Martial Arts Cinema and Hong Kong Modernity

Aesthetics, Representation, Circulation

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Introduction

Martial Arts Cinema and Hong Kong Modernity

Made at a time when confidence was dwindling in Hong Kong due to a battered economy and in the aftermath of the SARS epidemic outbreak,[1] *Kung Fu Hustle* (*Gongfu*, 2004), the highly acclaimed action comedy by Stephen Chow, can be seen as an attempt to revitalize the positive energy and tenacious resolve—what is commonly referred to as the "Hong Kong spirit" (*Xianggang jingshen*)—that has allegedly propelled the city's amazing socioeconomic growth. It brought about this revitalization, in part, through the character Sing (played by Chow himself), a petty crook who has had to endure years of adversity before transforming himself into a kung fu master and using his newly acquired skills to fight for justice and redemption. But no less important are the ways in which the film invoked various past traditions of Hong Kong martial arts cinema—the Cantonese magical swordplay movies of the 1960s and the classic films of Bruce Lee and Chang Cheh, for instance—and reimagined them in the context of today's special effects-packed Hollywood blockbusters. As a genre, the martial arts film is widely considered the most representative of Hong Kong cinema, but it can also be read as a metonymic symbol of the city's rapid and successful modernization during the postwar era. This is the case not just because the genre's rise to prominence during the 1960s and 1970s, in both domestic and international markets, coincided with the economic takeoff that has made Hong Kong one of the most affluent places in the world; more importantly, the ideological discourses underpinning many martial arts films, such as the spirit of competition and conquest, the ethics of hard work and discipline, and perseverance in the face of overwhelming difficulties, conjure up the very same ethos perceived to be an indispensable driving force for

1. The source of the economic downturn can be traced to the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998, when currency devaluation in Thailand and its ripple effects caused a serious slump in numerous regional economies. The heat of the financial crisis was also felt by Hong Kong, which saw a sharp rise in unemployment and a drastic drop in the Hong Kong stock market and in property values. The gloomy economic environment was further abetted by the dot.com meltdown of 2000, when the speculative bubble surrounding the Internet sector and related fields imploded and triggered the slowdown not only of the global economy but also of the recovery process in Hong Kong. The outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in the spring of 2003 added another bad news to the already growing pile of woes. A highly contagious and deadly form of pneumonia, the SARS epidemic killed some 300 people and dealt a major blow to the tourist industry (and to the still ailing local economy).

Hong Kong's remarkable growth. In this sense, the attempt of *Kung Fu Hustle* to hark back to earlier traditions of martial arts cinema and reinvent them with high-tech special effects reflects a twofold objective: to uphold the continued importance of the martial arts film in today's globalized screen culture dominated by Hollywood blockbusters; and to reaffirm, at a time of crisis, some of the core values that have shaped and defined the modern self-identity of Hong Kong people.

The cultural politics of *Kung Fu Hustle* is fascinating, but what really interests me here about the film is the broader theoretical issue it raises regarding the study of Hong Kong martial arts cinema: in highlighting the martial arts film and Hong Kong's postwar development as points of intersection and convergence, *Kung Fu Hustle* opens up a space for examining the genre within a larger historical context, one that pertains to sweeping changes associated with the rapidly modernizing society of the former British colony. And this is precisely what I endeavor to do in this book: to investigate the complex overlaps between martial arts cinema and Hong Kong modernity, focusing in particular on the years between the mid-1960s and the end of the 1970s. Long regarded as a crucial period of transformation in Hong Kong society and culture, the 1960s and 1970s not only witnessed a new, radically different trend of martial arts films, but were also a time when Hong Kong transformed itself from a small trading port to a modern industrial city with new forms of social life and experience. Far from being a mere historical coincidence, the two seemingly discrete trends turn out to be closely intertwined. Indeed, it is my contention that Hong Kong martial arts films of the period, marked by new aesthetic strategies and thematic concerns as well as by new transnational formations and practices, are best conceptualized as a mass cultural expression of Hong Kong's colonial, urban-industrial modernity—of its experiential qualities, its social and ideological contradictions, as well as its heightened circulation of capital, goods, people, information, and technologies.

This attempt to embed martial arts cinema within the social and cultural landscape of Hong Kong modernity might seem odd or even counterintuitive, given the critical commonplace that tends to reduce the genre to a mere vehicle for cultural nationalism. This sort of cultural nationalist reading, which stresses the long history of martial arts literature and culture in China and considers martial arts cinema as an integral part of this quintessential Chinese tradition, is a useful and even necessary, but ultimately inadequate, approach. Not only does it fail to address some of the most important features—be they institutional, aesthetic, or ideological—that have marked Hong Kong martial arts films, it also has little to say about the larger social and historical contexts from which the films emerged in particular periods of time. With a rapidly growing industrial economy and an increasingly cosmopolitan urban culture, Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s constituted an arena where different ideas, styles, experiences, and structures of feeling interacted and negotiated new forms and meanings of modern life. As one of the most popular genres in Hong Kong cinema

at the time, the martial arts film played an essential role in facilitating this process, reflecting and reinforcing the everyday experiences and discourses associated with a new modern social order.

In conceiving the martial arts film as a cultural counterpart and response to the burgeoning modernity of Hong Kong, I am following a recent trend of work that explores cinema—or at least specific film practices—within the wider context of a modernizing metropolitan society.[2] A major premise underlying this approach is the complex interconnection between cinema and modernity; or specifically, the conception of cinema as an emblem of the modern, a mass culture expression or incarnation of various processes of modernization and modernity (such as the Fordist method of mass production and mass consumption, the sensory intensification of everyday life, and drastic changes in social and gender relations). Among the most forceful proponent of this line of inquiry was Miriam Hansen, who, in a series of articles, developed the concept of vernacular modernism as a way to conceptualize the ability of cinema to provide a horizon for the contradictory experience of technological, urban-industrial modernity.[3] For Hansen, this horizon offered by cinema is a fundamentally public one, rendering perceptible the aporias of modern life not just for individual reflection but for mimetic identification by a mass audience. Furthermore, this reflexive relation of cinema with modernity, while capable of triggering cognitive processes in the viewers, is centrally grounded in sensory and affective experience due to film being a medium that gives primacy to the aesthetic organization of images and sounds. In conceiving such a vernacular mode of modernism, Hansen aimed to expand the scope of modernist aesthetics so that it is not just confined to certain elite movements in literature, music, painting, and other art forms, but includes a wider range of practices—even those within the realm of mass culture—that engage in dynamic interaction with the social, political, and economic processes of modern society. It comes hardly as a surprise, then, that Hansen first developed the concept of vernacular modernism in relation to classical Hollywood cinema, arguing that the transcultural appeal of this mass-produced, mass-consumed form of entertainment was grounded not so much in the presumed universality of its classical style as in

2. Some representative examples of this line of investigation include (in chronological order of publication): Tom Gunning, "The Whole Town's Gawking: Early Cinema and the Visual Experience of Modernity," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 7, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 189–201; Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, ed., *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996); Leo Charney, *Empty Moments: Cinema, Modernity, and Drift* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); and, as we will see shortly, the work of Miriam Hansen on vernacular modernism.

3. The articles include: Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999): 59–77; "Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism," *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 10–22; "Vernacular Modernism: Tracking Cinema on a Global Scale," in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Nataša Durovicová and Kathleen Newman (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 287–314.

its reflexive capacity to articulate and disseminate the particular historical experience associated with capitalist-industrial modernity. Later, in an attempt to extend the concept to film practices in other modernizing societies, Hansen switched her focus to Shanghai cinema of the 1920s and 1930s and took it as representing a parallel yet different brand of vernacular modernism, one evolving "in a complex relation to American—and other foreign—models while drawing on and transforming Chinese traditions in theater, literature, graphic and print culture, both modernist and popular."[4] Hansen's work has had a major impact on Chinese cinema scholarship; many scholars have followed her lead and approached, in more comprehensive and historically informed ways, Chinese cinema of the interwar period through the lens of vernacular modernism.[5] My book is similarly influenced by this conceptual framework, but it goes beyond the previous emphasis on the early twentieth century period and considers Hong Kong martial arts films of the late 1960s and 1970s as resuscitating the vernacular-modernist tradition in Chinese-language cinema—albeit in a different context and on a more global scale.

In all, with its aim to bring martial arts cinema and Hong Kong modernity into meaningful intersection, this book requires us to look at the genre with new eyes, from a perspective that does not simply regard it as a cult object or, worse still, discount it as a form of frivolous entertainment—in other words, a genre unworthy of serious attention. Nor is it enough to follow complacently the critical orthodoxy that has hitherto shaped our understanding of the genre. Rather, what is needed is a systematic and historically informed approach, one that would take the ostensibly "shallow" genre to be a complex body of work that sheds light on important aesthetic, social, and cultural issues. But before I further sketch out such an approach, a brief look at the history of Hong Kong/Chinese-language martial arts cinema is in order.

The Genealogy of a Genre

The first Chinese-language martial arts films can be traced to Shanghai cinema of the late 1920s. By today's standards, these films could look rather tame: they lack the kind of dazzling action choreography as we know it today, and tend to give primacy to special effects that seem crude and rudimentary to modern eyes. All this, however, should not blind us to the mass sensation created by the films, which comprised almost 60 percent of the total Chinese film production in the period. For some critics, the enormous popularity of the genre is best explained by its ability to evoke a symbolic "Chineseness" and to articulate a sense of national pride and alternative

4. Hansen, "Fallen Women," 13.
5. Examples of this trend include Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), and Weihong Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915–1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

justice, which was avidly exploited by the film industry to satisfy the nationalist sentiments of the time.[6] Recent research, however, has complicated this view by switching the focus to the genre's historical overlap with a nascent Chinese modernity. According to this position, the early martial arts films, with their inventive use of film technology, their emphasis on kinesthetic experience and the transformative power of the body, and their propensity to destabilize the boundaries between magic and science, archaic fantasy and modern desire, were closely linked to the massive transformation in everyday life resulting from the burgeoning modernity of Shanghai. Besides, the importance given to the female warrior, a figure often put at the center of dramatic tension and visual spectacle in the films, may also be taken as reflecting the growing social power of women in modern life.[7]

