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**Does the Karate Kid Have a Kung Fu Dream?  
Hong Kong Martial Arts  
between Hollywood and Beijing**

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## Abstract

This analysis of the martial arts choreography in *The Karate Kid* (2010) examines the contradictory matrix in which action films produce meanings for global audiences. A remake of a 1984 film, this iteration of *The Karate Kid* begins its imaginative battle over martial arts turf with English and Chinese titles at odds with one another. For English-speaking audiences, the title of the film promises a remake of the popular 1984 story of a displaced Italian American teenager (Ralph Macchio) trained by a Japanese American sensei (Pat Morita) to compete against the local karate bullies. However, the 2010 version has another identity competing with the first. Its Chinese title translates as *Kung Fu Dream* – Japanese culture, karate, and domestic American class and racial politics out of the picture. In this version, an African American youngster (Jaden Smith) moves to Beijing from Detroit and is taken under the wing of a drunken kung fu master (Jackie Chan) to battle a group of wu shu/san da villains. With the change of choreography comes a shift in the ideological battles taken up by the film's plot providing a different take on race, class, ethnicity, and geopolitics against the backdrop of the 'rise' of China. This essay explores what this shift in martial arts choreography says about the Hollywood, Hong Kong, and Mainland Chinese industries involved in its production. In addition, it explores how fans have come to grips with the depiction of karate, traditional kung fu, PRC-style wu shu, and various screen iterations of a range of martial arts in the film.

## Contributor Note

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## **Introduction: Purity, Authenticity and Meaning-Making in Cinematic Martial Arts**

A fraught relationship exists between the action film and the world of martial arts. While the martial arts, in addition to a range of combat forms, have a plethora of cultural manifestations, including philosophies, histories, literature, myths, and religious associations, the film world only samples the most spectacular elements from this rich cornucopia of traditions. Filmmakers take advantage of the political dimension of martial arts by exploiting ethnic tensions (such as Japanese karate versus Chinese kung fu), cultural exoticism (for example, ideas such as 'Buddha's palm'), imperial ambitions (Cold War pugilism), gender (women warriors) and race (Asian and African American fighting stars). The fighting arts themselves take a backseat to the needs of the story, the development of the characters, the physical condition of the actors, the positioning of the camera, editing, musical accompaniment, and special effects technology.

Accordingly, purists complain about the artificial or hybrid nature of the arts depicted on screen. Although most martial arts cannot boast any absolute purity of form, Leon Hunt notes, in *Kung Fu Cult Masters* (2003), that 'authenticity' – the sense that the mishmash of styles on screen allows access to esoteric knowledge or vanishing cultural traditions – plays a key role in the genre.

Indeed, many practitioners actually came to the martial arts in the first place because of a particular film star or film-going experience (from Bruce Lee to the *Matrix* (1999), and so on). They must confront the contradiction between on-

screen fight choreography and their own system.<sup>1</sup>

Film performers who are also martial arts practitioners, like their non-acting peers, approach combat training in various ways and practice a wide range of styles. Some, like Bruce Lee, who was a child performer in Hong Kong cinema, were actors before becoming martial arts masters. Others entered the film industry because of their martial skills (most famously, Jet Li and Chuck Norris). Once in the movie business, exposure to different directors, choreographers and stuntpeople, as well as other martial artists, makes maintaining a 'pure' style nearly impossible.

Bruce Lee, of course, developed his own 'non'-style based, in part, on Chinese Wing Chun (Lee 1963/1987),<sup>2</sup> and this developed within a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural melting pot connected to transnational action cinema. He worked between Hong Kong and Hollywood with a wide range of martial artists from different styles (such as Dan Inosanto, from Filipino arts including kali, arnis, and escrima; and Ji Han Jae, from Korean Hapkido). These forms, as well as Western boxing, wrestling, Korean taekwon do, several types of Chinese kung fu, and a variety of other fighting arts found their way into Lee's repertoire both on and off-screen.

If connected with an even broader range of martial arts history, then the cultural mix of early dynastic China with the span of cultural contact stretching from India to Japan, including the fighting arts and

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the relationship between the popularization of Asian martial arts in America and their representation in popular culture, see Skidmore, (1991: 129-148).

<sup>2</sup> For the definitive account of Bruce Lee as a philosophical subject, see Bowman (2010).

spiritual disciplines associated with Hindu-Buddhist teachings must be acknowledged. Arguably, Bruce Lee advocated returning to the formative period of Asian combat, because national divisions are relatively recent ethno-cultural stamps on earlier martial arts.

However, despite the fact that fight choreography draws on a wide range of systems, national antagonisms still play a significant role in the Hong Kong martial arts film plots, and 'karate vs. kung fu' serves as one of its most characteristic thematic structures. In Bruce Lee's *Way of the Dragon* (1973), for instance, Tang Lung (Lee) proves the superiority of Chinese kung fu over Japanese karate when he demonstrates the power of his sidekick for the kitchen staff in karate gi at the restaurant he has come to defend from the mafia. Later, Lee, clothed in a traditional Chinese tunic and sash, goes up against black-belt Colt (Chuck Norris), dressed in a karate gi, to demonstrate the speed and agility of the Chinese arts. Symbolically, Lee faces off against the power of America in the form of the human weapon 'Colt',<sup>3</sup> wrapped in the attire of greater China's military nemesis and industrial competitor Japan. His act of pulling out Colt's chest hair and blowing the tufts into the dust of the ruined coliseum in Rome – an emblem of the decadence of the West – arguably speaks to the elemental nature of the fight between the Chinese hero and the anti-Chinese foe. Of course, the main problem with this description of the story is that it ignores the fact that Lee's eclectic art form (Jeet Kune Do) breaks with Chinese martial traditions and 'absorbs what is useful' from a global

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<sup>3</sup> The name 'Colt' is quite likely a reference to the famous make of firearms, which continue to be manufactured in the United States, and which were popularized in Westerns.

potpourri of fighting systems.<sup>4</sup> His sidekick, in fact, looks more 'Japanese' or 'Korean' in form than any type of Chinese kicking style, and the footwork in Lee's classic fight owes more to Western boxing (specifically Mohammed Ali's ability to 'float like a butterfly') than to Wing Chun or Tai Chi. This interpretation of the scene also glosses over the fact that Norris has stronger ties to Korean arts (Tang Soo Do/Tae Kwon Do) than Japanese karate. The anti-Japanese sentiments expressed in the story lose their purchase when the origins of the fight choreography come into play.

