

# YUEN WOO PING'S Wing Chun

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# 1

## Yuen Woo Ping and the Art of Empowering Female Characters

### The Art of Countering Dominant Structures of Meaning

Yuen Woo Ping's films do not conform to the traditional notions of film art and stylistic innovation, and his status as author is not so self-evident. Unlike the "New Wavers," the cosmopolitan filmmakers who rejuvenated Hong Kong's production framework by bringing Western standards to the industry, Yuen Woo Ping, like Sammo Hung and Corey Yuen Kuei, is a studio-trained director who began his career in the late 1970s by reviving the martial arts film.<sup>1</sup> Although Yuen is acknowledged as one of the filmmakers who introduced comic elements into the kung fu genre,<sup>2</sup> he is not perceived as an author who has redefined the genre in the manner of Tsui Hark (*Butterfly Murders/Die bian/Dip bin*, 1979) or Patrick Tam (*The Sword/Ming jian/Ming jim*, 1980), the directors of the Hong Kong New Wave, or the directors who represent the New Hong Kong Cinema such as Wong Kar-wai (*Ashes of Time/Dong xie xi du/Dung che sai duk*, 1994).<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to these art film “literate” directors,<sup>4</sup> who sought ways to de/re-construct the hero and give an “artistic” twist to the martial arts genre, Yuen is better known as the “action director”<sup>5</sup> who sought new ways to keep the action genre alive through his capacity to make the characters leap, fly, and defy both gravity and common sense. In fact, the international recognition he acquired several years ago came through his work as action director/choreographer, in globally popular films such as *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999) and its sequel *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon/Wo hu cang long/Ngo fu chong lung* (Ang Lee, 2000) and most recently through Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* volumes 1 (2003) and 2 (2004).<sup>6</sup>

Unlike Yuen, filmmakers with similar career paths, enjoyed author status in critical writing, such as the above-mentioned Sammo Hung, or Lau Kar Leung, who I will discuss in subsequent chapters. All three of them followed the trajectory of the so-called studio-trained director, which implies that they started as stuntmen and bit players, advanced to the status of action choreographers, and were finally offered the chance to direct their own films. The specificity of this type of filmmaker is that, even though at one point he acquired the position of director, he continued to be involved as action choreographer on his own projects and/or the projects of his colleagues. As is the case concretely (although not only) with Yuen, as mentioned above, these Hong Kong directors are engaged in big budget Hollywood productions.

In Chapter 4 I will say more about why it is difficult to separate Yuen’s persona as director/author from his position as action choreographer. What is more, the idiosyncrasies of his filmic universe in many ways converge with the preoccupations of his colleagues. Since the central interest of this study is Yuen Woo Ping’s film *Wing Chun*, I will point to the films from his body of work that can be taken as exemplary of a certain type of universe. More precisely, I will focus on his kung fu comedies that most

prominently demonstrate a consistent preoccupation with subverting the interests of the martial arts tradition, implying in the first instance that instead of dignified male heroes who fight against foreign intruders or corrupt authorities, in Yuen's films we frequently encounter problematic, weak, or ridiculous men and strong women. In spite of the fact that kung fu comedy is invested in subverting the interests of the martial arts tradition, it has also been noted that this sub-genre belongs to the homosocial, macho world. In this environment women are also depicted as nagging or grotesque figures, but they are granted the physical and verbal skills that enables them to spar (but not exclusively) with their spouses (Hunt 2003). This is, in any case, a specificity of Hong Kong cinema, and a selection of films from Yuen's filmic universe is an occasion to shed additional light on this cinema.

Although his films feature predominantly male action heroes epitomized in the image of the famous martial arts master Wong Fei Hung/Huang Fei Hong (the most popular version is the comical one interpreted by Jackie Chan),<sup>7</sup> they offer us some of the most extraordinary action women in the history of cinema, culminating with the legendary martial arts heroine Wing Chun. My interest in writing this monograph that coheres around Yuen's 1993 kung fu comedy *Wing Chun/Yong Chun* comes from my long term fascination with Hong Kong cinema's tradition of female warriors. *Wing Chun* is a rare example of a filmic text that functions according to "the Law of the Woman," and it offers a painfully simplistic, yet incredibly empowering (albeit imaginary) solution to the (far from resolved) crisis of femininity. We will see that the balance of this fictional world is achieved across three levels, each of which is closely dependent on the working of female subjectivity: 1) female action, 2) female interaction, and 3) female personification of the highest narrational authority. The restructuring of subjectivity is closely tied with the re-shaping of the fabula, whereby a history/legend about a woman warrior becomes intertwined with

contemporary concerns with female empowerment. The fixing of the problem on the level of the fictional world coincides with the re-definition of female subjectivity.

Speaking of the representation of femininity in Yuen's films, I am not only referring to the women warriors who can "save the world," albeit by forging a partnership with a male hero as in his *Tai-Chi Master/Tai ji zhang san feng* (1993) or *Iron Monkey/Shao nian Huan Fei Hong zhi tie ma liu/Siu nin Wong Fei Hung ji tit ma lau* (1993), nor am I alluding to the woman who can set the fictional world into balance single-handedly as is the case with *Wing Chun*. Yuen's films such as *Drunken Master/Zui quan/Jui kuen* (1978), *Dance of the Drunk Mantis/Nan bei zui quan/Laam bak chui kuen* (1979), *Dreadnaught/Yong zhe wu ju/Yung che miu gui* (1981), or *Drunken Tai-Chi/Xiao tai chi/Siu tai gik* (1984) feature amazingly skilled yet utterly common female characters in supporting roles — middle-aged mothers, sisters, or wives who can stand up for themselves in the most spectacular ways. What is additionally noteworthy about the examples of films that feature these women of action is that they offer us insight into diverse faces of femininity, from the submissive and the oppressed to the emancipated. In spite of the fact that some of these female characters have no proper function in propelling the events, and even if the exhibition of their fighting skills is at times just a set piece inserted into a seemingly simplistic story, we need to interpret these actions in terms of their critical value. These women's actions are significant because, as mentioned above, they almost regularly demonstrate a female capacity to fight against verbal, physical, or any other kind of abuse.