Their popularity among ordinary viewers notwithstanding, the early Shanghai martial arts films came under increasing attack by both government officials and cultural elites for their allegedly superstitious and anarchistic tendencies. The genre was eventually banned in 1932, and it was not until the production base of Chinese commercial filmmaking was relocated from Shanghai to Hong Kong in the late 1940s that martial arts cinema was given a new lease on life. In the beginning, most Hong Kong martial arts movies were made by émigré filmmakers from the mainland and thus retained many of the characteristics—in particular, the magical and supernatural elements—of their Shanghai predecessors. This trend, however, quickly waned and was replaced by martial arts films with more indigenous materials and styles. A good case in point is the series of movies based on the adventures of real-life Cantonese folk hero Wong Fei-hung: first appearing in 1949 and totaling almost one hundred films made in a period of over twenty years, this long-running series launched a new trend of martial arts film emphasizing the use of "real kung fu" (*zhen gongfu*). Moreover, like many martial arts films of the time, it drew on literary sources—in this case, the Guangdong School martial arts fiction.[8] Produced and circulated primarily within the cultural and linguistic sphere of Guangdong (including Hong Kong and the Cantonese-speaking segments of the Chinese diaspora), Guangdong School fiction is known first and foremost for its local flavor, especially its use of Cantonese

6. For a good example of this line of argument, see Jubin Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema before 1949* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), chapter 3.
7. See Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*, especially chapter 7, and Weihong Bao, "From Pearl White to White Rose Woo: Tracing the Vernacular Body of *Nüxia* in Chinese Silent Cinema, 1927–1931," *Camera Obscura* 20, no. 3 (2005): 193–231.
8. According to Hu Peng, who directed the first ever Wong Fei-hung film in 1949 (and would go on to make dozens of them), the main inspiration of the series came from a radio play based on the novel *Huang Feihong biezhuan* [The unofficial history of Wong Fei-hung], which was first serialized in the newspaper *Gongshang ribao* on October 28, 1947. The author of the novel, Zhu Yuzhai, was himself a skilled martial artist and a student of Lam Sai-wing, who in turn was a disciple of the real-life Wong Fei-hung. See Hu Peng, *Wo yu Huang Feihong*: *wushi nian dianying daoyan shengya huiyilu* [Wong Fei-hung and I: Memoirs of a film director's fifty-year career] (Hong Kong: San He, 1995), 6–7.

slang and its celebration of local heroes and traditions—a tendency that can also be observed in the Wong Fei-hung films.[9]

Another major literary source for the martial arts films of the period was the so-called "new school martial arts fiction" (*xinpai wuxia xiaoshuo*). First leaping into prominence with the success of Liang Yusheng's *Dragon and Tiger Vie in the Capital* (*Longhu dou jinghua*, 1954) and Jin Yong's *Books and Swords, Gratitude and Revenge* (*Shujian enchou lu*, 1956), this trend clearly showed the influence of its "old school" counterpart in Republican Shanghai. Yet it also marked a major departure not only in terms of content and style, but also in the production and circulation of martial arts fiction away from the mainland to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Chinese communities overseas.[10] It did not take long for Hong Kong film producers to realize the commercial potential of this increasingly popular trend. Film adaptations of new school novels by Jin Yong, Liang Yusheng, and Zhuge Qingyun started to come out in the late 1950s (and would continue into the present). A number of new school authors also moved on to work in the film industry itself. A good case in point is Ni Kuang, a prolific writer who authored more than 300 scripts and was involved in such pivotal martial arts films as Chang Cheh's *One-Armed Swordsman* (*Dubei dao*, 1967) and *Blood Brothers* (*Ci Ma*, 1973).

With growing demand from both local and regional markets, the early 1960s saw a surge in the production of Hong Kong martial arts films. The once dominant Wong Fei-hung series, however, had declined in popularity. Instead, the most visible trend in the period was the revival of magical swordplay films, albeit ones with higher production values and more sophisticated special effects. It is worth pointing out here that most martial arts films made before the mid-1960s were Cantonese-language productions. Mandarin films, which had become an integral part of Hong Kong cinema since the influx of Shanghai film talent into the local industry in the immediate postwar period, were targeted primarily at the more educated and more refined middle-class audiences who saw themselves as above the "frivolous" entertainment of martial arts films. This situation, however, started to change when the legendary Shaw Brothers studio launched in 1965 a campaign for "new school" (*xinpai*) martial arts films with the production of eight swordplay movies, including Xu Zenghong's *Temple of the Red Lotus* (*Jianghu qixia*, 1965), Chang Cheh's *Tiger*

9. For an overview of the Guangdong School martial arts fiction, see John Christopher Hamm, *Paper Swordsmen*: *Jin Yong and the Modern Chinese Martial Arts Novel* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 32–48. On the Wong Fei-hung film series, see the essays in *Mastering Virtue: The Cinematic Legend of a Martial Artist*, ed. Po Fung and Lau Yam (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2012). See also Po Fung, "A Hero Reinvented: Wong Fei-hung's Cinema Odyssey," in *The Hong Kong–Guangdong Film Connection*, ed. Wong Ain-ling (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2005), 248–60, and Hector Rodriguez, "Hong Kong Popular Culture as an Interpretive Arena: The Huang Feihong Film Series," *Screen* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 1–24.
10. See Hamm, *Paper Swordsmen*, 1–11; 49–78.

Boy (*Huxia jianchou*, 1966), and King Hu's *Come Drink with Me* (*Da zuixia*, 1966).[11] Eschewing the stylized theatrical fights and supernatural special effects that pervaded and distinguished their Cantonese counterparts of the time, these Mandarin martial arts movies took their cues from Hollywood and Japanese cinema and embraced, in the name of "realism," a highly sensational style emphasizing gory violence and other forms of sensory stimulation. In the beginning, many of these new style martial arts films featured strong, active female characters as protagonists, but this female-centric trend was soon challenged with the rise of a new male heroic prototype marked by a strong sense of youthful energy and defiance and by a propensity for violent action. Conceived under the rubric of *yanggang* ("staunch masculinity") and identified most closely with the films of Chang Cheh, this new masculine paradigm proved enormously popular among the young generation and increasingly—though not completely—put the woman warrior figure into the shadow.

With the transition to the hard-hitting kung fu subgenre at the beginning of the 1970s, these trends towards sensory intensification and representations of hyper-masculinity became even more apparent. In contrast to the swordplay movie, which is for the most part set in a distant or mythical past evoking ancient tradition and history, the kung fu film tends to feature a more modern setting, focusing in particular on the late Qing and early Republican periods—a pivotal era in which China moved away from dynastic rule to the struggle for the formation of a modern nation. On the other hand, the kung fu subgenre also distinguishes itself with its emphasis on "real," authentic hand-to-hand combat over supernatural swordplay or special effects, thereby showing a characteristically modern outlook rooted in realism and rationalism. The importance accorded to "real kung fu," with its associations with corporeal effort and training, also reflects a focus on physical labor as well as bodily discipline and empowerment closely linked to Hong Kong's labor-intensive industrialization in the period.

The popularity of martial arts films reached a peak in Hong Kong in the early 1970s, when they comprised nearly 70 percent of the film industry's total output and dominated both the local as well as regional markets. It was around this time that a new company, Golden Harvest, came into being and quickly established itself as a major force in Hong Kong cinema.[12] Adopting a more flexible approach than Shaw

11. This campaign for a renewed action cinema was first launched in a special section in the October 1965 issue of *Southern Screen* (*Nanguo dianying*), the official publication of the Shaw organization. See "Shaw Launches 'Action Era,'" *Southern Screen* 92 (October 1965): 30–43. See also Law Kar, "The Origin and Development of Shaws' Color Wuxia Century," in *The Shaw Screen: A Preliminary Study*, ed. Wong Ain-ling (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2003), 129–43.

12. Golden Harvest was founded in 1970 by Raymond Chow, former production chief at Shaw Brothers, and quickly became one of the most prominent film studios in Hong Kong. It would continue to occupy a leading position in Hong Kong cinema until the early 1990s. For an overview of the company, see *Golden Harvest: Leading Change in Changing Times*, ed. Po Fung (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2013).

Brothers, Golden Harvest contracted with independent filmmakers and offered them greater creative freedom and pay; as a result, it was able to attract a group of gifted stars and directors, including Bruce Lee. Thanks to Lee and the kung fu craze associated with him, Hong Kong martial arts films started to attract a global audience, not only in Europe and the United States but also in numerous third-world countries all over the world.[13] This international breakthrough, however, turned out to be a fleeting phenomenon: with Lee's premature death in the summer of 1973 and the problem of overproduction in general, the worldwide interest in the genre started to fade. A period of stagnation followed, but the genre was soon revitalized and taken in new directions, most notably the Shaolin kung fu films of Chang Cheh and Lau Kar-leung; Chor Yuen's series of dark, evocative swordplay films based on the novels of Gu Long; and kung fu comedies featuring, among others, a young Jackie Chan. Martial arts films continued to flourish in the 1980s, albeit in distinctly modernized forms: some, like Chan and Sammo Hung, recast the period kung fu film into the action-adventure genre with a modern urban setting, whereas John Woo, a protégé of Chang Cheh, reinvented the *yanggang* aesthetic in his acclaimed gangster epics such as *A Better Tomorrow* (*Yingxiong bense*, 1986) and *The Killer* (*Diexie Shuangxiong*, 1989). The Wong Fei-hung saga was revived in the *Once Upon a Time in China* (*Huang Feihong*) series starring Jet Li, while a new cycle of swordplay movies, ones that made innovative use of both indigenous and Hollywood-style special effects, took the market by storm in the early 1990s.

Over the following decade, thanks in part to home video, cable TV, DVD, the internet, and other new distribution technologies, Hong Kong martial arts and action films succeeded in (re)gaining a wide international following and seizing the attention of producers and filmmakers all around the world. Even Hollywood started, in the early 1990s, making concerted efforts to appropriate the unique action aesthetics of Hong Kong cinema, bringing in many of the industry's brightest talent (among them John Woo, Jackie Chan, Michelle Yeoh, Jet Li, and Yuen Woo-ping). By the turn of the new century, the "Hong Kong style" had left a clear mark in the Hollywood mainstream, as attested to by films such as John Woo's *Face/Off* (1997), the Wachowskis'

13. On the global circulation and influence of 1970s Hong Kong martial arts cinema, see David Desser, "The Kung Fu Craze: Hong Kong Cinema's First American Reception," in *The Cinema of Hong Kong*: *History, Arts, Identity*, ed. Poshek Fu and David Desser (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 19–43; Amy Abugo Ongiri, "Bruce Lee in the Ghetto Connection: Kung Fu Theater and African American Reinventing Culture at the Margins," in *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*, ed. Shilpa Davé, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha G. Oren (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 249–61; May Joseph, "Kung Fu Cinema and Frugality," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 433–50; S. V. Srinivas, "Hong Kong Action Film in the Indian B Circuit," *Inter-Asian Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (April 2003): 40–62; and Kim Soyoung, "Genre as Contact Zone: Hong Kong Action and Korean Hwalkuk," in *Hong Kong Connections*: *Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*, ed. Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li, and Stephen Ching-kiu Chan (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 97–110.