There has never been any absolute stylistic purity in any martial arts film, and Lee was never alone in mixing systems, ignoring form, and molding the traditional arts for screen entertainment. While Japanese-Chinese antagonisms provided the plot, the 'new style' *wu xia pian*, for example, at Shaw Brothers in the late-1960s and early 1970s pilfered swordplay from the popular samurai films of Japan (for example, *Zatoichi Meets The One-Armed Swordsman* (1971)), imported directors from Korea (such as Chang-hwa Jeong for *Five Fingers of Death/King Boxer* (1972)) and swallowed Hollywood action whole (consider Shaw Brothers' 'Jane Bond' films such as *Angel With The Iron Fist* (1967)). This is not to say that particular films or performers are not rooted in certain traditions. Many clearly are. It is rather that filmmakers draw on a range of martial arts to give the impression of authenticity, to define characters, create

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, as Dan Inosanto points out in *Absorb What is Useful: A Jeet Kune Do Guidebook Volume Two*, Bruce Lee was keenly aware of the way in which fight choreography for the camera differed from the combat skills he taught to his Jeet Kune Do students as well as the drawbacks of stylistic 'purity' in the martial arts. (See Inosanto 1982).

fictional antagonisms, sometimes to pander to perceived prejudices, and to maintain the conventional expectations of entertainment associated with the genre.

Because of the richness of the martial arts, viewers, who are not practitioners, may not appreciate the complexity of the cultural references they see on screen. In an age of CGI, the power of the physical performance also diminishes. There is, however, a parallel fan dimension to the martial arts genre, and viewers come to know the conventions associated with different types of what has been called 'movie fu',<sup>5</sup> or the cinematic version of various martial arts.<sup>6</sup> Drawing on other films in the genre, directors, performers, and choreographers invent and disseminate 'movie fu', and viewers absorb it.

This could help to deepen our understanding of many dimensions here, such as, for instance, why so many martial arts films revolve around teaching, training and the master/disciple relationship. The films themselves seek to educate viewers to see the artistry on screen, to appreciate what effort goes into a fight, and to comprehend the significance of a particular element of the combat. Although these stories of personal development, challenge, and achievement transcend the genre, their importance to the way in which martial arts appear on screen cannot be underestimated. This is why Meaghan Morris focuses on the pedagogical dimension of the genre, and observes

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<sup>5</sup> A fan describes the martial artistry in recent remake of *The Karate Kid* (2010) as 'movie fu', <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20110315132201AA1gguo>. [Accessed 6 February 2014].

<sup>6</sup> For a primer on martial arts choreography, see Kreng (2008).

that there is so much for viewers to 'learn' from Bruce Lee (Morris 2001: 171-86).

As martial arts films circulate globally and new fighting styles become part of the mix, viewers in various parts of the world need to be brought up to speed with what a new film seeks to depict. Some may be fans of earlier kung fu films, Mixed Martial Arts aficionados, karatekas or Wing Chun adepts, living in Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, the United States or elsewhere. These constituencies bring varying attitudes toward Hong Kong and Hollywood films, and also to established stars, such as Jet Li or Donnie Yen. Viewers bring their own histories of film viewing with them.

The following analysis of the martial arts choreography in *The Karate Kid* (directed by Harald Zwart, 2010) examines the contradictory matrix in which action films produce meanings for global audiences. A remake of a 1984 film directed by John G. Avildsen, this iteration of *The Karate Kid* begins its imaginative battle over martial arts turf with English and Chinese titles at odds with one another. For English-speaking audiences, the title of the film promises a remake of the popular 1984 story of a displaced Italian American teenager (Ralph Macchio) trained by a Japanese/Okinawan American sensei (Pat Morita) to compete against the local karate bullies.

However, the 2010 version has another identity competing with the first. Its Chinese title translates as *Kung Fu Dream* – Japanese culture, karate, domestic American class and racial politics move out of the picture. In this version, an African American youngster (Jaden Smith) moves to Beijing from Detroit and is taken under the wing of an alcoholic kung fu master (Jackie Chan) to

battle a group of *wu shu/san da* villains. With the change of choreography comes a shift in the ideological battles taken up by the film's plot, which provides a different take on race, class, ethnicity, and geopolitics, occurring against the backdrop of the 'rise' of China. This alteration in martial arts choreography speaks to broader changes in the Hollywood, Hong Kong, and Mainland Chinese industries involved in its production. In addition, it explores how fans have come to grips with the depiction of karate, traditional kung fu, PRC-style *wu shu*, and various screen versions of a range of martial arts in the film.

### From Karate to Kung Fu

No doubt Dutch/Norwegian director Harald Zwart knew that Japanese karate would not be a prominent feature of his film, *The Karate Kid*; and audiences have been quick to pick up on the fact this is not a nostalgia film meant to appeal to an older generation of fans. One Internet viewer remarks:

I get now – I didn't get before – that **this movie wasn't at all intended for nostalgic 'Karate Kid' fans**. If we went, great, they'll take our money – but it wasn't made for us. This was made for people who weren't alive when the original came out. So shout outs to the original weren't important.<sup>7</sup>

The decision, then, to keep the original title in English was most likely a business decision. A remake of a familiar property would help in marketing the movie, since

<sup>7</sup> Fan website on *The Karate Kid*, [http://www.11points.com/Movies/11\\_Things\\_I\\_Hated\\_About\\_the\\_Karate\\_Kid\\_Remake#](http://www.11points.com/Movies/11_Things_I_Hated_About_the_Karate_Kid_Remake#). [Bold in the original] [Accessed 6 February 2014]

it had a proven track record as a successful film. As a Columbia co-production with China Film Group, the concept behind the project needed to be easy to understand and communicable to various people, from those involved in vetting the initial package to those buying tickets in the United States, mainland China, and other important markets for action film around the world.

A few in-jokes in Zwart's version nod to fans of Alvidsen's original (for instance, the reference to trying to catch flies with chopsticks). However, the revamped settings, race, nationality and age of the characters, and only the bare-bones retention of the basic storyline involving puppy love and martial arts competition combine to make the 1984 and 2010 iterations of the story quite different. In addition, each film's approach to the martial arts differs greatly.

In the original, Mr. Miyagi (Pat Morita) is named after Chogun Miyagi, the founder of Goju Ryu, a type of Okinawan karate system that combines the 'hard' and the 'soft', the 'yang' and the 'yin', which differentiates Goju Ryu from the 'harder' Japanese styles. Indeed, keeping in mind the fact that Okinawa used to be part of the independent Kingdom of the Ryukyus, its martial arts traditions owe a debt to, but remain distinct from, the Japanese as well as Chinese fighting arts of the region (Krug 2001: 395-410). The elegance of the crane stance kick defines this Hollywood version of Okinawan karate as different from the harder, more direct, less graceful karate of the Cobra Kai.