In that respect, I will suggest that Yuen Woo Ping's "art" should be observed in terms of its subversive function, a view that is inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's writings on the deterritorializing function of art. I am referring here to their concepts from *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism*



*and Schizophrenia*, and in Chapter 2 I will take recourse to Deleuze's writings on film, specifically, his work *Movement-Image* (Deleuze 1983). Deleuze is a key figure in postmodern thought and one of the first philosophers who wrote about film. While traditional film theory treats film as a series of static photographic images, Deleuze argues that film consists of movement-images and time-images. In the books he wrote with Guattari he puts forward an anti-Freudian position as well as the ideas of the micropolitics of power. At the center of interest are (conceptual means that could theoretically forge) open and non-repressive societies. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, for example, they introduce concepts such as deterritorialization, becoming, bodies without organs and line of flight (Deleuze and Guattari 1996). Each of these concepts alludes to the non-hierarchical, two-way relations of different forms that affect the politics of identity. Via these ideas and concepts, an identity is propagated that is in a constant process of becoming; at stake is the conceptual space where meanings flow freely. I will examine Yuen's kung fu comedies as examples of the "art of empowering women and subverting patriarchal authorities," and I will argue that these principally commercial genre films (that cannot be categorized as "art [house] films")<sup>8</sup> should be discussed in terms of their deterritorializing function, or more precisely, their capacity to forge an empowering image of femininity. What this concretely means in terms of Yuen's body of work is that I will discuss the idiosyncrasies of his persona as filmmaker not only in relation to the employment of cinematic devices in his films or the organization of space and time;<sup>9</sup> rather, I will place my main emphasis on the narrative representation of issues such as gender and power/authority.<sup>10</sup>

In my previous work I have discussed concrete Hong Kong films in terms of the "art of countering territorial regimes," and I have taken this in a double sense, as connected to Hong Kong as an actual physical territory, but also in terms of the production of

meaning.<sup>11</sup> I have argued that the art of specific Hong Kong films is interdependent with the countering of certain regimes of signs. As far as the study of Yuen's filmic universe is concerned (and *Wing Chun* is the model example), the countering of territorial regimes implies also opposing the structures of meaning which are dependent on the cultural fixations, norms, and rules that govern the construction of the regressive image of femininity based initially on the assumption that women are passive, whereas men are active. The countering of such fixations involves the connection between the cinematic representation of gender and narrative.

It is important to point out that narrative representation is not only determined by the process of cinematic storytelling/narration, but also by a certain mode of cultural expression that informs the film's fabula. The actions these women are able to perform have to do with the connection between the narrative and the rules and norms that regulate what kind of female character is imaginable and conceivable. This implies that the "art of empowering women" is also bound up with a specific cultural imaginary. Speaking generally of Hong Kong films that feature fabulas populated with female heroes, it is possible to argue that these films work contrary to the laws of common sense that govern the social imagination of Western traditions. The viewing pleasure derives from the exhilarating action scenes and the super human skills of the characters such as Wing Chun, but at the same time the sense of empowerment emanates from the fictional worlds/fabulas predicated on specific conventions and practices.

## History as Science Fiction

According to Clifford Geertz, even though common sense seems to be about the mere matter-of-fact apprehension of reality, or down to earth colloquial judgments, we have to consider the fact that the

diversity of artistic expressions stems from the variety of conceptions we have about the ways things are (Geertz 1983). In Geertz's view, vernacular characterizations of *what happens* are connected to vernacular imaginings of *what can*. Geertz brings forward the notion of "legal sensibility" implying that stories and imaginings are contingent on a law; this law is rejoined to the other cultural formations of human life such as morals, art, technology, science, religion, division of labor, and history. Traditional Chinese society was male-dominated and men were regarded as superior to women. Confucian teaching codified this hierarchy.<sup>12</sup> Although the feminine element is so essential in the philosophical sense (particularly in Taoist thought, for it is interwoven with the masculine element), such a balance of forces cannot be found and confirmed in the actual position of women in everyday life, in traditionally patriarchal Chinese society.

In spite of female subordination in daily life, the stories of women warriors remained alive, and remarkably, women play a heroic role to an extent that is without parallel in European or Anglo-American action-adventure films. Apart from Taoism and Confucianism, when it comes to the question of social and cultural formations that regulate what women can do, *Wing Chun* reminds us of the third dominant religion in China — Buddhism. Since the way towards transcendence under Buddhism was equally applicable to both men and women, it is not strange that this would emerge in films.

For example, Wing Chun's teacher of martial arts and the highest narratorial authority in the film is a Buddhist nun; this *can happen* because in Confucian China, Buddhism and Taoism acknowledge, at least theoretically, women's equality with men. There is an egalitarian principle at work, where both men and women can achieve spiritual fulfillment. Quite understandably, then, Wing Chun could find refuge in a Buddhist temple and learn kung fu from a Buddhist woman.

Therefore, the fact that women are elaborated as skilled fighters is related to the specificities of the genre incorporated into the process of cinematic storytelling, but it is the specific vision of the film, a vision that exceeds the level of the fictional world that determines what kind of female subject is conceivable and which actions she can perform. The intelligent women fighters, women who are knowing subjects the types of female characters that can be found in Beijing Opera, martial arts novels, or the traditional Chinese stories of the fantastic and the supernatural — are dependent on the norms that circulate within Chinese cultural heritage.<sup>13</sup> One prototype that has served as a model for many Chinese girls and women who wished to abandon a strictly feminine role and gain access to the political sphere is Hua Mulan (Fa Mulan in Cantonese) the heroine of the Five Dynasties (420–588). A legendary figure, she has remained famous (and was even re-imagined in a Hollywood movie) because of an anonymous poet who sang her praise in the famous “Song of Mulan.”

One of the most indicative examples from the tradition of women warriors is the film *The Temple of the Red Lotus/Jiang hu qi xia/Tsan hong tsu* (Chui Chang Wang/Hung Hsu Tseng, 1965) in which all the female members of the family are trained in martial arts, including Lianzhu/Lian Chu (Chin Ping), the central female character in the film.