The Matrix (1999), and Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* series (2003–2004). Meanwhile, the unprecedented success of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon* (*Wohu canglong*, 2000) further paved the way for a string of global Chinese-language martial arts films, most notably Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (*Yingxiong*, 2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (*Shimian maifu*, 2004), *Kung Fu Hustle*, and Chen Kaige's *The Promise* (*Wuji*, 2005). Taken together, these developments bear out the growing transnational appeal and impact of Hong Kong/Chinese-language martial arts and action cinema. What used to be a local film genre has become an essential part of global mass culture, circulating across borders and generating in the process new networks, markets, audiences, as well as forms of consumption.

Between Modern and Traditional

The historical sketch above is by no means exhaustive, but it should suffice to give a sense of the scope and complexity of Hong Kong martial arts cinema, which has taken on very different forms and meanings in different periods of time. This book makes no attempt to study the genre in a comprehensive way. My focus is primarily on the Mandarin martial arts films, of both swordplay and kung fu varieties, that dominated Hong Kong cinema during the late 1960s and much of the 1970s. The reasons for emphasizing this particular group of films are twofold: on the one hand, owing in part to lack of access, many of these films have been ignored until relatively recently,[14] and it is an imbalance that I intend to rectify. More importantly, it is in these films that the underlying argument of the book, that is, the close interconnections between martial arts cinema and the sensory and social-ideological formations of Hong Kong modernity, can be illustrated most clearly.

Granted, this attempt to bring martial arts cinema and Hong Kong modernity into meaningful intersections could strike one as odd and surprising, since the martial arts film, with its deep roots in traditional Chinese literature and culture, is commonly taken as a genre more identified with native tradition than with modern (Western) ideas and styles. In the history of Chinese cinema, as Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar argue, it is realism, often mixed with romantic and/or melodramatic elements, that "was approved as the mode of modernity" and "constructed as the aesthetic counterpart of the quest to make China a modern nation-state." The martial arts film, by contrast, is "culturally nationalist"; it is notable for its "dynamic extension of traditional popular cultural forms" and "hails viewers first and foremost as Chinese people seeing a Chinese spectacle."[15] At first sight, a similar argument can also be

14. For years, Shaws had refused outside access to its films, and it was not until 2002 that the studio finally sold its vast film library to Celestial Pictures, which went on to restore and distribute many of the films on DVD, VCD, and cable television.
15. Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, *China on Screen*: *Cinema and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 77; 48.

made for Hong Kong martial arts cinema. For example, when Shaws launched its campaign for new martial arts films in the mid-1960s, it was in many ways merely extending a strategy that had been successfully exploited, namely an attempt to cultivate in its films a sense of nostalgia and cultural nationalism. This explains why the studio's output in the period comprised mainly historical epics and *huangmei diao* musicals, both of which pivoted on the idea of an essentialized Chineseness based on the use of traditional Chinese subjects, imagery, and aesthetic forms. Here is, for instance, what Poshek Fu says about the *huangmei diao* musical:

> The Chinese characters [in the *huangmei diao* films] are all frozen in a temporal frame that is as ahistorical as it is decontextualized in space; and the good and the virtuous (inadvertently, also the most beautiful) among them are projected as the embodiment of Chinese traditions encapsulated in a series of Confucianist clichés, namely chastity, loyalty, purity, integrity, courage, industry, and filial piety. This idealization of an imagined tradition that was China, accentuated by a traditionalist aesthetics of popular songs and folk opera music . . . had enormous appeal among the Chinese diaspora, many of whom were recently exiled from the Mainland due to the change of political power, and were thus painfully nostalgic for the homeland.[16]

Without doubt, much of what Fu says about the *huangmei diao* musical applies equally well to martial arts films, particularly those of the swordplay variety. Despite their generic period settings that relate only tangentially to Chinese (political) history, swordplay films do conjure up a strong sense of "Chineseness" through their inclusion and appropriation of unique Chinese cultural ideas (such as the chivalric code of behavior embodied by the concept *xia*) and practices (notably martial arts fiction and Beijing opera). Even the kung fu film, which evinces a more distinctly modern sensibility and is relatively free from nostalgic associations, is still widely perceived as evoking a set of Chinese "essences" that inspire love and yearning for the homeland. This can clearly be seen in the way Chinese kung fu has been valorized as a form of national heritage commonly known as *guoshu* (national arts). As David Desser points out in connection with the nationalist appeal of the kung fu subgenre, it is martial arts as a specifically Chinese knowledge, and not physical strength or virility per se, that gives unsurpassed aura to the male heroic body and makes it a privileged source of Chinese pride.[17]

Yet nostalgia, as a yearning for the past, is not necessarily opposed to the experience of modernity but rather has a complex relationship with it. In other words, the

16. Poshek Fu, "Going Global: A Cultural History of the Shaw Brothers Studio, 1960–1970," in *Border Crossings in Hong Kong Cinema*, ed. Law Kar (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 2000), 47

17. David Desser, "Fists of Legend: Constructing Chinese Identity in the Hong Kong Cinema," in *Chinese-Language Film*: *Historiography*, *Poetics*, *Politics*, ed. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 288–91.

meanings embedded in the cultural nationalist discourse of the martial arts film are by no means fixed or static; rather, they need to be specifically coordinated with a larger understanding of the industrial practices and sociohistorical circumstances of the time. For instance, the martial arts film craze in late 1920s and early 1930s Shanghai entailed not simply a nostalgic urge to connect with native traditions. The cultural nationalist appeal of the genre was clear and unmistakable, but it was also to a large extent harnessed as a means of expanding the audience base in order to bolster a nascent Chinese film industry, which was in turn conceived as part of a larger project of building a modern Chinese nation.[18] On the other hand, with China becoming a communist state after 1949 and isolated from the broader world, both Taiwan and Hong Kong were free to articulate their own versions of "authentic" Chineseness through nostalgic reconstructions of traditional Chinese culture in popular media. Unlike Taiwan, however, where the discourse of cultural nationalism was often used as a legitimizing mechanism for the ruling Guomindang government, the cultural nationalist mode in Hong Kong films (and other forms of mass culture) was not so much politically motivated as driven by commercial considerations. Given the experience of exile and diaspora shared by Chinese migrants, including those who fled to Hong Kong in the postwar era, it comes hardly as a surprise that an abstract, depoliticized "cultural China" would appeal to them, who saw in it an opportunity to affirm their Chineseness by identifying with an imaginary cultural ideal without committing themselves to a particular state or ideology.[19]

The seeming traditionalism of Shaws' productions, then, is deceptive and needs to be taken with caution, since it obscures in many ways the fundamentally modern quality of the films as mass commodities. In its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, Shaw Brothers was a veritable modern industrial organization with a massive, fully modernized studio and hundreds of employees under long-term contract. Like its American counterparts, the company adopted an assembly-line model of production designed to maximize efficiency and output, and relied on a system of vertical integration to maintain control of the market. And similar to other large Hong Kong film studios, it boasted a vibrant overseas market network in Taiwan as well as in Southeast Asia, thus reflecting and reinforcing the city's widely recognized strengths in regional capitalism. By the late 1960s, Shaw Brothers had grown into one of the most established film companies in the region and represented for many people a symbol of dynamism and growth. "To most Asian filmmakers," as Fu points out, "the Movietown [the vast studio complex built by the Shaw organization in the 1960s] . . .

18. See Hu, *Projecting a Nation*, chapter 3; and Stephen Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The* Wuxia *Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 9.

19. For Stephen Teo, this tendency to assert one's Chineseness by identifying with an essentialized cultural ideal constitutes an example of what he calls "abstract nationalism." See Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), 112–13.

represented *modern*, it *was* the Hollywood in the East: its efficient management, its streamlined production procedures, its sumptuous studio facilities, and its superabundance of glamorous, fashionable stars."[20] Similarly, in the words of Korean filmmaker Chung Chang-wha, who had a long and successful career in Hong Kong during the late 1960s and the 1970s, Shaws was "one of the most prosperous studios in Asia at the time," a place where "any talented director [would want] to work."[21]

Not only were Shaws' films mass commodities aimed at maximum profit, but they are also better seen, in aesthetic terms, as a combination of modern and traditional elements. On one level, many of the Shaw films could seem rather old-fashioned and conservative, especially when compared to the productions from Motion Pictures and General Investment Co. Ltd. (MP & GI), the main competitor of Shaws in the 1960s. Under the leadership of Loke Wan Tho, with his bold vision of modernizing the everyday culture of Chinese societies through cinema, MP & GI concentrated on making self-consciously hip and modern films that utilized contemporary settings and themes as well as a slick, dynamic style bearing clear Hollywood influence.[22] At the outset, Shaws could not compete with its rival in these terms; its strengths, as noted earlier, resided in period pictures, in such genres as historical epics, *huangmei diao* musicals, and martial arts films—a trend that can be traced back to the studio's Shanghai years in the 1920s and 1930s.[23] Yet the surface traditionalism of these films is misleading. It is worth noting that Shaws, despite its films' adherence to traditional subjects and genres as well as their propensity for nostalgic sentiments, had since the early 1960s made a concerted attempt to modernize its products by recruiting Japanese professionals, from cinematographer Nishimoto Tadashi and special effects designer Tsuburaya Eiji to a group of directors including Inoue Umetsugu, Nakahira Ko, and Matsuo Akinori. Taking advantage of their skills and expertise, the studio successfully appropriated a range of new technologies and techniques (e.g., color and widescreen cinematography, hand-held camera, and aspects of set construction).[24] All this had a crucial impact on its films: for instance, while the *huangmei diao* musical utilizes folkloric narratives and draws on traditional folk music, it is also, as one critic argues,

20. Fu, "Going Global," 50.
21. John Kreng and Hyung-Sook Lee, "Remembering the Forgotten Name of an Asian Action Master: Interview with Director Chung Chang-Wha," *Spectator* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 90.
22. For an overview of MP & GI and what may be called its "modernity program," see Poshek Fu, "Hong Kong and Singapore: A History of Cathay Cinema," in *The Cathay Story*, ed. Wong Ain-lin (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2002), 60–75.
23. For more discussion on the early years of Shaws' filmmaking activities, see Zhou Chengren, "Shanghai's Unique Film Productions and Hong Kong's Early Cinema," in *The Shaw Screen: A Preliminary Study*, ed. Wong Ain-lin (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2003), 19–35.
24. On this strategy of recruiting Japanese film workers, see Yau Shuk-ting Kinnia, *Japanese and Hong Kong Film Industries: Understanding the Origins of East Asian Film Networks* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 86–103.

a "highly cinematic genre" that makes use of "modern cinematic techniques and modes of delivery."[25] The paradox here can hardly be missed: while there is no question that Shaws created through its films a fantasy representation of a timeless, eternal China, it did so almost entirely in the form of a modern technologized spectacle.