The actual fight choreography, however, owes more to Pat E. Johnson's background in Tang Soo Do, under Chuck Norris's tutelage. Pat Morita's stunt double, Shihan Fumio Demura, a karate sensei, adds yet another level to

the fighting.<sup>8</sup> As one online source summarizes:

In the original *Karate Kid* the style was supposed to be Goju-Ryu as Chojun Miyagi practiced and taught in Okinawa. But the stunts were done by Fumio Demura who practices Shito-Ryu. And Pat Johnson helped with the movie and he was Tang-Soo-do which is Korean.<sup>9</sup>

This combination of Korean and Japanese/Okinawan arts provides an insight into the contours of the American martial arts community, where many U.S. practitioners learned to fight when stationed in the armed forces in Asia. In her analysis of the *Karate Kid* film series, Keiko Nitta notes:

Behind the Japanese American's exotic everyday practices there is a more familiar American picture. That is, Miyagi's martial art is also interpreted as a skill that US militarism can mobilize for deployment if necessary. (Nitta 2010: 388)

Given the U.S. presence in Okinawa, South Korea, and other parts of Asia from the Philippine colonial period through WW II, the Korean War, the War in Vietnam, and into the present, the fact that American martial arts should owe a heavy debt to Japanese and Korean systems comes as no surprise. Although less well-known outside of martial arts

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<sup>8</sup> See the review of *The Karate Kid*, at <http://www.fast-rewind.com/kkid/index.html>. [Accessed 6 February 2014]

<sup>9</sup> Online information on *The Karate Kid*, <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20100618162717AAqWvHQ>. [Accessed 6 February 2014]. For background on the distinguishing features of the various Asian martial arts, see Draeger and Smith (1981).

circles, Filipino arts have a long history in the United States as well. Their impact on global martial arts choreography can be clearly charted through the careers of practitioner-choreographers such as Dan Inosanto and Jeff Imada.

When *The Karate Kid* had its premiere in 1984, karate and tae kwon do classes for children and teenagers were a very common part of American culture. Unlike the Chinese and Filipino martial arts, which do not always have a clear progression of forms, ranks, or an organized curriculum, the Japanese and Korean arts have belt levels, disciplined dojos, crisp uniforms, and a culture of organized competitions. With the exception of kendo, weapons (vital to Filipino arts) come late, if at all, into the 'empty hand' karate systems, making them more amenable to suburban families who want to teach their children some form of self-defense.

Chinese arts were also taught in Chinatown, but usually in a more informal fashion revolving around ethnic traditions such as lion dancing and dragon parades. Divided politically (pro- and anti-KMT), linguistically (Mandarin, Cantonese, and a range of other dialects), and stunted by exclusionary immigration policies, the Chinese community did not provide a fertile ground for the expansion of the Chinese martial arts. They developed along different lines. Fueled by the popularity of Bruce Lee, the televisual presence of David Carradine on the *Kung Fu* television series made the Chinese arts visible and highly appealing. Despite the existence of many amazing ethnic Chinese martial arts sifu and the dedication of non-Chinese instructors in Wing Chun, Hung Gar, Tai Chi, and other systems, the sheer variety of forms, less rigid methods of instruction, and more



complex styles made the Chinese arts less common on the tournament circuit, among movie stuntmen and choreographers, and as the form of choice for the local martial arts school. As in *The Karate Kid* (1984), the dojo dominated, and even 'softer' Okinawan systems such as Goju Ryu were less common.

To give John G. Avildsen's film credit, the original *Karate Kid* attempts to push back against the very vicious anti-Japanese sentiments of the Reagan era. Detroit was losing its hold on the international auto industry to the popularity of more fuel-efficient Japanese cars, and two years earlier the notorious killing of Vincent Chin, linked to anti-Asian sentiments in the Motor City, made the racist xenophobia even more violently apparent. Avildsen's *Karate Kid* responds to these anti-Japanese sentiments by showing its avuncular Sensei Miyagi to be the owner of old American cars – the cars he makes his student clean and polish with his 'wax on, wax off' karate training technique.

Moreover, not only is the local dojo, the Cobra Kai, headed by a blond villain (Martin Kove), who interprets the Japanese arts in such a way as to empower his students as teenage bullies, but Miyagi's background speaks to the injustice of the WW II-era Internment of Japanese Americans, where he lost his wife and child. The film also places Miyagi in the all-Japanese American 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Battalion and makes him a decorated war veteran.

Bitterness mixes with patriotism, karate with bigotry, and the film attempts to make sense of the changing ethnic landscape of America by teaming a Japanese immigrant with an Italian American teenager united through the martial arts. However, the film also

domesticates what was then the perceived threat of Japanese economic domination of a key American industry. Miyagi heals America, not only through his wartime sacrifice and valor, but also by enabling the best of his culture to be assimilated by American youth. No longer a competitor, the Americanized Japanese becomes an ally in the struggle against insularity and prejudice. As Nitta perceptively observes: that

a Caucasian American boy recognizes a Japanese American's historical accomplishments, as well as learns his teacher's culture and even otherness as his own, may signify the political or strategic multiculturalism of contemporary America. The intersection of karate and American military actions at the character of Miyagi suggests a possible hegemony by which the US military intention recolonized – by way of recognizing – Okinawa's usability. Karate is not exactly a Japanese martial art but it has been developed in Okinawa, originally an independent nation: this movie, not necessarily sensitive about depicting the foreign culture, never fails to express this fact. (Nitta 2010: 389)

In other words, cultural differentiation, through the martial arts, surfaces when needed to drive home an ideological point. Okinawa functions as a part of Japan until it must take on a separate identity in the service of American military interests.

Forcing the 'karate kid' to practice 'kung fu' in the 2010 remake uncovers similar issues related to race, American culture, and the martial arts. The slippage between karate and kung fu in Zwart's film, in fact, brings to the surface a

submerged aspect of American martial arts culture that the 1984 film fails to acknowledge. Martial arts – Japanese and Chinese, Asian and Western – play a huge role in African American life.<sup>10</sup> Transforming the Italian American teenager of the original into the African American preteen in the remake pays tribute to the role African Americans have played in the development of Asian martial arts in the United States.

African Americans in the military learned various Asian arts while stationed abroad or through contact with others who had been trained. With the rise of the visibility of kung fu through the popularity of Shaw Brothers films such as *Five Fingers of Death* (1972), Bruce Lee's feature films, and the television series *Kung Fu* (1972-75), more African Americans began to train in the Chinese arts as well. Given the racial climate in America and the need for self-defense in the black community, African Americans took up the arts that welcomed them.<sup>11</sup> On screen, both 'karate' and 'kung fu' figure in African American action narratives, ranging from karatekas such as Jim Kelly in *Enter the Dragon* (1973) and *Black Belt Jones* (1974) to Tamara Dobson's kung fu fighter *Cleopatra Jones* (1973).