Still 1.1



Still 1.2

**Stills 1.1, 1.2** In *The Temple of the Red Lotus* (Chui Chang Wang/Hung Hsu Tseng, 1965), the mother reminds her daughter of the daily kung fu lesson with her father.

On Lianzhu's wedding night, her mother enters the newlywed's bedchamber and whispers something mysterious to her (Still 1.1). The young husband (Jimmy Wang Yu) is unpleasantly surprised when he learns that the mother has reminded the daughter of her daily kung fu lesson with her father (Still 1.2). In this film the grandmother (Lam Jing) is portrayed as the highest authority of the family. This is underscored with her dragonhead staff with a bell attached to it; in the film, her presence is established metonymically via the head of the staff and the sound of the bell (Still 1.3).



**Still 1.3** The grandmother's authority is metonymically marked through her dragonhead staff with a bell attached to it.

When the young couple wants to leave Jin Castle, a family rule is applied — they have to fight their way out. Since the men are not in the castle, Lianzhu and her husband Wu have to fight a series of women: Lianzhu's sister-in-law (Stills 1.4, 1.5); Lianzhu's aunt (Stills 1.6, 1.7); Lianzhu's mother (Stills 1.8, 1.9); Lianzhu's grandmother (Stills 1.10, 1.11).



Still 1.4



Still 1.5

**Stills 1.4, 1.5** A series of women try to prevent the young couple from leaving the family castle. One of them is Lianzhu's sister-in-law.



Still 1.6



Still 1.7

**Stills 1.6, 1.7** Lianzhu's aunt follows.



Still 1.8



Still 1.9

**Stills 1.8, 1.9** The next one is Lianzhu's mother.



Still 1.10



Still 1.11

**Stills 1.10, 1.11** Finally, the young couple has to confront the grandmother, the head of the family.

The young couple overcomes each barrier not by outshining the martial arts expertise of their opponents but through pleading and crying. The grandmother, however, is not as merciful, and since Lianzhu has greater knowledge of kung fu than her husband Wu, she engages in a duel with her grandmother while Wu waits on the other side of the river.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, the grandmother too spares their lives, and soon Lianzhu and Wu are on their way.

There is one female authority, however, who is on an even higher level; this is the Red Lady Sword (Ivy Ling Po), the best fighter of all. She acts as Lianzhu's and Wu's guardian angel, coming to their rescue on several occasions. Her superior position is indicated quite literally in the film; her point of vision and action is "from above" (Still 1.12); that is, she appears on the rooftops or hills (Stills 1.13, 1.14). The Red Lady watches over those who need help, and through her effective interventions she controls the outcome of events.



Still 1.12



Still 1.13



Still 1.14

**Stills 1.12–1.14** The Red Lady Sword is the highest authority, positioned literally above everyone.

Referring to the traditional examples of women warriors, we have to recall the famous female clan of the Yang family, with its several generations of women generals and, as in *The Temple of the Red Lotus*, with the grandmother as the grand matriarch at the top of the pyramid. According to the legend, the Yang women took part in battles in order to avenge their husbands and fathers, the male warriors of the family, or to serve the country in place of the male members, who had all lost their lives in battles (Still 1.15).

**Still 1.15** *Ladies of the Great Yang Family*, from the Beijing opera classic. The grandmother is in the front.



Drama historian A. C. Scott describes the Beijing opera matriarchs (*laodan*) as “halting in step but firm in spirit, forceful in expression and emotional in their grief, they are constantly concerned with the honor of family life and the unity of the clan” (1983: 125).

In the history of Hong Kong cinema, one of the most famous grandmothers is Chin Tsi Ang, the actual grandmother of the famous Hong Kong director, actor, and action choreographer Sammo Hung. Chin Tsi Ang is one of the first female martial arts heroines in a film (Stills 1.16, 1.17); she starred in the 1930 film *The Lady Sword Fighter of Jiangnan/Huangjiang nüxia* (Shang Guanwu).<sup>15</sup>



Still 1.16



Still 1.17

**Stills 1.16, 1.17** Chin Tsi Ang, one of the earliest women of action, in *The Lady Sword Fighter of Jiangnan* (Shang Guanwu, 1930).



The characters and stories that we can find in the traditions of Hong Kong cinema, an example of which is the legend of Wing Chun are bound up with cultural and social framings, options, and constraints. The emergence of powerful female characters is strongly connected to the stories that occurred “a long, long time ago in a universe far, far away,” but this is not the case of a generic clash between fairy tale and science fiction that infers a temporal disjunction and a past that is yet to come.<sup>16</sup> If we recall some of the most famous action heroines in the Hollywood films — the characters such as Princess Leia from the *Star Wars* series, Ellen Ripley from the *Alien* series, or Sarah Connor from the *Terminator* sequel, we will notice that the first and the most important difference between the Hong Kong and the Hollywood heroines is that the latter come from the future.<sup>17</sup> The reason for this is because no narrative justification could be found to situate them in the past (or the present).<sup>18</sup>

Discussions on the reinvention of femininity through the action genre as it is manifested especially in contemporary Hollywood have occasionally been geared toward the female warriors of Hong Kong cinema who appeared on the big screens many decades earlier than their Hollywood counterparts.<sup>19</sup> One of the reasons for this, as it has been pointed out, is that the diverse traditions of Hong Kong cinema permit different sorts of characters and not just the main protagonists, to be fighters. In Yuen Woo Ping’s film *Drunken Master*, for example, there need not be a special narrative justification for a middle-aged mother to engage in a martial arts combat with the young Wong Fei Hung who has threatened her daughter’s chastity. In terms of Hong Kong cinema, this is an act of common sense. We will see that in the narratives from Yuen Woo Ping’s universe the action is set in the past but the women seem to be emancipated in ways unimaginable in Western traditions. In these Hong Kong films, almost literally, history comes to figure as science fiction.<sup>20</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari state that it is through creative fabulation “that hidden universes are drawn out of the shadow by a beam of light”, but I would add that in the case of Hong Kong cinema it is in the first instance the cultural imaginary that conditions the emergence of alternative universes and fabulas (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 171). These fabulas put pressure on the traditional feminist theory, which relies on a psychoanalytic framework, for they bring forth unexpected connections, transformations, and lines of flight from the dominant structures of meaning.<sup>21</sup> The universe of *Wing Chun* is an example of such a fictional world, because here, as we will find, desire is not regulated through oedipal structures or the Law of the Father; the law at work in this filmic narrative is the “Law of *Wing Chun*.”<sup>22</sup> What makes *Wing Chun* so different from other martial arts films that feature female warriors is the fact that this film departs from the paternal line that generally governs the narrative structure of kung fu film. Here, the master/pupil relationship is established between two women, which is practically an exception even in Hong Kong cinema.<sup>23</sup>