Similarly, despite the conventional perception of their being tradition-bound and tied to cultural beliefs and practices from premodern China, it is important not to overlook the modern dimensions of Shaws' martial arts films—and those from other companies, notably Golden Harvest—that proliferated in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Emerging and thriving in a period when Hong Kong cinema, like the city as a whole, was embarking on a rapid course of modernization, these commercial and profit-driven films, while banal and formulaic in many respects, turn out to be more intriguing than is usually thought. On the one hand, given the hitherto conservative local film culture, the films represented a major aesthetic breakthrough, borrowing many of their stylistic and technological innovations from Japanese and Hollywood cinema and laying the foundation for the films of the 1980s and beyond. Hand-held camera, slow- and fast-motion, elaborate action choreography, rapid (and occasionally elliptical) editing, creative wirework and other special effects—all this constituted part of a new dynamic style which, at once popular and experimental, would help propel Hong Kong martial arts (and action) cinema into a form of global mass entertainment.

Yet making a case for the aesthetic values of these 1960s and 1970s martial arts films does not entail a narrowly textual approach. What is more important is to consider the complex intertwining of the films and their social and historical contexts, especially the ways in which the films, their style as well as their content, can be said to be rooted in the dynamics of Hong Kong's postwar modernization process. This, I should note, is not to simply argue that the films, with their emphasis on movement and sensational action, mirrored the energy and vitality of a society undergoing rapid growth. Nor is it adequate to say that the explicit display of strong, athletic bodies in the films alluded to a growing confidence and assertiveness among Hong Kong people. These interpretations are not necessarily wrong, but they are far too generalized to be of much analytical value. To better understand martial arts films of the period as a cultural expression of Hong Kong modernity, it is necessary to first consider the array of socioeconomic and cultural changes brought about by Hong Kong's postwar transformation into a modern urban-industrial society, and then explain how these changes helped develop a new trend of martial arts films.

25. Edwin W. Chen, "Musical China, Classical Impressions: A Preliminary Study of Shaws' *Huangmei Diao* Film," in *The Shaw Screen*, 51.

Mapping Hong Kong Modernity

Modernity is a notoriously difficult concept to define, and any attempt to make sense of it is necessarily partial and context-specific. On the broadest level, the onset of modernity and a new modern world can be traced to seventeenth-century Europe, where the rise of Enlightenment thought—a heightened emphasis on liberty, equality, and the scientific method, all founded upon the alleged centrality of human reason—challenged and ultimately swept aside medieval worldviews and traditional hierarchical political and social orders (as epitomized by absolute monarchy, the privileges of the nobility, and the political power and authority of the Catholic Church). In particular, the emergence of modern science during this period, triggered by a new methodology for uncovering truth about the natural world, brought about a host of scientific and technological breakthroughs, many of which would be harnessed in practical applications—in manufacturing, for instance, where the use of steam engines and other innovations led to higher productivity and paved the way for the Industrial Revolution of the late 1700s and 1800s. With new technologies emerging in the second half of the 1800s, especially large-scale iron and steel production and the use of electric power, the Industrial Revolution entered a new phase; not only did production output increase significantly (and would be further boosted by Fordist-Taylorist methods of mass production), but accelerated industrial development also gave rise to an array of attendant social phenomena—from urbanization and mass consumerism to the proliferation of mass media and culture and the expansion of women's social visibility—that defined and continue to define modern society.

In this book, I take modernity to be an ensemble of interrelated historical processes—economic, social, cultural-ideological, and experiential—that brought drastically new ideas, practices, and subjectivities to Europe, North America, and eventually all around the world. This, however, does not suggest that modernity is a simple rupture with tradition, nor does it entail a form of Anglo-Eurocentrism. Rather, modernity involves what Harry Harootunian calls a "doubling" that inscribes in everyday life the differences between the exigencies of capitalism and other modern forces on the one hand and, on the other hand, the lingering traces of the (premodern) past, as manifested in the persistence of traditional values, patterns of culture, and modes of life.[26] Due to the different inflections in the encounter of the new and the vestiges of another era that never entirely go away, the paths taken by different societies towards and through modernity are necessarily not the same. In Hong Kong's case, the rapid course of industrialization (and the various socioeconomic and cultural transformations associated with it) in the 1960s and 1970s, imbricated with the forces of past traditions and the experience of colonization and diaspora, gave rise

26. Harry Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 111.

to a complex social constellation that centrally shaped the colonial, urban-industrial modernity of the city.

There is widespread consensus among researchers that the 1960s and 1970s constituted a major transitional era in Hong Kong society and culture.[27] Soon after Hong Kong became a colony under Britain, it was made into a transshipment port for commodities from various parts of China, Southeast Asia, and the West. While research has revealed that the manufacturing industry started to develop in Hong Kong as early as in the nineteenth century, and that Chinese entrepreneurs had set up industries on a relatively sizable scale there by the 1930s,[28] full-fledged industrialization did not take place until the 1950s. Two factors converged to make this process possible (and necessary). First, the Korean War (1950–1953) and the ensuing embargo imposed on China led to a sharp fall in Hong Kong's all-important entrepôt trade, thus forcing it to shift its economic base. Manufacturing turned out to be a viable option, given that the embargo on China gave Hong Kong industries an opportunity to fill the void and to export their products to foreign countries. The second factor pertained to the influx of mainland Chinese refugees during the postwar period. The exodus came primarily in two waves: the first took place between 1945 and 1951, when tens of thousands of mainland Chinese fled to Hong Kong to escape civil war and communist rule. The second wave occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s during the disastrous Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) and the subsequent famine in China. Many of these refugees, particularly those from the first wave, were rich industrialists from Guangdong and Shanghai who brought with them capital, machinery, as well as entrepreneurial skills and would play an essential role in the restructuring of Hong Kong's economy from a trading hub to an export-oriented manufacturing center. But while these mainland industrialists were vital to Hong Kong's economic makeover, no less important were those less affluent migrants who provided a ready source of cheap labor for the rapidly expanding manufacturing sector. These people, many of whom had few resources or skills, had to carve out a living in a society that was ill-prepared to absorb them into its social and economic structures within a short period of time. The sense of living in a borrowed place and time, with very little to rely on, created great insecurity, but this lack of certainty and a safety net was ironically what provided the personal and collective drive for economic

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27. See, for instance, Gordon Matthews, Eric Kit-wai Ma, and Tai-lok Lui, *Hong Kong, China: Learning to Belong to a Nation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), chapter 2; Tai-lok Lui, "Xianggang gushi buyi jiang: fei lishi de zhimindi chenggong gushi" [Hong Kong story is not easy to tell: The ahistorical success story of the colony], in *Narrating Hong Kong Culture and Identity*, ed. Pun Ngai and Yee Lai-man (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2003), 206–18; and Helen Siu, "Hong Kong: Cultural Kaleidoscope on a World Landscape," *in Narrating Hong Kong Culture and Identity*, 113–34.
28. On the prewar industrial development of Hong Kong, see Tak-Wing Ngo, "Industrial History and the Artifice of *Laissez-faire* Colonialism," in *Hong Kong's History: State and Society under Colonial Rule*, ed. Tak-Wing Ngo (New York: Routledge, 1999), 119–40.

and social advancement—an ethics of asceticism widely considered the basis of Hong Kong's success story.

Spurred by the capital and labor of postwar Chinese refugees, Hong Kong experienced tremendous growth from the mid-1950s through the 1970s, transforming itself in less than thirty years' time into one of the most prosperous places in the world. To be sure, this accelerated growth, as remarkable and impressive as it was, should not blind us to its darker, less attractive sides: long working hours, awful work conditions, lack of income redistribution and thus a widening gap between the rich and the poor, and so forth. Indeed, these problems, together with the absence of political participation in a society under colonial rule, were among the major reasons for the growing social unrest in Hong Kong during the late 1960s. The conflict and tension that had been building up first exploded in 1966 when the suppression of a peaceful hunger strike in opposition to a ferry fare hike set off a series of protests, marches, and street violence. These disturbances were followed, in less than a year, by even more large-scale riots in which pro-communist activists in Hong Kong, provoked by news of the Cultural Revolution in China, turned a minor labor dispute into weeks of strikes, demonstrations, and even terrorist attacks.[29] But in spite of the immediate tolls taken on the economy, these turbulent events did not pose an enduring threat to the city's overall growth trajectory. On the contrary, they might have actually sped up the process as the public grew wary of the use of violence after months of conflicts, and more and more people came to believe that peace and prosperity were what they needed. Their attention thus turned increasingly to the material benefits of an economically buoyant society. With the rapid recovery and return to high-speed growth, a new image of Hong Kong, one predicated on the myth of the city's "economic miracle," was swiftly disseminating in the media and taking an increasingly strong hold of the collective popular imagination.

Rapid economic growth in postwar Hong Kong triggered, or at least interacted dynamically with, an array of concomitant social phenomena. Urbanization is a case in point, a process intimately linked to the city's industrial takeoff—and to its fast-growing population, for that matter[30]—and bringing about a more dense, crowded, chaotic, and perceptually stimulating built environment. Industrial and urban development served as the catalyst for a burgeoning mass culture, too, with a mélange of entertainment and leisure options—from pulp fiction, comics, radio, cinema, and (since 1967) broadcast television to cafés, dance halls, department stores, and shopping malls—pervading Hong Kong's robust popular cultural scene and providing

29. For an in-depth account of these disturbances and riots, see Gary Cheung, *Hong Kong's Watershed: The 1967 Riots* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010).

30. Thanks to the influx of Chinese refugees but also to rapid natural increase in the relative stability of the immediate postwar period, the population of Hong Kong increased almost fivefold from 0.6 million in 1945, the year when the Japanese occupation ended, to about 3 million in 1961, half of which was under the age of 25.

ample sources of diversion for the local populace.[31] The coming-of-age of postwar baby boomers in the 1960s, a generation who aspired to new forms of distraction and consumer goods, further fueled this burgeoning mass culture. Meanwhile, the substantial female labor force in the rapidly expanding manufacturing sector granted Hong Kong women a level of economic and social freedom never seen before, while the export-oriented nature of Hong Kong's emergent industrial economy kept alive and further bolstered the historical role of the city as a hub of transnational flows. Taken together, these developments played an important role in shaping Hong Kong society and culture, bringing widespread changes not only to social and economic structures and the experiential matrix of everyday life, but also to the ways people perceived and made sense of themselves as well as the world surrounding them. By the end of the 1970s, Hong Kong had emerged as a profoundly different city from its previous self a mere two decades earlier, establishing itself not just as one of the newly industrialized economies in the region but as a vibrant metropolitan society and a crucial node in the network of regional and international flows, its hitherto tradition-oriented population gradually turning into a modern, forward-thinking community.