Before training with Mr. Han in Beijing, Dre already has a rudimentary understanding of martial arts through exposure to karate. When Mr. Han comes

to fix the faucet in Dre's apartment, the young man is working out with a karate instructional video, and, later, he watches the starfish Patrick practice karate awkwardly in a Sponge Bob Square Pants cartoon. (Sandy is the real karateka in the television series.) The portrayal of Japanese karate as part of the American popular cultural landscape rather than as a serious fighting art makes kung fu master Mr. Han more appealing to the bullied karate kid than sticking with his video regime.

Of course, *The Karate Kid* is far from the first time Jackie Chan has been paired with an African American in an action film, so the switch from cartoon karate to Hong Kong-Hollywood *Rush Hour* style kung fu makes sense according to the logic of the box office.<sup>12</sup> Dre's mother, Sherry (Taraji P. Henson), provides the audience with an approving African American maternal figure, who, presumably like Jaden Smith's parents who produced the film, sanctioned Dre/Jaden's involvement with Asian martial arts. Dre assures her that 'Kung fu isn't about fighting; it's about making peace with your enemy'. However, Sherry does not need much persuasion. Her support for Dre's training and enthusiasm for the arts require no explanation for viewers cognizant of the relationship between the black community and the Asian martial arts as well as the African American fan base for Hong Kong kung fu films and karate's prominent place in blaxploitation cinema. The generational shift, however, matters, and younger viewers need a primer on how to appreciate martial arts action. *The Karate Kid* positions itself within this cultural matrix, and the film

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<sup>10</sup> For a critical understanding of the relationship between black America and the Asian martial arts through Charles Johnson's (1983) short story, 'China', see Brown (1997: 24-48).

<sup>11</sup> For more on the importance of Asian martial arts in the African American community, see Kato, M. T. (2007) and Prashad (2001). For more on the racial politics of the popularity of Hong Kong kung fu films in the inner city, see Desser (2000: 19-43).

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<sup>12</sup> For a detailed discussion of Jackie Chan's connections to black culture internationally, see Marchetti (2012).

acknowledges the contribution Afro-Brazilian arts such as Capoeira have made when Dre mentions his uncle's Brazilian girlfriend and his link to Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ), popularized by the Gracie family, as well as Capoeira, a combat form disguised as dance acrobatics stemming from South American slave traditions.

The use of the phrase 'karate kid' acknowledges the popularity of the original film and the importance of the Japanese martial arts in America, but Hong Kong kung fu takes charge of its young star (and potential audience) in the person of Jackie Chan. Brian Lam, in an online comment, conveys the feeling that, for many martial artists, the line between karate and kung fu need not be turned into an iron barrier in the film genre:

Okay, the title of the 'new' karate kid title may be a misnomer in the literal sense. But I don't consider the title a mistake. Some may argue that the filmmakers are demonstrating cultural insensitivity to Chinese and Japanese martial artists. But I believe the karate/kung fu discrepancy can also be interpreted as masterful perception. Because a master, like Bruce Lee or Jongsanan, knows that at the core, there is no real difference between any of the martial arts. In fact, this is the very sort of provincial distinction Bruce Lee fought against throughout his life. (Lam 2010)

Given common ancestry, combined histories, and the complex weave of the martial arts film as a transnational phenomenon, putting too fine a point on the cinematic differences rather than the cultural roots of Japanese/Okinawan

karate and Chinese kung fu may not be necessary.

Hollywood, in fact, has contributed to this slippage for decades. Ed Parker, founder of American Kenpo Karate, for example, trained many celebrities, including Elvis Presley, Blake Edwards, Robert Wagner, George Hamilton, Robert Culp, Joey Bishop, Warren Beatty, Elke Sommers, and many others, in his system. Parker brought 'kenpo' ('kempo'), a hybrid combination of Japanese, Okinawan, and Chinese martial arts popular in his native Hawai'i, to the American mainland. He opened schools, instituted karate tournaments, and wrote several books, including *Secrets of Chinese Karate* (Parker 1963). In that volume, Parker looks at the similarities between Japanese and Chinese martial arts systems, noting their common ancestry. Because of this background, Ed Parker became a magnet for Asian martial arts adepts, including Bruce Lee, whom he helped to promote on the West Coast.

However, although often elided in Hollywood, distinctions among the Asian martial arts exist and function in particular films in various ways. In the case of Zwart's *Karate Kid*, these differences go far beyond the title of the film and the shadow of the original to the very heart of the construction of a global audience for contemporary Asian martial arts. Teasing out the details of the kung fu shown on screen in the remake, in fact, reveals a new global formation of viewers for action cinema.

### **From Wu Shu to Movie Fu**

In 2010, Jackie Chan assembled a very different team of martial artists to choreograph *The Karate Kid* than had been on hand in the 1984 version. As

expected in this mainland co-production, the Chinese arts dominate. Rather than differentiate between the Okinawan and 'harder' Japanese styles such as Shotokan to demarcate the heroes and the villains, the remake draws on the divisions between the modernized, postwar Chinese martial arts used in performance and competition as opposed to traditional forms and their popular depiction in Hong Kong movies.

Master Li (Yu Rongguang), who teaches Dre's nemesis, Cheng (Wang Zhenwei), exemplifies the modified '*wu shu*' characteristic of mainland Chinese martial arts culture.<sup>13</sup> Like the film star Jet Li, Yu Rongguang and Wang Zhenwei trained in Beijing and won national *wu shu* championships. A few years older than Li, Yu became part of the first cohort of *wu shu* talent to work in the Hong Kong film industry in the 1980s, and he is perhaps best known for his titular role in Yuen Woo-ping's *Iron Monkey* (1993). While they represent the villains in *The Karate Kid*, it seems important to note that virtually all of the principal stunt team seen in the film come from Mainland China with the same *wu shu* credentials. Wu Gang, the stunt coordinator, who trained Jaden Smith for his role as Dre, shares a similar background (Nasson, no date). Based in Shanghai rather than Beijing, Wu boasts of several world as well as national *wu shu* championship wins and has been an active member of Jackie Chan's inner circle for several years. An obvious affinity exists between Hong Kong cinematic kung fu and PRC *wu shu*, since so much of the sport revolves around theatrical flourishes and athletic displays that can stand out in competition.

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<sup>13</sup> Many overviews exist of *wu shu* in the People's Republic of China. See, for example, Wu (1992). For a contrasting overview of kung fu, see Chow and Spangler (1982).