At this point I would like to emphasize that, in a broader sense, the notion of an “imaginary solution” can be taken as analogous to Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of creative fabulation. More precisely, I am using this notion to underscore the capacity of narrative to propel symbolic communication and to point to the urgency of (re)discovering and (re)inventing myths, histories, and fabulas, for they have the power to shape and promote a certain vision of the world — or to put it in Deleuzian terms, to create and enable lines of flight from territoriality of semiotic regimes.<sup>24</sup>

## **Speed, Rest, Sensation, and Deterritorialization**

The reinvention of femininity and masculinity through the action genre involved cases such as men being turned into a spectacle as

well as women becoming both masculinized and *musculinized*.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to the Hollywood examples, the women warriors in Hong Kong action films cannot be described as *musculinized*, for their bodies are not muscled and man-like even when they have a masculine appearance. Even though Wing Chun's aunt tells her she has lost everything except the fists, Wing Chun doesn't really display the masculine features of the characters such as Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2* or Ripley in *Alien Resurrection*. Her "masculinization" can rather be attributed to the Chinese cultural imaginary.

I am referring in the first place to the "body of Tao," the Taoist priority given to the human body over social and cultural systems. We can trace this tradition in Beijing opera, which, had such a profound influence on the martial arts and swordplay genre of Hong Kong cinema, including the kung fu comedy. Traditionally, the "masculinization" of female fighters in Hong Kong cinema is not perceived as a problem, and it does not bring the character's femininity into question. Their masculinity does not presuppose the loss of femininity, for their character entails duality, two in one, as is typically the case in Beijing opera. This type of female character is called *wudan*, and it designates a cross-dressing woman of action who maintains her feminine appeal (A. C. Scott 1983).

Interestingly, until the very end of the film, Wing Chun is dressed as a man. On the one hand, the film draws on the tradition of female cross-dressing, but in this kung fu comedy cross-dressing also evokes contemporary play with gender, in particular the idea of gender as performance. This is especially evident in scenes where Wing Chun is confused with a man; this can be perceived as subversive confusion, and we could say that in such instances cross-dressing provokes, in Judith Butler's sense, gender trouble. For Butler, gender trouble has positive connotations, as does the parodying of gender through cross-dressing (Butler 1993). Even though cross-dressing is a cultural stereotype and Wing Chun

dressed in male attire can fool everyone, including her childhood sweetheart, we know that she is of the female sex. Therefore, Wing Chun's tender interaction with another woman (in a scene that I will discuss in Chapter 2) can inevitably be perceived in today's context as "queer." Her "queerness" points to the unstable structure of gender, and it has a deterritorializing effect. These strategies were pushed to phenomenal extremes in films directed or produced by Tsui Hark starring Brigitte Lin, for example, *Peking Opera Blues/Do ma daan* (Tsui Hark, 1986), *Swordsman II/Xiao ao jiang hu zhi Dong Fang Bu Bai* (Ching Siu Tong, 1992), and *The East Is Red/Dung Fong Bat Baai: Fung wan joi hei* (Ching Siu Tung, Raymond Lee, 1992). The reason, of course, that Lin acquired the status of a filmic gender-bending persona is the cultural heritage, or rather, the tradition of cross-dressing that was imported into film from Chinese opera.

Due to her "male appearance" throughout the film, Wing Chun needs to win back her female organism, to put it in Deleuze's and Guattari's terms. She needs to affirm herself both as a *woman* and *the best fighter*. Even though she ultimately appears looking like a woman (implying she is dressed and made up as a woman) this is not how her femaleness, her female authority is ultimately established. She reclaims her subjectivity by inventing her own fighting method, hence, by *fighting like a woman*. Winning back the female organism, that is, "becoming-woman" can also be understood in relation to Deleuze's and Guattari's idea of molar politics, or rather their assertion that "it is indispensable for women to conduct a molar politics with a view of winning back their own organism, their own history, their own subjectivity" (Deleuze and Guattari 1996: 275–6). This molar politics needs to be regarded within their view that all becomings are molecular including becoming-woman. According to Deleuze and Guattari, becoming-woman is more than just imitating or assuming the female form, at stake is the capacity to emit particles "that enter the relation of

movement and rest, or the zone of proximity, of a microfemininity [...]” (275–6). This coincides with Butler’s assertions on the artificiality of gender, implying that gender marks performance rather than identity.

Maxine Hong Kingston is one of the writers who stressed the importance of telling stories about becoming-woman, more specifically of becoming-woman warrior. In her fictional biography, Kingston invents a story of how she herself became a woman warrior, but first she tells stories of women warriors, recounted by her mother. She tells of Fa Mulan, the girl who took her father’s place in a battle, and of the woman who invented white crane boxing:

It was a woman who invented white crane boxing only two hundred years ago. She was already an expert pole fighter, daughter of a teacher trained at the Shaolin temple, where there lived an order of fighting monks. She was combing her hair one morning when a white crane alighted outside her window. She teased it with her pole, which it pushed aside with a soft brush of its wing. Amazed, she dashed outside and tried to knock the crane off its perch. It snapped her pole in two. Recognizing the presence of a great power, she asked the spirit of the white crane if it would teach her to fight. It answered with a cry that white crane boxers imitate today. Later the bird returned as an old man and he guided her boxing for many years. Thus she gave the world a new martial art. (Hong Kingston 1977: 19)

In this socio-cultural imaginary, a woman *can* give the world a martial art, which conversely implies that through a martial art she can confirm her female identity. Speaking of becoming in terms of this filmic narrative, I would suggest that Wing Chun’s microfemininity is most prominently expressed through her martial arts, through the actual relation of speed and slowness so brilliantly choreographed by Yuen Woo Ping and magnificently executed by