Not all of the phenomena discussed above are relevant to this book, but many are and will be central to my analysis in the chapters to come. For example, the advent of industrial capitalism, coupled with a rising young generation who grew up under the colonial system and had little knowledge or experience of mainland China, provided some of the conditions for an emerging Hong Kong identity defined not so much by racial or culturalist identification as by a capitalist subjectivity grounded in the values of individualism, competition and conquest, and ascetic discipline. This same capitalist subjectivity is also what increasingly pervaded and characterized Hong Kong martial arts films of the period. On the other hand, it is not just the social but the sensory-perceptual dynamics of Hong Kong modernity that need to be addressed. As important as the transformation in social subjectivities was to the "modern turn" of Hong Kong martial arts cinema, no less crucial was the emergence of a perceptually dense environment, both at work and in a burgeoning mass culture marked by dazzling displays of images and commodities. All this entailed a fundamental change in the sensory economy of Hong Kong's everyday life, which in turn helped usher in new aesthetic modes—in martial arts films and other forms of mass entertainment—that registered and mediated the changing experiential milieu associated with a modern urban-industrial society.

These are but two aspects in which martial arts cinema and Hong Kong modernity—two seemingly distinct and independent realms—may be said to converge and intersect. The list can undoubtedly go on, and it is precisely the goal of this book

31. For more discussion on Hong Kong culture in this critical period, see *Hong Kong Sixties: Designing Identity*, ed. Matthew Turner and Irene Ngan (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Center, 1995).

to bring to light these interconnections, to investigate the different ways in which the economic, social, and perceptual transformations associated with Hong Kong modernity in the 1960s and 1970s found expression in the martial arts film. In the next and final section of this introduction, I will sketch out three general levels of analysis and outline the ways in which they inform the various chapters of this book.

Aesthetics, Representation, Circulation

As discussed above, a process of rapid industrialization and modernization from the mid-1950s onward had brought drastic changes to both the sensory-perceptual milieu and social-ideological structure of Hong Kong. It is against this historical background that a new trend of martial arts films emerged in the mid-1960s and quickly came to dominate the city's thriving film (and mass culture) market. While there are a variety of ways to make sense of the genre's linkages and intersections with the large-scale transformations Hong Kong was experiencing at the time, my analysis in this book will investigate the issue on three different but interconnected levels: *aesthetics*, *representation*, and *circulation*.

Aesthetics, as originally conceived by eighteenth-century philosopher Alexander Baumgarten and re-elaborated by Terry Eagleton and Susan Buck-Morss, is primarily a discourse of the body. It is concerned with the ways in which our embodied being, through the senses, may derive pleasure and gratification from certain objects and activities within the phenomenal world.[32] This particular notion of the aesthetic provides a useful starting point for my analysis of how, in response to the sensory intensification and thus the changing matrices of perception associated with Hong Kong's urban-industrial modernity, a new sensational and visceral style stressing impact, speed, and other sensory stimulations materialized and played a key role in shaping and defining martial arts films of the period. Put otherwise, what I try to show is a paradigmatic change in the aesthetic experience of martial arts cinema, as manifested in the ways the viewer's body, as an apperceptive apparatus, was increasingly foregrounded and came to represent a central place for aesthetic pleasure and experiential authenticity.

In addition to transforming the sensory experience of everyday life, rapid urban-industrial modernization also led to sweeping social and ideological changes in Hong Kong, which in turn brought about new representations of national/local identities and social relations in martial arts cinema. One example, as I have briefly touched upon earlier, involves the rise of a new capitalist subjectivity that fundamentally reshaped not only the self-perception of Hong Kong people but also the ways

32. See Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 13–17; and Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 (Fall 1992): 3–41.

in which Hong Kong identity was imagined and constructed in both sociopolitical and cultural discourses. Another case in point pertains to the massive disembedding of gender relations: as Hong Kong became more and more modernized and was increasingly influenced by new discourses and ways of life, traditional values and norms became less entrenched and more open to challenge. The effect of this ideological destabilization was no more evident than in the ways gender roles and identities were reimagined in the period: not only did women become more socially and financially independent (and thus more prominent in public life), but the prevailing male order was also in need of constant adjustment vis-à-vis the changing social milieu. And the martial arts film, with its popularity and cultural dominance at the time, was one of the prime vehicles through which the modern imagination explored new concepts and constructions of femininity and masculinity. Yet I should note that all these changes, whether in relation to the rise of a new Hong Kong identity or to the radical reconceptualization of gender issues, were always fraught with tensions and ambiguities—and hence the complex and contradictory representations of social subjectivity and gender identity in martial arts cinema. In closely studying these representations and the complex meanings they contain, I seek to reveal the deep cultural ambivalence that underpinned Hong Kong society as it went through rapid capitalist modernization.

The third level of analysis revolves around the process of circulation, understood as a dynamic cultural phenomenon that involves the movement of objects, images, and people across spaces and serves as a driving force for transnational flows and interactions. Just as Hong Kong, in the boom years of the 1960s and 1970s, developed into an export-based manufacturing center and consolidated itself as an essential node in the network of regional and global flows, Hong Kong cinema of the period also made heightened efforts to forge a wide network of linkages facilitating transnational circulation and exchange. In this context, the martial arts film offers a fascinating case study, not least because it was by far the most successful genre in crossing boundaries and expanding Hong Kong cinema's overseas markets beyond the traditional (regional) ones. My goal, then, is to explore and illuminate the transnational practices and politics of martial arts films from the late 1960s and 1970s, drawing attention to the new modes of exchange as well as to the new forms of engagement and imagination facilitated by such circulatory networks.

Taken together, these three levels of analysis reveal the complex processes through which the martial arts film genre actively articulated and mediated the multifaceted experiences—colonial-capitalist, urban and mass-mediated, and cosmopolitan yet culturally anchored—associated with Hong Kong's burgeoning modernity in the 1960s and 1970s. The rest of the book will further look into these processes and explore their larger historical implications. Chapter 1 considers how the bodies of martial arts film heroes, posed between mastery and vulnerability, served as a site/

sight through which the aspirations and anxieties of Hong Kong people living in the flux of a rapidly modernizing society were expressed and made visible. In particular, I identify three types of male heroic body—the narcissistic body, the sacrificial body, and the ascetic body—and discuss how each responded to, and crystallized out of, particular ideological pressures arising from a society going through a course of rapid modernization. As socially symbolic signs, these different but interrelated representations of the body are exceptionally rich in meanings, inscribing within themselves not only fantasies of liberated labor but also the historical experience of violence, in the form of both colonization and unfettered growth, that lay beneath the transformation of Hong Kong into a modern industrial society.

In Chapter 2, I explore the issue of the body from a different perspective—not at the level of representation but rather as a perceiving vehicle (i.e., the body of the spectator) acted on by a film's stimuli. As a genre, the martial arts film is particularly known for offering a wealth of raw, immediate sensations that trigger powerful visceral responses from viewers. But while this is true, what needs to be emphasized is the historicity of such a perceptual aesthetic, which varies across time and is inextricably linked to changes of experiential modes in different historical circumstances. For instance, in the context of Hong Kong's rapidly growing urban-industrial modernity of the 1960s and 1970s, the proliferation of sense stimuli and sense activities, both at work and in everyday life, radically altered the sensory-affective experience of the real. This proved to have a paradigmatic impact on the martial arts film, which was rapidly embracing a new, unprecedented level of sensationalism, or what I call here "sensory realism"—i.e., a mode of realism grounded not so much in visual resemblance between image and world as in the correspondences between a film's perceptual-affective stimulations and the viewer's real-life sense experiences. It is in this sense that martial arts films of the period can be seen as bringing a "modern" or "modernist" style to Hong Kong cinema, a style characterized by speed, impact, and new forms of cinematic materiality and hapticality.

The next two chapters shift the focus to questions of gender representation. Chapter 3 examines the rise and proliferation of the so-called *yanggang* ("staunch masculinity") martial arts films from the late 1960s on, which popularized a new paradigm of hypermasculinity and brought fundamental changes to the local filmmaking tradition hitherto dominated by women's genres and female stars. While much critical attention has been devoted to the ways these *yanggang* films fashioned a new heroic figure characterized by virile physicality and by a manly ability to endure hardship and conquer adversity through violence, my focus is different and centers on the recurrent theme of male bonding—not only the *horizontal* bonding between sworn brothers but also the *vertical* or *hierarchical* one between masters and disciples. Central to my argument is that this emphasis on male homosocial relationships, in imagining and valorizing an exclusively male sphere seemingly able to transcend

both women and other antagonistic forces in society, is best understood as an attempt to cope with the increasing threats to hegemonic masculinity posed by the rise of female social power and by the emergence of a ruthless capitalist order in a rapidly modernizing Hong Kong. These threats, however, were never completely curbed, and this explains why the prevailing male order had to keep reinventing itself, through cinema and other means, to maintain and reaffirm its semblance of control.

Despite the prevailing conception of the martial arts film as a "male" genre, it is worth mentioning that Hong Kong cinema, more than any other film industry perhaps, has established a prominent tradition of onscreen women warriors. Chapter 4 considers the representations of these female fighting figures—or *nüxia*, meaning literally "female knights-errant"—in a group of martial arts films from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. In light of the rising social position and economic independence of women in Hong Kong during the period, it is tempting to construe such prominent female characters, with their outstanding martial skills that give them a high degree of physical and social autonomy, as a symbol of female empowerment reflective of larger social trends. Yet I argue that the gender politics involved in the films is considerably more complex, and that the truly transgressive aspect of cinematic *nüxia* lies not simply in their taking on of qualities (such as violent physicality) historically associated with men. Rather, what is potentially more radical is their adeptness in performing multiple gender identities, from female masculinity (the appropriation and refunctionalization of dominant masculine norms) to the feminine masquerade (the conscious flaunting of femininity). Such gender play bears a transgressive potential by virtue of its ability to effect a mixing or blurring of gender identities, and thus to destabilize and even challenge the notion of masculinity and femininity as fixed, immutable categories.

The last set of issues to be explored in this book focuses on processes of transnational circulation and exchange. Due to its emphasis on physical action and sensory stimulation, the martial arts film—and action cinema in general—is often taken to be a genre that has lent itself most readily to global circulation and consumption. While true to a degree, such a view is inadequate and fails to address the different forms and meanings of transnational practices that have informed the genre in different periods of time. In Chapter 5, my discussion explores what I call the "minor transnationalism" of Hong Kong martial arts films from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s. By the word "minor," I do not simply mean the marginal status of the films in terms of their mode of production (poverty-row budgets; meager production values) and aesthetic strategies (a visceral style emphasizing force over fineness; a hybrid textuality eschewing "purity" and "authenticity"). What I also have in mind is that these films, precisely because of their marginality, tended to operate in a "minor" transnational mode that, unlike today's Hollywood blockbusters dominating markets worldwide and imposing on viewers a set of aesthetic as well as ideological preferences presented as "universal"

norms, adhered to more "lateral" and nonhierarchical network structures and modes of exchange.