While '*wu shu*' simply means 'martial art' in Chinese, it has come to represent a particular standardization of Chinese martial arts in the People's Republic of China, which established the All-China Wushu Association in 1958 (Wu 1992). A brief shot of the 2008 Olympic Village in Beijing and its iconic 'bird's nest' stadium in *The Karate Kid* reminds the savvy viewer, however, that *wu shu* continues to be slighted as a competitive sport and remains unsanctioned by the Olympic committee. The emphasis in *wu shu* practice is on potential health benefits, physical strength, and athletic prowess rather than philosophical depth, self-defense, or historical authenticity. In order to develop as a competitive sport, as part of physical education curricula, and to suppress any residual religious, superstitious, or politically subversive elements of the martial arts, the government set up a commission to provide guidelines for recognized empty-hand and weapons forms. These include long fist (*changquan*), Southern fist (*nanquan*), and Tai Chi (*taijiquan*) as well as long and short weapons sets. Shaolin-inspired animal forms add whimsy and the opportunity for acrobatic flourishes. The regimented practice sessions involving forms in *The Karate Kid* draw on these standard sets. Shot on location at the Beijing Shaolin Wushu School (Nasson, no date), the mass scale and regimentation of the training shown on screen as the camera cranes up to reveal the impressive number of the students going through their routine acquires a sinister quality when Dre spots Cheng as one of the pupils.

This sort of *wu shu* training, familiar to audiences in the PRC as a recognized part of the physical education curriculum, takes on a different connotation in the film as it serves as the antithesis of the traditional kung fu

associated with Mr. Han. The term 'kung fu' (*gong fu*) refers to any skill acquired through hard work, and Mr. Han has 'kung fu' in the martial arts as well as in plumbing and mechanical maintenance. He provides an alternative to government sanctioned martial arts – looking to the past for a post-Mao future – with an eclectic blend of fighting techniques chosen to look different from the standardized *wu shu* practiced by Li and Cheng.

The development of *wu shu* as a modern sport predates the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 and can be traced back to a similar initiative supported by the Kuomintang (KMT) during the Republican era (Morris 2004). When the KMT established the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan, they continued the development of what they called '*kuo shu*' (*guoshu* in pinyin), the 'national art' inspired by the Jing Wu Athletic Association, best known via Bruce Lee's fictionalization of its activities in his film, *Fist of Fury/The Chinese Connection* (1972). The ROC's *kuo shu*, like the PRC's *wu shu*, attempts to codify diverse traditional Chinese martial arts into a system that can be taught and judged in a competitive sports environment. Like *wu shu*, it includes southern, northern, and internal forms such as *taijiquan*, weapons, and sparring.

As parallel developments, both the PRC and the ROC include '*san shou*'/'*san da*' sparring competition, and this provides the model for the climactic sparring match in *The Karate Kid*. The fighting techniques characteristic of this aspect of the sport have a checkered history. According to the Russian Tongbei Wushu Federation based in Moscow, *san da* evolved out of the close quarter fighting characteristic of the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 (with Western boxing and

wrestling mingling with aikido and jujitsu). When the Soviet army was enlisted by the KMT to train its soldiers in the Whampoa Military Academy in 1924, *san da* became part of the combat curriculum and a recognized part of the Nationalists' *kuo shu* system.<sup>14</sup> The *san da* choreography in *The Karate Kid* displays some of the eclecticism now found in the mainland Chinese variation of the sport, including Mongolian style takedowns, kickboxing, and some locks reminiscent of Chinese *qin na* (*chin na*). When Mr. Han sees the students sparring in this fashion in the film, he tells Dre, 'That is not kung fu. That does not represent China. More good news... I will teach you real kung fu'.

If *wu shu/san da* takes the place of the 'hard' karate from the 1984 film, then 'real kung fu' steps in for the softer Goju-Ryu and provides the 'soft power' in the remake. The irony, of course, is that Mr. Han's 'real kung fu' comes from the theatricality of the Hong Kong kung fu film and its soft power from aspects of martial arts already part of the *wu shu* curriculum (e.g., *taijiquan*). In fact, the 'authenticity' or purity of the martial arts on screen is not important. Rather, *The Karate Kid* must train its viewers to appreciate the type of kung fu performed in Hong Kong movies. Mainland viewers did not have legal access to Hong Kong films until after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and, then, only in very limited releases. Therefore, many of the classics of kung fu cinema are not widely known in the mainland. The Jackie Chan vehicles cited extensively in *The Karate Kid*, *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* and *Drunken Master*, both directed in 1978 by Yuen Woo-ping and featuring his father Simon Yuen, were not the movie

<sup>14</sup> Tongbei Wushu Federation, <http://www.wushu.org/eng/0102.php>. [Accessed 6 February 2014]

events in the People's Republic that they were in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Although Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, Jet Li and Donnie Yen were favorites of American fans of kung fu television broadcasts and inner city theatres, a younger generation of viewers outside of Asia may know martial arts more through MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) cage fights and Brazilian Ju-jitsu (BJJ) bouts than through the films of these actors. An older audience of loyal African American fans may be recognized through Sherry's appreciation of Mr. Han and his art, but a younger generation in China, America, and elsewhere must be taught the value of watching kung fu action. *The Karate Kid*, then, begins to define 'real kung fu' practice for its viewers, educating them into an appreciation of Chinese martial arts beyond *wu shu* competitions, *san da* sparring, and the PRC codified rules, manuals, and accepted physical education curricula. It takes it out of gym class and puts it into the realm of 'real' entertainment. Of course, Mr. Han's 'real kung fu' is a creation of the martial arts film genre, and this 'movie fu' flows out of a heady mixture of intertextual references, star citations, and Hong Kong stunt team associations.

### The Kung Fu Film Vault

In addition to training with the *wu shu* champion Wu Gang, Jaden Smith also watched Jackie Chan movies in order to prepare to portray Dre in *The Karate Kid*. 'I watched a lot of Jackie's movies and even copied some of his moves' (Bergstrom 2010). Jackie Chan's approach to kung fu comes from his extensive education in Peking opera under the tutelage of Yu Jim-Yuen at the China Drama Academy in Hong Kong. As

he notes in his autobiography, *I Am Jackie Chan: My Life in Action* (Chan and Yang 1998), being on stage as one of the 'Seven Little Fortunes' was a physically and emotionally grueling way of growing up. However, training in Peking opera stage combat and acrobatics put Chan in a position to move into the Hong Kong film industry as a stuntman and martial arts performer.

Many of the routines found in Chinese opera have their roots in Shaolin martial arts, and many operatic flourishes have found their way into competitive *wu shu*. Some oral histories of the spread of Shaolin kung fu into southern China link itinerant opera troupes (such as Red Boat Opera Companies) to the clandestine dissemination of the combat arts during the period of Manchu domination over the majority Han Chinese in the Qing Dynasty.