Michelle Yeoh. In this context, Yeoh's own "becoming" is equally important, for she has transformed from a beauty queen into an authentic female fighter whose bravery can match the heroic stunts of Jackie Chan. Yeoh wasn't trained in martial arts, but thanks to her perseverance and audacity, her action scenes became as authentic as those of the best male fighters. While the fabula of the legendary heroine Wing Chun conditions the sense of empowerment echoed in contemporary women of action, Yeoh's speed and slowness expressed through her ability to perform most of her own stunt work conditions conversely Wing Chun's microfemininity. Wing Chun's character-image depends on the narrative drive of an action cinema, but the fact that it is a female character that can execute the action through the dynamic of speed and slowness creates the unique sense relation that I have described as the sense of empowerment. By means of this sense relation, Wing Chun's character-image acquires the status of the empowerment-image.

Keeping in mind concerns about the narrative representation of gender and power, for the purpose of the analysis of *Wing Chun*, in Chapter 2 I will introduce the critical narratological approach; what is crucial is the interest in what is told, how it is told, and who takes part in the process of the telling.<sup>26</sup> The concrete filmic narrative will thus be observed as a network of semiotic events. The deterritorializing function of Yuen Woo Ping's art will in the first instance be traced precisely through an examination of the meaning making process. This type of narratological analysis will enable us to draw conclusions about the "creative" aspect of fabulations and indicate the ways in which they counter specific regimes of signs.

I will consider two levels, or rather the interaction between the formal elements/filmic devices (as these are related to the aspects of cinematic storytelling), and the elements of narrative (the fabula). The examination of the elements and aspects of

narrative in *Wing Chun* in Chapters 2 and 3 will demonstrate that the art of countering territorial regimes of signs pertains to both levels. The studying of these processes will enable us to establish the ways in which legal sensibility affects narrative representation. Keeping with the aims of this study, ascertaining *what can* will provide insight into the ways in which narrative, as interrelated with legal sensibility, affects the representation of gender and power.

Since the fabulas of Yuen's films feature diverse women of action another vital issue is how their character-images are constructed. As mentioned earlier, in Yuen's body of work we encounter middle-aged, old, or even fat women of action who can teach the men a lesson; all these women move so fast that their actions are at times practically imperceptible. Deleuze and Guattari assert that "knowing how to age does not mean remaining young, it means extracting from one's age the particles, the speed and slowness, the flows that constitute the youth of that age" (277). Evidently, some of these women of action have aged and yet in a quite literal way they embody the speed and slowness that constitute the youth of their (older) age. Their ability to oscillate between speed and slowness is what gives them the power to counter patriarchal fixations and to offer imaginary solutions to the crisis of femininity.

When discussing movement and rest, and speed and slowness, the inevitable pair of complementaries that we can add is yin and yang — the Taoist principle of equal exchange between activity and passivity. Yin and yang are the two fundamental phases of Tao's action; they serve to designate cold and hot, moon and sun, soft and hard, feminine and masculine, death and life. Their complementary opposition exists in everything, and their alternation is the first law of Chinese cosmology: when yin reaches its apex, it changes into yang, and vice versa (Schipper 1993). This reminds us that the dynamic of exchange of complementary

particles that generate the process of "becoming" can in this case also be seen as intertwined with the specificities of a concrete cultural imaginary.

The analysis of Yuen's filmic universe in Chapter 4 shows that the inadequate men in particular have repercussions on the construction of the image of femininity in his films. I map out the context from which Yuen's films emerged, and I also compare his career path with those of Sammo Hung and Lau Kar Leung. In relation to the representation of women the men are principally elaborated as negative characters; they prove to be weaker and less capable, including the fathers, who often have no authority. In *Wing Chun*, even the chief of the bandits, who is an excellent fighter, is defeated in the end. In contrast to the films of the late 1960s and early 1970s, where the inadequate (male) authority is implied mostly through the foreign invaders or through corrupt government officials, and where women warriors take part in battles alongside their male counterparts, in the kung fu comedies such as *Wing Chun*, the fathers or male authorities need not be foreign or corrupt to be mocked. The plethora of inadequate men who appear in Yuen's films most blatantly spells out the urgency of giving both patriarchy and paternity a face.<sup>27</sup> Again, Deleuze's and Guattari's concepts are relevant here: apart from the concept of "de/re-territorialization" and "becoming" as related to narrative representation, I will additionally introduce the concept of "the body without organs" (hereafter BwO in this volume).

Since there is no ready-made poetics that can incorporate all the gravity defying creatures of Hong Kong cinema, including the female characters in the films of Yuen Woo Ping, I will work with a *poietics*. Poietics entails sensitivity and openness to an ongoing process and a multiplicity of connections, rather than a fixed set of rules; it can be seen as a fluctuating and a fluid manual, the type of manual inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's ideas on art. The term is derived from the Aristotelian notion of *poiesis*, implying creation



or production. In accordance with these ideas, the analyses in this study will focus on the art of countering territorial regimes (the art of empowering female characters being the most prominent example) involving both the elements of the fabula and the aspects of the story. Bearing in mind the discussions of the first four chapters, in the concluding chapter I focus on the ways in which these fabulations that generate a sense of female empowerment put pressure on traditional film theory (above all, feminist film theory) and on the dominant theories of cinematic narration. The analyses ultimately help us establish the ways in which deterritorializations and becomings from this cinema of alternative fictional worlds become intertwined with dominant concerns regarding gender and sexuality, subjectivity, and trans/cultural memory.

# Notes

## Chapter 1 Yuen Woo Ping and the Art of Empowering Female Characters

- 1 Actually, he started his film career with small roles as a martial artist in the Wong Fei Hung classics of the 1960s. I return to this in Chapter 4.
- 2 See for example Roger Garcia's "The Doxology of Yuen Woo Ping" in *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film, The 4 th Hong Kong International Film Festival* (137–140). See also Stephen Teo's section "Kung fu and Modernization".
- 3 In *Butterfly Murders*, for example, Tsui Hark announces his interest in the supernatural potential of *wuxia pian* which can be bolstered up with special effects, a new trend in martial arts films that he would further explore in the projects of his Film Workshop in the 1990s. In *Ashes of Time* Wong Kar-wai interweaves the formal elements of "art cinema" with the martial arts genre, experimenting with the new ways of de/constructing space and time and accordingly, the characters' subjectivity.