Specifically, it is my contention that action cinema of the period, of which Hong Kong martial arts films are but one example, can be conceptualized as a contact zone—in other words, a symbolic space of exchange in which films from diverse national or regional origins, often with different textual, cultural, and ideological attributes, meet and act upon one another to create not only new hybrid texts but also new forms of identification that actively negotiate with national, racial, and other types of identity boundaries. To apply this idea of contact zone to Hong Kong martial arts cinema, I first consider how a cosmopolitan film culture of Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s, one with a strong presence of Hollywood, Japanese, and European cinema, offered a host of ideas and styles which local martial arts films drew on and reinvented in developing a new idiom for the experience of modern life. Then I approach transnational flows and cultural translation from the other direction, focusing on the regional and international circulation of Hong Kong martial arts films and looking into their interactions and exchanges with other "minor" action genres. A Chinese immigrant fighting to set Mexican slaves free from their evil American masters (Mario Caiano's *My Name Is Shanghai Joe/Il mio nome è Shangai Joe*, 1972); the maimed action hero appropriated as a symbol responding to the intertwined experiences of colonial oppression, a partitioned nation, and state-led modernization (Lee Doo-yong's *Returned One-Legged Man/Doraon oedali* series, 1974)—these are but some of the fascinating yet unexpected cinematic formations that have emerged from the transnational intakes of Hong Kong martial arts films. In adopting such a transnational and comparative perspective, I hope to shed light on some of the common historical experiences (colonialism and racism; capitalist-industrial modernity) that shaped and influenced many parts of the world while considering, at the same time, the particular inflections of these experiences in different contexts.

While the focus of the book is mostly on the period from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, its implications go beyond this particular time frame and are meaningful for understanding more recent martial arts films. In the epilogue, I revisit some of the book's major arguments and reconsider them in the context of recent developments pertaining to both martial arts cinema and Hong Kong society in general. As will become obvious, the martial arts film's cultural and commercial resilience can be explained in part by its adaptability—that is, its ability to adjust and reinvent itself according to shifting historical conditions. But no less important are some of the more enduring aspects of the genre, particularly those that pertain to its complex historical connections with Hong Kong's multifaceted processes of modernization and modernity. The body of the action hero as an emblem or symbol of Hong Kong's capitalist spirit; an aesthetic of "sensory realism" that grew out of the sensory experience of modern urban-industrial life; the emphasis on bonded males and on active,

assertive female protagonists; a complex web of transnational networks and practices—all these features have persisted, in some form or another, over the decades and have continued to impinge on the cultural imaginary of contemporary martial arts films, articulating and speaking to the collective memories and experiences of Hong Kong people.

Epilogue

An underlying premise of this book is that Hong Kong martial arts cinema from the mid-1960s through the end of the 1970s, marked by new aesthetic and thematic directions as well as by new practices of transnationality, is best conceptualized as a cultural counterpart and response to processes of modernization and modernity that were shaping the former British colony. But despite its specific time focus, the issues explored in the book have broader significance and are useful for understanding martial arts films of more recent times. Without doubt, Hong Kong continued and intensified its march towards urban-capitalist modernization throughout the 1980s, the 1990s, and beyond. The pace of growth—economically, socially, and demographically—showed no signs of slowing during the period. On the one hand, the population expanded from 4 million in 1970 to 6.7 million in 2000. On the other hand, although the economy underwent a process of restructuring in the 1980s when the "Open Door" policy of post–Cultural Revolution China and other factors resulted in the relocation of Hong Kong's industrial sector to the mainland and triggered its transition from labor-intensive manufacturing to finance- and service-oriented industries, the city continued to enjoy great prosperity and had by the mid-1990s established itself as one of the world's foremost centers of international trade and finance. Rapid growth spawned more transportation, shops, infrastructure, entertainment, and commodities. As a result, the city became more congested, frantic, and noisy—in short, perceptually busier and more intense—than ever before. Meanwhile, gender relations and identities were also in constant reformulation as both men and women tried to negotiate the changing social, economic, and political contexts of Hong Kong.

Similar to the larger society from which it emerged, Hong Kong martial arts cinema, too, has continued its modernization process since the late 1970s. This can be seen in (at least) three new trends of development: first, the rise of the action-adventure film with contemporary urban settings, which came to take the place of traditional kung fu movies commonly set in the late Qing and the early Republican periods. Jackie Chan, for instance, moved away from period kung fu films to modern action comedies (*Wheels on Meals*/*Kuaican che*, 1984; *Dragons Forever*/*Feilong mengjiang*, 1986), cop movies (*Police Story*/*Jingcha gushi*, 1985; *Police Story 2*/*Jingcha*

gushi xuji, 1988), and Indiana Jones–style adventure films (*Armour of God*/*Longxiong hudi*, 1987; *Armour of God 2: Operation Condor*/*Feiying jihua*, 1991). Sammo Hung, who in the late 1970s and early 1980s made a number of highly successful period kung fu pictures, also sought to keep up with the times by making contemporary action comedies such as *Winners and Sinners* (*Qimou miaoji wu fuxing*, 1983) and *The Owl vs. Bombo* (*Maotouying yu xiao feixiang*, 1984). Historical kung fu films, then, were relegated to the margins of the local film industry throughout the 1980s, but with the success of Tsui Hark's *Once Upon a Time in China* (*Huang Feihong*, 1991) and its sequels, they made a comeback in the early 1990s, albeit in distinctly modernized forms characterized by the ample use of advanced wire work and by the adoption of a more contemporarily dynamic cinematic style.

The second trend pertains to what has been called "gun-fu." Identified most closely with—but not limited to—the "heroic bloodshed" films of John Woo, this trend integrated gunplay with elaborate action choreography, reimagining traditional martial arts battles with swords and blades as gracefully choreographed modern gunfights. What resulted was a type of stylized, even mannerist, action film new to both Hong Kong and the West, one that has had an enormous influence on popular filmmaking around the world. Last but not least, the modernization of post-1980 Hong Kong martial arts cinema manifested itself in the swordplay movie, specifically, the attempts to integrate high-tech visual and special effects into the often mythological and supernatural imaginary of the subgenre. One of the earliest examples of this trend is Tsui Hark's *Zu*: *Warriors from the Magic Mountain* (*Shushan jianxia*, 1983), a groundbreaking work that produced dazzling martial arts spectacles by combining Hollywood's sophisticated technologies of the digital motion control camera, mechanically assisted animation, and optical compositing with locally established traditions such as wire-work choreography.[1]

In some important aspects, these modernized martial arts and action films moved away from the cultural imaginary of their predecessors in the late 1960s and 1970s—an imaginary, as I have stressed throughout the book, firmly grounded in a specific configuration of colonial-industrial modernity. A case in point involves what can be called the "technologization" of Hong Kong martial arts cinema and, by extension, the "virtualization" of the action body—i.e., its reconfiguration from a vehicle of concrete power and concerted effort to a mere "medium" for high-tech visual and special effects. This "technological turn," as I have argued elsewhere, is closely intertwined with the changing sensory environment and experience of Hong Kong society over the past two to three decades. As Hong Kong transitioned from an

1. For more discussion on the film's assemblage of visual and special effect technologies and its impact on Hong Kong cinema, see Andrew Schroeder, *Tsui Hark's Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), chapter 3.

industrial to a postindustrial information society during the 1980s and 1990s, the sensory-perceptual mode of its everyday life also went through profound changes, shifting from a "solid" and embodied experiential order (associated with manual labor and machine speed) to one characterized by lightness, fluidity, and disembodiment (as witnessed in intellectual and affective labor, electronic speed, and other emergent social/cultural phenomena). This new modality of sensory experience has paved the way for a new type of martial arts film, one that continuously churns out powerful sensory stimulations but is at the same time "lighter" and more "fluid," and increasingly marked by a "virtualization" of effort and embodiment not unlike the predominant social-experiential condition of the time.[2] While this propensity for effortless and disembodied action can be seen in the revisionist kung fu films of the 1990s with their airily choreographed combats aided by advanced wire work,[3] the trend found its most evident manifestation in those magical swordplay movies relying extensively on spectacular but yet "light" and "immaterial" effects—digital or otherwise—over concrete physical action. From *Zu: Warriors* and Ching Siu-tung's *A Chinese Ghost Story/Qiannü youhun* series (1987–91) to Andrew Lau's *The Storm Riders* (*Fengyun*, 1998), Tsui's *The Legend of Zu* (*Shushan zhuan*, 2001), Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle*, and more recently, Oxide and Danny Pang's *The Storm Warriors* (*Fengyun II*, 2009) and Cheang Pou-tsoi's *The Monkey King* (*Xiyou ji zhi danao tiangong*, 2014), martial art films packed with high-tech special effects have further ratcheted up the speed and intensity of on-screen action, but the shifts are as much qualitative as quantitative. By this I mean that the experiential impact of these films, compared to their predecessors from the 1960s and 1970s, is not only more intense but also, more importantly, has a fundamentally different quality to it: while the earlier martial arts movies tended to highlight the physical materiality and tangible labor of the body, the contemporary effects-laden ones are fast, flashy, but seemingly without any concerted bodily effort. In other words, no longer conceived and depicted as a vehicle in which concrete labor is concentrated, the body of the action hero or heroine has become increasingly subservient to the lightness and effortlessness of fantastic effects and digital sensations.

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2. Man-Fung Yip, "The Effortless Lightness of Action: Hong Kong Martial Arts Films in the Age of Immediacy," in *Martial Arts & Media Culture*, ed. Tim Trausch and Stefan Kramer (Los Angeles: Bridge21 Publications, 2017).
3. Just consider the famous ladder fight between Wong Fei-hung (Jet Li) and Master Yim (Yam Sai-koon) at the end of *Once Upon a Time in China*, or the scene in Corey Yuen's *Fong Sai-yuk* (*Fang shiyu*, 1993) where a full battle is waged atop the heads and shoulders of an awestruck crowd. While less visibly mediated by special effects as in their *wuxia* counterparts, contemporary kung fu films do make ample use of wire work (and more conventional techniques such as editing) in the hope of overcoming the limitations of human embodiment and making the martial arts action more effortlessly graceful. In these films, which have often been called "wire-fu," the "real" no longer pertains to sheer corporeal performance, but is something, as Ackbar Abbas argues, "co-produced" by the action stars/stuntmen and special effects. See Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 31.