When Chan teamed up with Yuen Woo-ping and his father Simon Yuen to make *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* and *Drunken Master*, he dug deep into his opera roots to lead Hong Kong kung fu films away from Bruce Lee's approach to screen combat.<sup>15</sup> After Lee's death, Chan had been groomed unsuccessfully at Golden Harvest as a successor to Lee, and Chan is fond of recounting his rebellion against being cast in Lee's mold. He talks about Lee kicking high while he kicks low, and Lee's stoic machismo countered by his own vulnerability to pain. However, the differences between Lee and Chan go beyond performance style. Lee created his own hybrid style of kung fu, Jeet Kune Do, out of a foundation in Wing Chun and Tai Chi. Although Lee's parents were Cantonese opera performers, Lee

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<sup>15</sup> For more on Chan in this role, see Farquhar (2010: 181-193).

does not seem to draw heavily on that tradition, but looks instead to Western boxing, Japanese and Korean fighting arts, and even fencing to develop a system which he taught for health and self-defense as well as screen performance. As open as Jackie Chan has been to absorbing a range of martial arts and working with top practitioners of various styles, he has never had any ambition to move his kung fu from the screen to the arena or the gym. Like operatic martial arts, his style remains a choreographed part of a fictional world. Chan excels, in particular, at the 'chou'/clown aspects of that tradition. Yuen Woo-ping and his father also come from Peking opera, so their collaboration provides an organic fusion that updates opera types with an eye to the contributions of Bruce Lee, Liu Chia-liang, and others to a more modern approach to fight choreography.<sup>16</sup>

One of the most appealing parts of the genre, which Liu Chia-liang mastered in his films made for the Shaw Brothers studio, involves attention to the training of the novice practitioner under the watchful eye of a knowledgeable master. This became the basis for Yuen Woo-ping's *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow*, *Drunken Master*, and a range of other martial arts films, which extended Liu's more sober approach to the master-pupil relationship into the realm of comedy. Many of the same routines that the drunken master Simon Yuen puts Jackie Chan through come back to haunt Jaden Smith in *The Karate Kid*. Indeed, the spectacle of training nearly overshadows the thrill of the competition in many popular films, including the

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<sup>16</sup> For an excellent introduction to Hong Kong cinema from the perspective of a martial arts practitioner, see Logan (1995). For more on action choreography in Hong Kong cinema, see Li (2006).

*Rocky* series as well as the original *Karate Kid* franchise (both of which were directed by John G. Avildsen), so even viewers unfamiliar with the Hong Kong kung fu genre may find the 2010 version's emphasis on physical conditioning and pedagogy familiar.

In *The Karate Kid*, Chan pulls out all the stops and provides a catalogue of the various styles that have fueled Hong Kong kung fu film choreography for decades. Given the popularity of films about Ip Man, Bruce Lee's teacher, it comes as no surprise that the wooden dummy usually associated with Wing Chun plays an important role in the film's *mise-en-scene*.

Donnie Yen inaugurated the current franchise in 2008, and the legendary teacher has been portrayed by Tony Leung, Anthony Wong, and To Yu-Hang in recent films as well. In *The Karate Kid*, the familiar wooden dummy takes the form of a long peg hammered into a telephone pole. In place of Mr. Miyagi's 'wax on, wax off', Mr. Han has another routine for Dre. Since Han witnessed Sherry's irritation with her son's failure to hang up his jacket properly, the master has developed an exercise to train Dre in blocking based on hanging his jacket on the wooden peg. Dre intones his mantra: 'Pick it up, hang it up, take it down, put it on, take it off, hang it up, take it down, put it on the ground, pick it up'. Han has such a commitment to this exercise that he holds an umbrella over Dre so he can continue to train in the rain. However, it bears little resemblance to Wing Chun wooden dummy exercises, although it does seem to achieve the same results in the fictional world of the film, and Dre's limbs strengthen and reflexes sharpen.

Legendarily developed by a Buddhist nun, Ng Mui, and named after her

student, Wing Chun, the eponymous system, supposedly designed to counter the Shaolin kung fu from which it diverges, relies on direct, close-quarter attacks, blocks, counters, and low kicks that do form a part of the Hong Kong martial arts film lexicon. However, the simplicity of much of the system does not make it the most attractive foundation for action choreography. Sammo Hung uses Wing Chun as the basis for part of the choreography in *The Prodigal Son* (1981), but the foundation for the martial artistry he puts on screen comes from the same source as Jackie Chan's choreography, since both grew up as Peking opera 'brothers' under Yu Jim-Yuen at Hong Kong's China Drama Academy.

Given its location at the mouth of the Pearl River Delta, Hong Kong has absorbed many of China's southern kung fu systems. While Wing Chun continues to be popular, other southern combat systems are more closely connected to performance arts. Of these, Hung Gar has been the most influential, and one of Wong Fei-Hung's pupils, Lam Sai-wing, is credited with popularizing the system in Hong Kong.<sup>17</sup> In addition to Liu Chia-Liang's contribution to fight choreography, Hung Gar-inspired fighting has had a place on Hong Kong screens at least since the beginning of the wildly successful Wong Fei-Hung film series starring Kwan Tak-Hing.

Although Kwan was not a Hung Gar adept, many of the choreographers, actors, and stunt personnel involved in the series did practice the style. Perhaps because of its connection to lion dancing and street performances, Hung Gar boasts many complex and visually engaging forms, including Tiger-Crane, Iron Wire Fist, and Five Animals. Hung

Gar is also the basis for the 'nanquan'/Southern Shaolin forms in the PRC's *wu shu* system, so, when Jet Li took up the role of Wong Fei-Hung in Tsui Hark's series *Once Upon a Time in China* in the 1990s, he had some familiarity with the style. Dre's open fighting stance with one hand extended inviting his opponent's attack resembles Jet Li's interpretation of the same position with nearly identical choreography based on *nanquan* sets.

In *Drunken Master*, which inspired much of the choreography in *The Karate Kid*, Jackie Chan plays a young Wong Fei-Hung, who undergoes unorthodox training under Simon Yuen as Beggar Su. Chan's comic treatment of the character bears little resemblance to the sober Confucian elder portrayed by Kwan Tak-Hing or Gordon Liu's interpretation of the early training of Wong Fei-Hung (Huang Fei-Hong) in Liu Chia-Liang's *Challenge of the Masters* (1976). However, it makes sense as a way to differentiate himself, as a Peking opera performer, from Kwan Tak-Hing and Gordon Liu. Hung Gar does, indeed, have 'drunken forms', and modern *wu shu* includes 'zui quan'/drunken fist as a recognized competitive routine. Chan's version of drunken boxing in *Drunken Master* displays his opera training and athletic prowess with backbends, sweeps, high kicks, flips, and complex footwork that takes full advantage of the theatrical qualities of the martial arts.

