced with state funding but no distribution secured. This timorous drive towards mediocrity is a given of our situation, and so it was back in 1995 when Stephen Muecke and I began the *CSR* ancestor journal, *The UTS Review: Cultural Studies and New Writing*. Looking at those early issues now, and following through to the wealth of imaginative scholarship later published by editors John Frow, Chris Healy and Katrina Schlunke, I feel astonished, grateful and overjoyed. I have some idea how much skill and grinding persistence this achievement took. The brilliance of this journal has been outrageous under the circumstances and I can only say—*excellent* kung fu.