- 4 Both Tsui and Tam are considered “New Wave” directors *par excellence*, whereas Wong is regarded as a representative of “New Hong Kong Cinema.” See Yau and Abbas.
- 5 In Chinese, an action choreographer is referred to as action director.
- 6 In spite of its sophisticated story world and special effects, what made *The Matrix* truly exceptional was the combination of Hollywood’s high-tech effects and Yuen’s martial arts choreography. Similarly, without Yuen’s imaginative action, Lee’s “high brow” *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* would not have had such a deep impact on the audiences (especially in the West). During the press screening of Lee’s film at the Cannes Film Festival the first scene that provoked the critics’ applause was the scene choreographed by Yuen where Michelle Yeoh is chasing Zhang Ziyi across a wall.
- 7 To be discussed further in Chapter 4.
- 8 I am referring to the festival and art house films, and also to European cinema.
- 9 As these are related to certain aspects of the Hong Kong film industry, particularly its mode of production. When it comes to cinematic art, style in principle refers to the systematic or inventive use of cinematic devices as these are related to the process of narration.
- 10 In the conclusion of his *Narration in the Fiction Film*, David Bordwell states that his theory being an account of narration, will not necessarily help define matters of narrative representation or narrative structure. In contrast, in the study of Wing Chun and the work of Yuen Woo Ping I am placing the emphasis precisely on narrative representation and narrative structure as it is related with the cultural imaginary.
- 11 See “Hong Kong Cinema and the Art of Countering Territorial Regimes,” in *Discernments: Deleuzian Aesthetics*.
- 12 Women were expected to follow the strict code of the three Obediences — at home obey your father, after marriage obey your husband, after your husband’s death obey your son.
- 13 Speaking of legendary Beijing Opera stereotypes where a female character is made to be both a pretty heroine and a military hero, the most famous one is certainly Hua Mulan (Fa Mulan in Cantonese pronunciation). In the *Legends of China* series presented five years ago at the Hong Kong Cultural Center there was a magnificent opera

*The Ladies of the Great Yang Family*, based on a heroic story of twelve women warriors of the Song Dynasty, all of whom are skilled in martial arts, and the head of the family is the grandmother. For the examples of women warriors in martial arts novels, see for example Jin Yong's (Louis Cha) *Deer and the Cauldron* and *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain*. See also *Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural and the Fantastic* edited by Karl Kao, in particular the story "Li Chi, the Serpent Slayer."

- 14 I will say more about this reversal of the Freudian division between the sexes; in Hong Kong cinema women are often portrayed as active whereas the men are passive
- 15 Different sources on the year of production — 1925 and 1930.
- 16 I am referring to Princess Leia from Star Wars. Generic clash (and a temporal paradox) comes from the reference to the past event that happened a long, long time ago juxtaposed with futuristic space vehicles.
- 17 We have to add that these fantasy narratives with exaggerated physical types are often derived from comic books, within imaginary locations.
- 18 George Lucas' statement regarding his decision to set the *Star Wars* story in outer space is indicative of this: "I researched kids' movies and how they work and how myths work; and I looked very carefully at the elements of films within that fairy tale genre which made them successful. [...] I found that myth always takes place over the hill, in some exotic far-off land. For the Greeks it was Ulysses going off into the unknown, for Victorian England it was India or North Africa or treasure islands. For America it was out West. There had to be strange savages and bizarre things in an exotic land. Now the last of that mythology died out in the mid-1950s, with the last of the men who knew the old West. The last place left 'over the hill' is space." Quoted in *Movie Brats* (133). It was out there in a galaxy far, far away, that scary monsters, androids and princesses could be in charge.
- 19 See Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*.
- 20 This assertion is inspired by Michel De Certeau's concept of history in his *The Writings of History*.

- 21 I am referring in the first place to Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Visual and Other Pleasures*.
- 22 In fact, when she defeats the chief bandit she earns the title "Mom"; and as the "mother" of thieves she orders them immediately to be good.
- 23 Jen and Jade Fox in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a failed master/pupil relationship.
- 24 Imaginary solution as a notion refers to Claude Levi Strauss only to the extent that it evokes myths and mythologizing.
- 25 See Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, and *Remasculinization of America*.
- 26 This presupposes a systematic analysis of the aspects and elements of narrative but it also urges critical awareness and theoretical reflection.
- 27 Speaking of the films of the late 1960s and early 1970s, I am referring in particular to the films of King Hu and Chang Che.

## Chapter 2 Structuring the Narrative: Becoming "Wing Chun"

- 1 Needless to say, the separation of the fabula from the story or the text is only theoretical because the functioning of the narrative involves the simultaneous interaction of all three layers.
- 2 The Buddhist nun is referred to as "Wu May" in the Mandarin version and "Ng Mui" in the Cantonese version.
- 3 I say more about Jackie Chan and kung fu comedy in Chapter 4.
- 4 See my "The Art of Countering Territorial Regimes: Women Warriors, Wicked Eunuchs and Soccer Players from Shaolin" in *Discernments: Deleuzian Aesthetics*.
- 5 I return to this in Chapter 4.
- 6 Fong Sai Yuk is a historical figure and a legendary kung fu fighter.
- 7 In my analysis of new Hollywood cinema, I have demonstrated that this tendency is connected with reinstituting patriarchal myths and generally improving the male subject. See my *Subjectivity in the New Hollywood Cinema: Fathers, Sons and Other Ghosts*.
- 8 See *Subjectivity in the New Hollywood Cinema*.
- 9 I have introduced this approach in *Subjectivity in the New Hollywood Cinema*.

- 10 Edward Branigan, for example, principally defines focalization on the basis of the characters' vision and opposes this to non-focalization, hence to non-vision.
- 11 See my *Subjectivity in the New Hollywood Cinema*.
- 12 Such as Fa Mulan, for example.
- 13 I am referring to Deleuze's *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2*. Movement-image as conceptualized by Deleuze inferred the films of classical Hollywood and it was opposed to the time-image that pertained to the art-house films or more precisely the post-Second World War European film movements such as Italian neorealism or the French New Wave.