Another development that seems to have moved Hong Kong martial arts cinema beyond its unique cultural imaginary in the 1960s and 1970s involves the genre's changing practices of transnationalism. As noted in the last chapter, Hong Kong martial arts cinema has a long history of transnational circulation and consumption that can be traced to its very beginning. While limited largely to Taiwan and Southeast Asia at the outset, the overseas market network gradually expanded, thanks to the kung fu craze in the early 1970s, to almost every corner of the world, including not only the United States and Europe but also Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. With its increasing worldwide presence, Hong Kong martial arts cinema—the kung fu subgenre in particular—firmly established itself as a popular form of global screen entertainment and propelled action stars such as Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan to international stardom. It also actively interacted with action movies from other film industries to produce new hybrid texts and new modes of collective identification and belonging. But for all its global reach, Hong Kong martial arts cinema of the period existed primarily at the margins both industrially and aesthetically, tending towards a mode of "minor" filmmaking characterized by its poverty-row budget, its exploitation tactics, its emphases on the body and on physical sensations, as well as its ideological affinity with working-class and urban minority audiences. Additionally, it eschewed by and large a "vertical" conception of transnational cinema based on the binary schema of domination and resistance, and was engaged more with "horizontal" transnational exchanges through processes of translation and hybridization. All this distinguished the genre from the hegemonic Hollywood blockbusters and turned it into an instance of what can be called "minor transnationalism."

In recent years, however, a reversal has no doubt occurred in the hitherto minor or marginal status of the martial arts film genre. This, in turn, has paved the way for a new modality of transnationalism—what I am calling here transnationalism in the "major" or blockbuster mode—in Chinese-language martial arts cinema. The mainstream success of movies such as *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon* and *Hero*, which launched the big-budget martial arts film as a force competing with Hollywood both within and beyond the Chinese-language film market, clearly reflected such shifts. But signs of change can be traced to an earlier period—to the late 1980s and early 1990s specifically—when several Hong Kong action auteurs, including John Woo, Tsui Hark, and Ringo Lam, achieved international cult status through the burgeoning video market and in colleges and the repertory circuit. Not surprisingly, the films of these Hong Kong directors found their most ardent champions in leisure-craving adolescents and young adults who were actively looking for alternative entertainment options, but they were also able to capture the imagination of a new generation of young filmmakers, including Quentin Tarantino, whose passion for Hong Kong (and Asian) movies has been much publicized. With its expanding audience base, Hong Kong martial arts and action cinema gradually attracted the attention of

Hollywood executives, who began looking for ways to tap the commercial potential of this emergent trend. It is precisely against this background that Woo went Hollywood and made his American debut with *Hard Target* in 1993, and other Hong Kong film talent such as Jackie Chan, Jet Li, Yuen Woo-ping, Ching Siu-tung, and Donnie Yen soon followed suit.[4] The profile of Hong Kong cinema continued to grow, and eventually to a point where it began to define aspects of Hollywood filmmaking. Without question, films such as *Face/Off*, Brett Ratner's *Rush Hour* (1998), *The Matrix*, and the *Kill Bill* series are all shaped by Hong Kong's unique action aesthetics in one way or another. It is to a large extent this growing mainstream visibility of Hong Kong–style action that had paved the way for the success of *Crouching Tiger* and other Chinese-language martial arts blockbusters.

Despite all these changes, however, contemporary Hong Kong martial arts films are by no means a total break from their counterparts in the 1960s and 1970s; on the contrary, there are arguably as many continuities as ruptures. For instance, even with the technological turn of Hong Kong martial arts cinema noted above, the solid and tangible corporeality of the genre did not simply disappear but has remained a vital (if less dominant) feature, as witnessed by the high-impact, high-risk stunt work characteristic of the films of Jackie Chan. Indeed, with the emergence of an array of hard-hitting martial arts and action films over the past decade, among them Benny Chan's *New Police Story* (*Xin jingcha gushi*, 2004) and *Invisible Target* (*Naner bense*, 2007); Wilson Yip's *S.P.L.* (*Sha po lang*, 2005), *Flash Point* (*Daohuo xian*, 2007), and the *Ip Man*/*Ye Wen* series (2008; 2010); and Dante Lam's *Unbeatable* (*Jizhan*, 2013), it is possible to speak of the resurgence of the hard, effortful body and the return of a more embodied viewing experience. This is not to say that the films are entirely free from visual and special effects, but the majority of the fights do lie within the realm of physical possibility, seeking to strike a balance between credibility (archival, cinematic, and corporeal authenticity), fantasy (the urge to overcome the constraints of human embodiment), and sensationalism (the pursuit of powerful sensory-affective effects). The renewed corporeal emphasis, I hasten to add, is not simply a stylistic matter but has larger social and ideological meanings. The trend first emerged at a time when Hong Kong was rebounding from a string of crises, including the 1997 Asian financial collapse and its after-effects, the dotcom meltdown in 2000, and the SARS epidemic outbreak in 2003. In this context, the resurgence of the body as a locus of tangible power and effortful action—an idea that harks back to the allegories of labor and the laboring body that underpinned the capitalist imaginary of many

4. On this "mini-exodus" of Hong Kong filmmakers to Hollywood, see Steve Fore, "Home, Migration, Identity: Hong Kong Film Workers Join the Chinese Diaspora," in *Fifty Years of Electric Shadows*, ed. Law Kar (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1997), 126–34.

martial arts films of the late 1960s and 1970s[5]—can be taken as a conscious attempt to reclaim the past and to reaffirm the ethics of hard work and ascetic effort widely considered the driving force for Hong Kong's postwar economic success. Far from a mere victim in the age of global technological modernity, then, the body has continued to provide a vital horizon for Hong Kong martial arts and action films, constantly evolving and bearing new forms and meanings vis-à-vis the changing experiential and socioeconomic contexts in which the films were made and consumed.

Continuities within Hong Kong martial arts and action cinema over the past decades may also be seen in the area of gender representations. The intense emphasis on male bonding in many of Chang Cheh's films, for instance, was reexamined and expanded in the "gun-fu" movies of John Woo—from *A Better Tomorrow* and *A Better Tomorrow II* (*Yingxiong bense II*, 1987) to *The Killer*, *Bullet in the Head* (*Diexue jietou*, 1990), and *Hard Boiled* (*Lashou shentan*, 1993).[6] This comes as no surprise, since Woo was a protégé of sorts to Chang, serving as his assistant in *The Boxer from Shantung* and *Blood Brothers*. Woo has long acknowledged Chang's influence on his works; in fact, *Bullet in the Head* was conceived as a loose remake of *Blood Brothers*, both films focusing on the erosion and ultimate disintegration of the once closely knit bonds between three sworn brothers. In *Blood Brothers*, as has been discussed earlier in the book, the collapse of the brotherhood ideal can be read as a response to a perceived crisis in hegemonic masculinity, a crisis attributed to the profound social changes—a ruthless capitalist order driven by greed and self-interest and the increasing social power of women—associated with a rapidly modernizing Hong Kong. This "masculinity-in-crisis" discourse can also be used to understand *Bullet in the Head*, although the crisis in this case was sparked by a more specific historical cause. As Woo himself pointed out, *Bullet in the Head* was made as a response to the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 and its devastating impact on the psychology of Hong Kong people. The many scenes of extreme brutality and suffering in the film, set in a tumultuous Hong Kong and war-ravaged Vietnam during the late 1960s, were not only a barely veiled reference to the tragic events in the Tiananmen Square, but also stood as an apocalyptic vision of what the future might hold for Hong Kong, thus mirroring the pent-up doubts and fears many people had over Hong Kong's imminent return to China.[7] In exploring the besieged ethos of male loyalty and honor in a corrupt

5. I discussed extensively these allegories of labor and the laboring body, especially in relation to the star image of Bruce Lee and the idea of ascetic training in Lau Kar-leung's films, in the first chapter of this book.
6. On the importance of male bonding in Woo's films, see Jilian Sandell, "Reinventing Masculinity: The Spectacle of Male Intimacy in the Films of John Woo," *Film Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (Summer 1996): 23–34; and Julian Stringer, "'Your Tender Smiles Give Me Strength': Paradigms of Masculinity in John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer*," *Screen* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 25–41.
7. For a more in-depth discussion along this line, see James Steintrager, "*Bullet in the Head:* Trauma, Identity, and Violent Spectacle," in *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 Takes*, ed. Chris Berry (London: British Film Institute, 2003), 23–30.

and violent world, *Bullet in the Head*, like *Blood Brothers* (and other films) before it, demonstrates clearly that the dominant masculine order is by no means fixed or stable, but has always existed in complex and contradictory relationships with various social forces and configurations of power.

The woman warrior figure, too, has persisted over the years, albeit not without revisions or changes. Michelle Yeoh, before gaining international fame with her brilliant performance in *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon*, had already established herself as a popular action queen in a string of films, including Corey Yuen's *Yes, Madam!* (*Huangjia shijie*, 1985); David Chung's *Royal Warriors* (*Huangjia zhanshi*, 1986) and *Magnificent Warriors* (*Zhonghua zhanshi*, 1987); Stanley Tong's *Police Story 3: Supercop* (*Jingcha gushi 3: Chaoji jingcha*, 1992); and Yuen Woo-ping's *Tai-Chi Master* (*Taiji Zhang Sanfeng*, 1993) and *Wing Chun* (*Yongchun*, 1994). In all these films, as Lisa Funnell notes, Yeoh's physical abilities were "prominently showcased" and constituted "an important dimension of her star identity." Funnell goes on to argue that as Hong Kong action cinema is "a male-dominated space," it was essential for Yeoh to "prove herself as a skilled fighter of comparable quality to Hong Kong's action men in order to appeal to local or regional audiences."[8] All this means that Yeoh's star image, at that stage of her career at least, was firmly grounded in what may be called female masculinity—a gender identity that, as I have discussed earlier in the book, constitutes a double-edged sword. For the female appropriation of hegemonic masculine norms, while empowering and even potentially subversive at some levels, also risks reinforcing those norms as the overriding standards and turning the masculinized female subject into a mere duplicate of her male counterpart. In *Police Story 3*, for example, Yeoh's dynamic performance, while widely praised and seen as rivaling that of her male co-star, Jackie Chan, frequently involved daredevil stunts (such as jumping from a moving van onto a car and landing a motorcycle on a running train) modeled on those that had established Chan as the leading action star in Hong Kong. This sense of Yeoh being a female copy of Chan becomes even more evident in the film's end credit sequence, where outtakes showcasing Yeoh's multiple failed attempts at perilous stunts and the injuries she suffered as a result replicated the "blooper credits" popularized by Chan's films of the 1980s, including the first two entries of the *Police Story* series. No matter how powerful it might appear, then, the masculinized image of Yeoh in *Police Story 3* adheres closely to the model provided by Chan, thus reinforcing and amplifying the latter as the dominant norm in the process.