In a scene in which he comes to Dre's rescue and fights the schoolyard bullies early in *The Karate Kid*, Chan, as the tortured alcoholic Han, puts the kids in locks, evades their strikes with backbends, and controls them with the sleeves of their jackets. Dre is impressed, and Han becomes the boy's reluctant master, taking up Simon Yuen's role as

<sup>17</sup> For a history of the style, see Lam (2013).



the inebriated master. Many of the exercises Han assigns to Dre mimic the conventional types of kung fu training seen in Hong Kong films. Dre does splits, back bends, and high kicks to ring a hanging bell. Han uses padded sticks to imitate strikes and takes Dre through sit ups, pull ups, and push ups. Variations on standard push ups and sit ups played an important role in the training sequences in *Drunken Master* as well.

Two training techniques taken directly from the Golden Harvest feature stand out. In the 1979 film, Beggar Su has Wong Fei-Hung practice the squatting 'horse stance' by placing bowls of wine on his legs and shoulders and a burning stick of incense under his buttocks to maintain the posture. Han does not go to those extremes in *The Karate Kid*, but his use of a stick to keep Dre in position while holding the horse stance on the Great Wall evokes the similar training scene from Yuen Woo-ping's film. The inclusion of the Great Wall as background highlights the horse stance as particularly significant. Dre's posture seems rooted, like the wall, in Chinese history and national identity. Indeed, the horse stance – a means of strengthening the legs by imitating a person seated on as horse – serves an important role in Shaolin-based training and many related systems of martial arts.

One of Beggar Su's favorite training techniques in *Drunken Master* involves attaching ropes to sticks and binding his pupil to these extensions in order to manipulate his limbs like a stick puppet. In *The Karate Kid*, Han becomes the puppet master and attaches rods to Dre in order to manipulate him into the correct positions to execute his techniques. A scene in which Han and Dre as puppet and puppeteer appear as shadows on the wall underscores the

visual metaphor and links it to another scene in which the principal characters attend a shadow puppet show to celebrate the Double Seventh Festival (a.k.a. the Chinese Valentine's Day). Dre must encourage his melancholy master to take up the role of puppeteer, since the weight of the car crash that killed his wife and child still burdens him.

However, the fact that the pupil in the film becomes the master's puppet in order to achieve the level of fitness necessary to compete in a tournament needs to be examined more closely. Between Bruce Lee's assault on the rigidity of traditional martial arts forms, which he dismissed as the 'classical mess', and the violent rebellion of the young Red Guards across the border as well as considerable civil unrest in Hong Kong during the late 1960s and into the next decade, the generational tables were poised to turn. The elderly Beggar Su relishes taking his revenge on the youthful Wong Fei-Hung through his sadistic training methods, and audiences enjoyed the comedy of seeing the young Jackie Chan suffer. Violent youth was being tamed, and martial arts training used to discipline its screen representative in the person of Jackie Chan.

However, in the case of Dre in *The Karate Kid*, the older Chinese master manipulating the puppet strings of an African American child, wearing a t-shirt with the red star of the Chinese Communist Party prominent against a khaki background, conveys a very different impression. Given the film's need to appeal to the mainland as well as U.S. and other international audiences, *The Karate Kid* must balance its negative depiction of state-sponsored *wu shu* with a recognition of the equally 'legitimate' place the traditional arts have

in the People's Republic. In the fictional world of the film, *wu shu/san da* looks modern and somehow less 'Chinese', since the practitioners from the state-sponsored academies wear sweat suits, while Dre seems more traditional in his Chinese tunic. However, as the yin/yang motif on the floor reminds viewers, both styles spring from the same source; the soft and the hard complement each other to strike a balance.

The film attempts to create a similar equilibrium geopolitically. The African American child in Chinese garb recognizes the future hold China has on the world's youth in a way that Jackie Chan in his early films did not. This is not violent youth under the thumb of the Chinese elders, but the recognition of Chinese cultural superiority, its ability to moderate its own excesses, and a sign of its soft power in the arena of global media. It visually flips the famous 1959 photograph of a youthful Chairman Mao with an elderly W.E.B. DuBois. Now, the Chinese master mentors African American youth rather than the other way around.

The slippage between political control and the self-discipline needed to become a martial arts champion haunts the image of Dre as Mr. Han's puppet. This resonates as well with Jackie Chan's political views, which have been regarded as 'undemocratic'. In 2009, commenting on the apparently chaotic political system in Taiwan, he was quoted as saying: 'I'm gradually beginning to feel that we Chinese need to be controlled. If we're not being controlled, we'll just do what we want' (Bloom 2009). No longer the comic drunk of his earlier film career, Chan now speaks with a much sterner public voice as he takes on avuncular roles in films such as *Rumble in the Bronx*

(1995), in which he befriends a disabled boy confined to a wheelchair and lectures American street gangs on their rude behavior (Fore 2001: 115-42; Fore 1997 239-264). Pang Laikwan observes that he adopts a similar tone off-screen as well: 'He assumes a heavy, Chinese paternal voice when he speaks to Hong Kong's media' (Pang 2007: 207). Even though he continues to be cast in 'drunken' roles in films such as *The Forbidden Kingdom* (2008) as well as *The Karate Kid*, Chan attempts to distance himself from his earlier inebriated clown persona. For example, he asserts: 'It was a mistake to make *Drunken Master*... The film was all about getting drunk to fight. It misled the audience' (Chan, quoted in Pollard 2009). In *The Karate Kid*, Chan remains the drunken master for his fans, but his new political role in the Chinese-speaking role requires him to sober up in order to represent the nation on global screens.

### **Shaolin Kung Fu vs. Wu Tang**

One of the most reliable dramatic antagonisms in the Hong Kong martial arts film genre revolves around the perpetual battle between the denizens of Shaolin Temple and the acolytes of Wu Tang (Wudang). Liu Chia-Liang's dramatic enactment of the competing styles in *Shaolin and Wu Tang* (1983) made such an impression on the African American community in the United States that it inspired the name of the rap group, Wu Tang Clan, and the title of Raekwon's 2011 album, *Shaolin vs. Wu Tang*. Wudang also figures prominently in Ang Lee's blockbuster *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), a film that brought white suburban and black audiences together in American multiplexes in unprecedented numbers. It makes sense, then, that *The Karate Kid*

imagines the source of Mr. Han's kung fu prowess to be in the Wu Tang (Wudang) Mountains. Wudang, then, provides another opportunity to strengthen the connections linking the African American community, Chinese martial arts, and Hong Kong cinema.