### Chapter 3 The Power of Female Action

- 1 For the discussion on style see, for example, Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film*.
- 2 Also, many filmmakers came from Beijing opera academies, including Yuen Woo Ping.
- 3 As noted, the loss of Wing Chun's feminine self in Yuen's film is also a certain disruption of this character-type.
- 4 Simon Yuen died in 1980, during the shooting of Woo Ping's film *The Magnificent Butcher*.
- 5 According to Yen, Yuen would work an entire month on one fighting scene. This meant hardcore training from five thirty in the morning until late at night, fighting all day, throwing the same kick or punch over and over again. The aim was to achieve thirty continuous moves, which also implied that the action was filmed in one wide shot. There is no doubt that the performers were put under enormous pressure, and as Donnie Yen confesses, he felt abused mentally and physically and wanted to quit after the first month.
- 6 Besides fast-paced punching drills and aerial kicking techniques, *wu shu* players learn how to use a wide range of Chinese weapons, so Li has a broad array of techniques at his disposal.
- 7 Starred in *The Sword* by Patrick Tam, and also numerous martial arts films.
- 8 During the filming of this scene a double was supposedly used for Wing Chun, as Yeoh had been badly injured.

## Chapter 4 The Universe of Yuen Woo Ping

- 1 See *Shaolin Ten-Animal Form of Kwan Tak Hing*.
- 2 *Hung gar* is one of the fighting arts that originated from Hunan's legendary Shaolin Temple.
- 3 See Garcia's "The Doxology of Yuen Woo Ping."
- 4 Wong was the legendary martial arts instructor of the early twentieth-century Southern China who established the Wong School of martial arts, a style which has become indigenous to the Guangdong region and to the Hong Kong film industry.
- 5 Lau Kar Leung directed the legendary *36 Chambers of Shaolin*.
- 6 This was not the first revisionist Wong, however; the first young version appeared in Lia Chia-liang's *Challenge of the Masters*, 1976, in which the character is figured as a reverential mirror of his older self.
- 7 The main character in Yuen's film *The Magnificent Butcher* was also a historical figure, Wong Fei Hung's student, the butcher Lam Sai Wing. Lam's tales of his master's adventures inspired a series of stories published in a local newspaper. These stories led to the film *The Story of Wong Fei Hung* (1949) which inspired more than seventy Wong Fei Hung films (1949–1970), the longest-running series in cinema history.
- 8 Jackie Chan has expressed admiration for the kings of film comedy such as Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd and he has referred explicitly to scenes from their films.
- 9 And from stage adaptations of episodes from the story of Monkey King.
- 10 A possible exception is Demi Moore in the sequel of *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*, although she plays an attractive professional in the film, rather than the mother of practically an adult.
- 11 This need not be related to the absence of the father; Donnie Yen was taught martial arts by his mother and Sammo Hung by his grandmother.
- 12 He also stars in Yuen's *In the Line of Duty*.
- 13 He later expanded his repertoire to include techniques from various martial arts.

- 14 "During the ritual of ordination they were supposed to unite their registers, that is, their respective spiritual forces. These registers did comprise the names and symbols of yin and yang energies. This showed that each human being possessed both masculine and feminine elements [...] when the cosmic energies were all there, the adepts would undress and loosen their hair — in ancient China, both men and women had long hair worn in a knot. In the dioceses there were as many female as male masters. This balance was fundamental, even in the practice of perfection, inasmuch as the highest degree of initiation — that which qualified the adept for the rank of master — could only be obtained by a man and a woman together, as a couple. Celibacy was unthinkable." In *The Body of Tao* (150).
- 15 Speaking of the manifestation of yin and yang, it may be useful to recall the postmodern filmic version of these two interdependent poles, in Wong Kar-wai's *Ashes of Time*. In this film Wong introduces a character called Murong Yang, played by the cult gender-bending actress Brigitte Lin. It turns out that Yang has a "sister" named Yin who wants her "brother" Yang killed. Yang, in turn, wants the man who betrayed Yin killed. The hired killer/narrator is confused and realizes that Yin and Yang are actually two persons in one. He explains that behind these two identities someone is hidden with a wounded soul.
- 16 Moreover, with the death of the vicious murderer, his little son is orphaned; as the final confirmation of Cheng Do's maturation and potential formation of a new parent-child relation, the film ends with Cheng Do in the nursery visiting Killer Bird's son.
- 17 Although men played female roles in Beijing opera, in the early days of cinema, women played male roles because cinema was considered a low art.
- 18 In fact, it would be possible to construct Wong Fei Hung intertextually by mapping out the body of work of Yuen Woo Ping.
- 19 The fall of the Ming Dynasty in 1644, when the last Ming emperor committed suicide, led to the advent of non-Chinese rulers — the Manchus — and the establishment of the last dynasty in China, the Qing. In the last stage of the Qing Dynasty, China lost the Opium War, and in 1842 the British gained possession of the Island of Hong