In many of her films (including *Police Story 3*), Yeoh portrays characters who not only showcase exemplary physical prowess but also maintain a largely masculine

8. Lisa Funnell, *Warrior Women: Gender, Race, and the Transnational Chinese Action Star* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 39–40.

appearance (e.g., wearing masculine clothes and little or no makeup). But there are also cases in which her femaleness and feminine appeal are foregrounded alongside her physical abilities. This can be seen in some of the female-cop movies she made during the mid- to late 1980s, but the most conspicuous example is no doubt Johnnie To's *The Heroic Trio* (*Dongfang sanxia*, 1993). In the film, the character played by Yeoh is a female fighter with extraordinary powers, but she is also a physically attractive woman who wears makeup, has long stylish hair, and often dresses in seductive costumes—notably, a red sleeveless catsuit that draws attention to her figure. This juxtaposition of feminine charm and masculine strength is again not something new, but can be found in earlier martial arts films such as *Come Drink with Me* and *The Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan*. But unlike those earlier films, which can be said to challenge conventional features of femininity (erotic appeal; the quality of "to-be-looked-at-ness") by turning them into a threat (*Intimate Confessions*) or at least a mask that serves to meet the needs of different situations (*Come Drink with Me*), the overt femininity of Yeoh's character in *The Heroic Trio* is hardly problematized; it is simply taken as "natural" and thus fails to produce a critical distance from which to (re)negotiate the idea of womanliness. In many ways, this persistence of a fixed, naturalized notion of femaleness is the predicament which many modern women find themselves in: no matter how they have ascended in social position, strong, assertive women are still often expected to appear (if not also act) in conventionally feminine ways, just as Yeoh's character is presented as simultaneously masculine and feminine, both in action and on display. Indeed, it can be argued that the heroine's erotic allure is not simply a marker of her female identity, but rather helps to reduce her active masculine connotations and to alleviate the subversive or destabilizing potential associated with her appropriation of hegemonic masculinity.

Last but certainly not least, Hong Kong martial arts cinema has remained a characteristically transnational genre that lends itself readily to cross-border circulation and consumption. It is true that the unique Hong Kong action–style, thanks to the migration of local film professionals to Hollywood and the direct appropriation of the style by American filmmakers, has attained a global prominence never before seen. The sensational success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* paved the way for a spate of big-budget, effects-laden Chinese-language martial arts films that sought to assert China's cultural prominence and compete with Hollywood on a global scale. But despite the growing "blockbusterization" of the martial arts film and the shift to a more hierarchical conception of cinematic transnationalism defined in terms of domination and resistance, the kind of "minor" transnational practices examined earlier in the book have not completely disappeared; they constituted a significant trend throughout the 1980s and 1990s and have remained a considerable force even to this day.

A good case in point is the trend of Hong Kong companies filming and financing English-language martial arts films, with primarily Western actors and/or locations, in an effort to appeal to American viewers and draw interest from distributors around the world.[9] Leading this trend was Golden Harvest, which from the late 1970s to the early 1990s had produced more than twenty English-language films for the international market, including such box office successes as Hal Needham's *Cannonball Run* (1981) and Steve Barron's *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1990).[10] But despite the occasional hits, these attempts to venture into the American/global market through English-language films did not always work. Part of the problem is that Golden Harvest tried to establish itself as a major global film producer, but its limited resources did not allow it to produce, on a consistent basis, the kind of big-budget movies that would compete with Hollywood blockbusters. Distribution was another problem: in the absence of its own theater network within the United States, Golden Harvest had no choice but to rely on one of the major American studios to handle the distribution of its films—which was not always done properly because most of the films were deemed marginal and not competitive.[11]

Despite these challenges, other Hong Kong companies followed suit and started producing their own English-language martial arts films, albeit with more practical expectations. Take, for instance, Seasonal Film Corporation: founded by Ng See-yuen in 1975, the company had concentrated on making Chinese-language movies, and was responsible for bringing into being *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* and *Drunken Master*—the two films that catapulted Jackie Chan to stardom—before seeking to globalize itself and branching out to English-language productions in the mid-1980s. Its first, and most successful, effort in this endeavor was Corey Yuen's *No Retreat, No Surrender* (1986). Yet the film, despite its global aspirations, was made on a slender budget and did not have any major stars or big-name director in the credits.[12] It was also unabashedly hybrid, a mélange of Hong Kong–style action, Bruceploitation, and overt allusions to American films, from John G. Avildsen's *The Karate Kid* (1984) to

9. For more discussion of this little-discussed trend, see Yip, "Martial Arts Cinema and Minor Transnationalism," in *American and Chinese-Language Cinemas: Examining Cultural Flows*, ed. Lisa Funnell and Man-Fung Yip (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 86–100.
10. Not all of these films belong to the martial arts or even action genre, but many do, including Robert Clouse's *The Amsterdam Kill* and *The Big Brawl*, James Glickenhaus' *The Protector* (1985), Clouse's *China O'Brien* series (1990), and the aforementioned *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and its two sequels from 1991 and 1993, respectively.
11. For a discussion of the issues facing Golden Harvest's English-language films, see Mike Walsh, "Hong Kong Goes International: The Case of Golden Harvest," in *Hong Kong Film, Hollywood and the New Global Cinema: No Film Is an Island*, ed. Gina Marchetti and Tan See Kam (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 173.
12. It is worth mentioning that Jean-Claude Van Damme did play the villain in the film, but he had just started his acting career and was a relatively unknown performer at the time. The director, Corey Yuen, was a respected action choreographer in Hong Kong, but he was virtually unknown in the West.

Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky IV* (1985).[13] These "lacks" and "deficiencies," however, must be considered in relation to the specific production context of the film. *No Retreat* was never meant to be a blockbuster success; rather, the film was a low-budget genre effort seeking to capitalize on the fast-growing home video market at the time. In this respect, *No Retreat* was a tremendous success. Despite its limited theatrical release and relatively modest theatrical gross (US$4.6 million) in the United States, the film sold very well in the global video market, and it is to a large extent the various video (and later DVD) releases and re-releases over the years that helped propel the low-budget film into a martial arts cult classic.[14] Similarly, the film's hybrid textuality and modes of address need to be taken not as a creative flaw but as a conscious effort—at a time when the kung fu craze of the 1970s had faded—to reinsert Hong Kong action back into the American (and thus global) popular imagination, even if that means passing as a American movie and remaking the martial arts genre for white, mainstream cultural needs.[15]

Yet another and more obscure example of Hong Kong's English-language martial arts films is the so-called "cut-and-paste" ninja movies associated with IFD Films and Arts as well as Filmark International.[16] IFD was founded by Joseph Lai in 1973, and Filmark was set up by Thomas Tang, who used to be a partner with Lai in IFD before leaving the company and forming his own in 1986. Together, IFD and Filmark turned out over 100 films during the 1980s and early 1990s, many of which can be classified as "ninja films"—a genre popularized in the United States and other parts of the world following the success of Menahem Golan's *Enter the Ninja* (1981). Made on extremely low budgets and often released straight to video, these Hong Kong ninja films are most (in)famous for their "cut-and-paste" approach—that is, the practice of recycling footage from one or more obscure Asian films to which the companies had bought the rights, combining it with new footage featuring ninja characters (usually

13. The Bruceploitation aspect of the film can be most clearly seen in its use of a fictional Bruce Lee—or his phantom rather—as the martial arts muse for the downtrodden protagonist. As for its borrowings from American cinema, the film draws from *The Karate Kid* not only the underdog story of a humiliated teenage boy but also the figure of a benign Oriental muse who empowers the teenager. The influence of *Rocky V* is more limited but no less clear; it manifests itself in the Cold War allegory played out in the opposition between a white American working-class hero (i.e., the film's "underdog-to-champion" protagonist) and a Russian villain associated with an organized crime syndicate.
14. Spurred by the success of the film, Seasonal went on to make six more English-language martial arts films, many of which received no theatrical release and went straight to video. These six films are Corey Yuen's *No Retreat, No Surrender 2: Raging Thunder* (1987); Lucas Lowe's *No Retreat, No Surrender 3: Blood Brothers* (1990), *The King of Kickboxers* (1990), and *American Shaolin* (1992); as well as Leung Siu-Hung's *Superfights* (1995) and *Bloodmoon* (1997).
15. Yip, "Martial Arts Cinema and Minor Transnationalism," 96–97.
16. For more discussion of IFD's films, see Yip, "Dragons, Ninjas, and Kickboxers: The Minor Transnational Action Films of IFD," in *Exploiting East Asia*, ed. Ken Provencher and Mike Dillon (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

played by little-known Caucasian actors[17]) and ninja-fighting sequences, and then dubbing over the images to create a final product. As one would expect, such a method often resulted in films with madly incoherent plots and style, but it also lowered production costs and allowed small cash-strapped companies to make several movies with the budget of one. In a rapidly changing global media market where there was a huge and growing demand for low-budget martial arts and action films owing to the rapid rise of home video as a mass culture industry, this fast and cheap production method proved to be a viable strategy and set the Hong Kong ninja films onto a consistent production path during much of the 1980s. More recently, the digitalization of media technologies has helped bring the films to a new generation of viewers. Not only have DVDs and YouTube videos made the films more accessible than ever before, but internet connectivity has also facilitated people to circulate and obtain information about them. This brought about a kind of virtual community connected by blogs as well as by fan sites and forums, and the ensuing cult interest on the films was strong enough to spawn a parody web series in 2012.[18]

Other examples can be given, but it is clear from the above that Hong Kong martial arts cinema has always maintained a close and dialogical relationship with broader social changes in the city, especially those pertaining to its rise as a modern industrial and later postindustrial society. Considering that Hong Kong has evolved into a very different society over the past two and three decades, it comes hardly as a surprise that contemporary martial arts films also differ from their predecessors in the 1960s and 1970s in important ways. Yet the ruptures, as we have seen, are not absolute, and many continuities and influences can still be found. Thus, in providing an in-depth look at the complex intersections of martial arts cinema and Hong Kong modernity from the mid-1960s through the late 1970s, this book is able to shed light on a hitherto underexplored area of research and to bring a new perspective and a new context to studying more recent martial arts films.

17. One exception is Richard Harrison, who starred in quite a number of IFD's ninja films in the early to mid-1980s. Harrison, despite not being a famous star, did make a name for himself through his many appearances in European B-movies (sword and sandal films, Spaghetti Westerns, and the like) of the 1960s and early 1970s.
18. *Ninja the Mission Force* (http://neonharbor.com/titles/ninja-the-mission-force/), as the web series is called, pays homage to IFD's ninja films and follows their notorious "cut-and-paste" style by splicing original ninja footage with redubbed scenes from unrelated films in the public domain. The series first appeared in 2012, followed by a second season in 2013. Both seasons have since been released on DVD.

Filmography

The 14 Amazons/Shisi nü yinghao (Cheng Kang, 1972)
The 36th Chamber of Shaolin/Shaolin sanshiliu fang (Lau Kar-leung, 1978)
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