Buddhist Shaolin and Taoist Wudang exemplify the 'yang' and the 'yin' of traditional martial arts. Shaolin represents the external 'hard' styles, while Wudang claims the internal 'soft' systems such as Tai Chi (*taijiquan*). They complement each other in the PRC's official promotion of Chinese martial arts, and *wu shu* competitions feature *taiji* forms as well as Shaolin-inspired routines. Master Li, in *The Karate Kid*, in fact, only teaches selective aspects of *wu shu*, while Mr. Han is more eclectic in his approach and exposes Dre to southern Shaolin and Wing Chun, as well as *taiji*. The pilgrimage to Wudang Mountain allows the film to continue its travelogue of major sightseeing attractions such as the Forbidden City and the Great Wall, strengthens the display of national treasures to support Chinese patriotic sentiments, and adds to the Hong Kong kung fu film's screen mythology involving Wu Tang Tai Chi. The train trip to Wudang also provides an opportunity for Mr. Han to explain 'qi' to Dre, who cites another popular culture connection, 'Like the force in *Star Wars*. You're Yoda and I'm like a Jedi'.

As master and pupil climb the mountain, they encounter Taoist monks and nuns doing *taiji* forms, demonstrating *qigong* exercises, and meditating in temple courtyards. They come across a woman adept perched on a ledge opposite a cobra – snake and woman swaying in unison. Given most systems of Asian martial arts rely on so-called animal forms, this scene updates the 1984 film's

use of the crane stance by allowing Dre to focus on the snake for his inspiration. The snake and the crane, in particular, figure prominently in Wing Chun and the Shaolin animal forms, and Jackie Chan performed snake-inspired routines in many of his early features as well (notably, *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow*).

Zhou Xiaofei, a martial arts champion from the People's Republic, who was leader of the Jiangsu Martial Arts Team and the Bayi Martial Arts Team,<sup>18</sup> plays the snake charmer on the cliff. At first Dre makes a 'hard' style mistake and assumes the woman imitates the snake in order to acquire a better understanding of its natural strength; however, Mr. Han corrects him and notes that the snake reflects the movement of the woman, since she is still like a reflecting pool of calm water. Not only does the metaphor harken back to Bruce Lee's famous dictum to 'be like water', but the *taiji* notion of reflecting and yielding to an opponent brings another dimension to Dre's training. As anyone who has practiced *taiji's tui shou* (pushing hands) knows, yielding to power turns the force against the opponent. In the same scene, Dre drinks from a pool with a yin/yang design to strengthen his resolve. However, the next exchange between Dre and Han translates this message into one of control. Dre wants Mr. Han to teach him to 'control' people, and the stillness of the Taoist adept becomes 'focus' instead. When Dre draws a diagram of his understanding of the woman's power over the snake, he shows dots radiating from her eyes mesmerizing the serpent.

<sup>18</sup> Publicity profile online, *Alive Not Dead*, [http://www.alivenotdead.com/zhouxiaofei/-Karate-Kid--profile-1009115.html?r\\_andhphoto](http://www.alivenotdead.com/zhouxiaofei/-Karate-Kid--profile-1009115.html?r_andhphoto). [Accessed 6 February 2014]

The taiji snake training tips the scales in Dre's favor during the climatic tournament duel with his archrival Cheng. The fight consists of an eclectic assortment of martial arts techniques that recapitulate the martial choreography from earlier scenes in the film, including 'drunken' backbend evasions, sweeps, low and high kicks, wrestling holds, among other maneuvers. The injured, smaller Dre finally defeats his opponent, however, with a combination of his crane stance, snake-inspired feint, and a Capoeira cartwheel that becomes the knockout kick to Cheng's face. Dre lands in a Hung Gar cat stance to thunderous applause, and Master Li's students line up to acknowledge Han as 'shifu' (sifu)/master.

With this, the film enthrones Jackie Chan's 'movie fu' as the global standard for martial arts choreography. Key techniques, magnified on giant screens in the auditorium, allow 'instant replay' to reinforce the spectacle of this specific visualization of kung fu. Sherry, representing an older generation of African Americans, provides a standing ovation, and the Chinese spectators for the tournament express their more subdued appreciation, mirroring, in a hopeful fashion, the film's reception in the PRC. Jackie Chan and Hong Kong choreography symbolically dominate the martial arts film genre in the arena of world cinema. The outtakes made famous by Chan's Hong Kong hits conclude the film and provide the stamp of 'authenticity' demanded by his fans. Jackie Chan teamed up with Jaden Smith ushers in a new generation – with, perhaps, a few Asian martial arts practitioners among them – for Hong Kong-inspired martial arts films.

## Kung Fu Dreaming

The question posed by the different titles for the film lingers. The issue of whether a 'karate kid' can be a part of a Chinese-defined 'kung fu dream' remains. In fact, this very question has been amplified by subsequent debate surrounding Chinese President Xi Jinping's proclamation of the 'Chinese dream', which, according to the *New York Times*, emphasizes:

Strong China (economically, politically, diplomatically, scientifically, militarily); Civilized China (equity and fairness, rich culture, high morals); Harmonious China (amity among social classes); Beautiful China (healthy environment, low pollution). (Khun 2013)

Kung fu, as practiced and proclaimed by Mr. Han, fits the bill – 'strong', 'civilized', 'harmonious', and 'beautiful'. However, this 'real' kung fu, elevated above the more mundane '*wu shu*', may be too traditional for Xi's modern sense of the direction of the Chinese state.

Mirana M. Szeto and Yun-Chung Chen, in their research on filmmaking in the HKSAR, note the impact of 'Mainlandization' on Hong Kong's cross-border productions (Szeto and Chen 2012: 115-134; 2011: 239-260; 2013). However, as Hong Kong film talent makes concessions to PRC taste and political constraints, Mainland Chinese film culture courts and absorbs Hong Kong cinema's production practices and modes of operation. With Hollywood in the mix, films such as *The Karate Kid* search for a common kung fu lexicon that can cross the PRC-Hong Kong border as well as make sense for global audiences. Hong Kong no longer provides the conditions for the education and apprenticeship of talents such as Jackie Chan, so the need for PRC talent

is very practical. As a state-funded sports activity, *wu shu* has an institutional standing that can reliably deliver young talent. Hong Kong's martial arts community remains firmly entrenched, but, unlike *wu shu* in the PRC, subject to the vicissitudes of combat fashion. The Ip Man films, for example, bring Wing Chun into vogue, but the lack of Wong Fei-Hung films may make Hung Gar less attractive. Moreover, traditional Chinese arts rarely produce film stars. Donnie Yen may be the best-known exception to the rule. Most martial arts performers working in Hong Kong have a background in Chinese opera, dance, or PRC *wu shu* with, perhaps, some additional training in the traditional arts,

if they have any background in combat arts at all. As a result, martial arts choreography in Hong Kong film includes elements of both sides of the 'real kung fu'/'*wu shu*' divide. The fact that an American 'karate kid' has a Chinese 'kung fu dream', then, speaks to a hybrid future for martial arts in global action cinema.

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