- Kong. Thus the downfall of the Ming Dynasty can be taken as the onset of foreign invasions. See, for example, Mary M. Anderson, *Hidden Power: The Palace Eunuchs of Imperial China*, and Henry Tsai Shi-shan, *The Eunuchs of the Ming Dynasty*.
- 20 The first time a eunuch appeared as a character in a martial arts film was in King Hu's *Dragon Inn*.
  - 21 This is regularly the case in martial arts novels such as *The Deer and the Cauldron*.
  - 22 Deleuze and Guattari state that every time desire is uprooted from its field of immanence a "priest" is behind it, and that actually psychoanalysis with its Oedipal structures or the Law-of-the-Father can be understood as a figure of a priest (1983b).
  - 23 Deleuze and Guattari point to the "three body problem": 1) the full BwO on the plane of consistency, 2) empty BwOs on the debris of strata destroyed by a too violent destratification and 3) cancerous BwOs in a stratum that has begun to proliferate (1996: 163).
  - 24 Yang which goes up, can for instance be pictured as a young boy, a dragon, fire, the sky, clouds, the sun, a horse, smoke, or dawn, whereas yin, which descends, is often represented as a girl, a tiger, water, the earth, rain, a tortoise, the moon or an ox. In *The Body of Tao* (152).
  - 25 In love or in artistic creation, one may find it in calligraphy, in poetry, dance, or in all other forms of art. Once accomplished, this oneness is abandoned as a sacrifice and sublimated (159).
  - 26 "Chinese Taoist treatises — the formation of a circuit of intensities between female and male energy, with the woman playing the role of the innate and distinctive force (yin) stolen by or transmitted to the man in such a way that the transmitted force of the man (yang) in turn becomes innate, all the more innate: an augmentation of powers. The condition for this circulation and multiplication is that the man must not ejaculate. It is not a question of experiencing desire as an internal lack, nor of delaying pleasure in order to produce a kind of externalizable surplus value, but instead of constituting an intensive body without organs, Tao is a field of immanence in which desire lacks nothing and therefore cannot be linked to any external or transcendent criterion" (1996: 157).

- 27 Deleuze and Guattari state that there is a long procession of BwO's; apart from the schizo body, the drugged body and the masochist body, the BwO is also full of gaiety, ecstasy and dance. Each person should find his/her version of a body without organs (1996: 150).
- 28 According to Deleuze and Guattari, the BwO is opposed not to the organs but to that organization of the organs called the organism. "The BwO howls, they've made me an organism! They've wrongfully folded me! They've stolen my body!" Eunuchs can be understood as bodies without organs that have been turned into an organism, that have come to stand for an oppressive system.
- 29 Indicative are these passages from Luis Cha's *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain*.
- The lady went by the name of Sign Tian. Though she was young, she had already made a name in the Martial Brotherhood of the border region. As her beauty was matched by sharp intelligence and quick wit, the elder members of the Liaodong Martial Brotherhood had given her the title of Glistening Sable. The sable can make great speed on snowy ground, and is sharp and intelligent. (10)
- At length, Fox asked Orchid, not without surprise in his voice, "I understand that your father is the Invincible Under the Sky. Why did he not transmit to you his esoteric martial feats? I have heard that both genders in your house have equal entitlement to the Miao's Swordplay, as the esoteric techniques of your family are passed on to all male and female descendants alike. (229)
- 30 One of the girls uses her braided ponytail as a weapon, which is actually the crucial weapon of the main hero in the film. In Chang Cheh's *Slaughter in Xian*, the fight with the braided ponytail is used as part of a theater performance.
- 31 Michelle Yeoh played Soong Ai Ling.
- 32 Although a beauty in real life in this film she has an unflattering appearance.
- 33 In the films of the "Fifth Generation" filmmakers, woman is the embodiment of the Chinese condition. This was most pronounced in the films of Zhang Yimou where the leading female role was played by Gong Li. See Rey Chow's *Primitive Passions*.

- 34 Yuen Woo Ping's *In the Line of Duty* films feature women of action but in this study I focused exclusively on the films in which action is situated in the past.

## Chapter 5 Re-thinking Conceptual Tools, Re-framing Imaginary Solutions

- 1 See my *Fathers, Sons and Other Ghosts: Subjectivity in the New Hollywood Cinema*.
- 2 In *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*, Yvonne Tasker offers an account of the recent history of the action-heroine. Tasker describes the action cinema of the 1980s as a "muscular cinema." Taking into consideration films such as *Red Sonja*, *Long Kiss Goodnight*, *Strange Days*, *Speed*, *Twister*, *Terminator 2*, and *Blue Steel*, for example, Tasker adds that "musculinity" is not limited to the male body. While the film *Thelma and Louise* demonstrates the impossibility of escaping the laws of patriarchy, films such as *Blue Steel*, *Silence of the Lambs*, and *GI Jane* radicalize the extent to which women are constrained to appropriate both "musculinity" and "masculinity." See also Hilary Radner's "New Hollywood's New Women: Murder in Mind — Sarah and Margie," in Steve Neal and Murrey Smith (eds.), *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998) and Sharon Willis's "Combative Femininity: *Thelma and Louise* and *Terminator 2*," in *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997).
- 3 In terms of Lacan's methodological distinction between the psychic fields, a brief definition is as follows: while the imaginary designates the relation between the ego and its images, the symbolic produces the subject through language and realizes its closed order by the Law, that is, the Law of the Father. The third field Lacan introduces is the real. The real forms the residue of all articulation which escapes the mirror of the imaginary as well as the grids of the symbolic. It is neither symbolic nor imaginary, and it can be understood as a foreclosed element. It stands for that which is lacking in the symbolic order. See Laplanche and Pontalis.

- 4 In brief, Lévi-Strauss has suggested that the family is the agency by means of which an entire symbolic network can be elaborated. In *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss argues that the rules of kinship and marriage (incest taboo) create the social state by “reshaping biological relationships and natural sentiments, forcing them into structures implying them as well as others, and compelling them to rise above their original characteristics” (490). Lévi-Strauss ultimately emphasizes the importance of language in securing that all the members of a group inhabit the same psychic territory.
- 5 Butler is advocating the necessity of acknowledging the universal term, ideology, as a site which is open to contest, but she is also insisting on the possibility of subverting the universal term through repetition. According to Butler, what one takes as a political signifier is itself a settling of prior signifiers. A political signifier implicitly cites the prior instances of itself, drawing on the phantasmatic promise of those prior signifiers. Repetition can have a subversive function because it presupposes a return. Butler argues for a site of political contestation which can be understood as a space of analysis where “woman” as a prescriptive model for female subjectivity becomes open for re-negotiation. This presupposes that woman’s status as a “stain” of the symbolic needs to be considered in terms of a temporary linguistic unity.
- 6 This is the argument I elaborated in *Fathers, Sons and Other Ghosts*.
- 7 Kaja Silverman introduced the term “cultural screen” in her *The Threshold of the Visible World*.
- 8 I explore this in the chapter “What Can She Know, Where Can She Go: Extraterritoriality and the Symbolic Universe,” in *Subjectivity in the New Hollywood Cinema*.