

## Spectres of Bruce Lee

Paul Bowman<sup>1</sup>

### 1.

By all accounts, in the 1970s, Bruce Lee was the very symbol of postcolonial, diasporic multicultural energy (Kato 2007; Miller 2000; Prashad 2001); the embodiment of what Rey Chow has called ‘the protestant ethnic’ (Chow 2002; see also Nitta 2010). However, in the book *From Tiananmen to Times Square* (2006), Gina Marchetti considers the waning of the affect of the socio-political charge of the image and politics of Bruce Lee in America. That is: although in the 1970s, Bruce Lee was this symbol of postcolonial, diasporic, multicultural ‘protestant ethnicity’, by the 1990s, the passions and problematics associated with diasporic Asian ethnicity had changed in status, form and content somewhat. In fact, as Marchetti discerns in the 1990s Hollywood film texts which sought to replay and canonize Bruce Lee’s energies – specifically 1992’s knowingly intertextual *Rapid Fire* (a film that starred Bruce Lee’s son, Brandon), and 1993’s biopic, *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* – the spirit of protest and radicality associated with Bruce Lee seems to have not only ossified and wizened but also to have actually atrophied and regressed *away* from *politicized* protest against social injustice and to have collapsed into little more than juvenile Oedipal anger. In other words, Marchetti’s reading intimates, in America, in Hollywood, in the West, Bruce Lee (and everything for which he may once have stood) has had his day: the biopic *Dragon* situates Hollywood’s racism firmly in the past, writing it as something that Bruce Lee ‘broke through’ and ‘overcame’; and *Rapid*

*Fire*, which constructs Brandon as Bruce Lee's contemporary metonym and proxy, fails to articulate a single coherent social, cultural, political or ideological 'problem' or 'issue' against which to protest. In true Hollywood style, *Rapid Fire* absorbs the potentially-political into the familiarly Oedipal. And the problem with the oedipal is that it is such a strongly repetitive structure, one that is ultimately organised by reconciliation rather than radical transformation. So, taken as an heir to or instalment of Bruce Lee's cultural legacies, *Rapid Fire* is something of a disappointment.

Perhaps this should come as no surprise. After all, *Rapid Fire* is ultimately little more than an easy-viewing, formulaic low-budget action flick. Perhaps it should not be expected to shoulder the 'non-white-man's burden', or be taken to exemplify anything more profound about culture and society than the fact that it is not really a very good film. But at the same time, we must remember: *Bruce Lee films too* are, by the same token, or by any conventional measure, not really very good films either. *And yet*, Bruce Lee films are so much more than so many other generically or formally similar films.

What is this 'so much more'? A claim of 'something more' ought not to be heard as a claim that Bruce Lee films themselves *aren't* Oedipal, formulaic or simplistic. They are indeed. There is much that is irreducibly juvenile about them – and about very many – perhaps the majority of – martial arts films. And I say this in full awareness of the likelihood I might be accused of 'orientalism' or even 'racism' – as if by pointing out the silliness and childishness of many martial arts films I am thereby reducing the Asian Other to a state of simplicity, childishness, innocence or even

savagery. But, really: I'm not being racist or ethnocentric. My prejudice is directed rather towards action film genres, formulas and narratives as such. It is these that are Oedipal and simplistic, and not some hypothesized (essentialised) and supposedly 'pure' and 'purely other' ethnic subject or somehow simply 'non-Western' film industry. (We ought to know enough about the international traffic in ideas, techniques, technologies and discourses to avoid this kind of thinking.) So, to clarify: it is because of the supervening and structuring codes and formulas that both Bruce Lee films and Brandon Lee films as well as many other martial arts and action films besides might be regarded as essentially quite shabby films. *But* the important point is that *despite* all of this – and *shining through* all of this – Bruce Lee films contained or communicated or encoded in condensed and displaced form several interlocking socio-political antagonisms: antagonisms of class and ethnicity, of coloniality and exploitation, of marginality and hegemony, centre and periphery, and, crucially perhaps, nation and belonging, or nation and longing. It is the destiny of some of these discourses that I want to consider in what follows.

## **2.**

The story of Lee's explosion onto cinema screens all over the world, to a truly unprecedented extent, is well known (Hunt 2003; Miller 2000). Similarly, the story of his image's role in the forging of inter-ethnic identifications, multicultural hybridizations and anti-racist and civil rights energies has been quite widely documented too (Brown 1997; Prashad 2001). But that was then, and, according to Marchetti, as the eviscerated and gestural cultural non-politics of films like Brandon Lee's *Rapid Fire* demonstrate, by the 1990s, Bruce Lee was no longer quite what

once he had been. This is because the cultural political landscape had moved on or settled down to such an extent that Bruce Lee no longer performed the same socio-semiotic cultural functions, or fed the same fire – as the symbol of not only the outsider and underdog, but also the migrant, the worker, the exploited, the colonised, the oppressed, the victim of racism, the protesting ethnic, and of course (as everyone knows who knows anything about Bruce Lee’s martial arts), the interdisciplinary postmodernist multiculturalist innovator and radicalizer of martial arts in the West. By the 1990s, Bruce Lee was well and truly a familiar part of Western culture (an *institution*), and no longer part of Western cultural politics (as a mobile metaphor of disruptive ‘outside’ force).

At the same time, the story of Bruce Lee’s relation to first Hong Kong and subsequently to Chinese culture and politics, however, is something different. When I say ‘first [to] Hong Kong and subsequently to Chinese culture and politics’, I mean: Chinese in the sense of the nation – the nation state – rather than Chinese in the sense of ethnic Chinese. Bruce Lee as ethnic Chinese – and indeed Hong Kong culture as strongly ethnically Chinese – is one matter (or set of matters). But Bruce Lee (and, as we will see, Hong Kong) vis-à-vis or *within* the geopolitical entity and borders of China itself is another. And again, as very many theorists and analysts of culture have observed, Hong Kong itself has always had a complex double and also paradoxically vanishing status; functioning both as a complex node and articulator of so-called East and so-called West whilst also, to borrow the phrase of Ackbar Abbas, functioning perversely and paradoxically in a mode of disappearance (Abbas 1997). For, insofar as Hong Kong has long been simultaneously representationally, socioeconomically and geopolitically constructed as ‘other’ of (or other than) both

China and Britain (and by extension, the rest of Asia, Eurasia, Europe and America), Hong Kong has always been problematically liminal (Chow 1998). To recall the Mafioso formula that is revealed to be spurious in the film *Old Boy* (namely, ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend’), we might observe that, as other of East and as other of West, the other of my other is in no way guaranteed to be my ‘same’. The enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my friend; the other of my other is not necessarily my same. And this, as so many thinkers have pointed out, is the situation of Hong Kong vis-à-vis China and the West and the rest.

This is why, even if Bruce Lee immediately constituted a clear semiotic paradigm of ‘China’ and of ‘Chineseness’ in the West, he never (simply) did in China or Hong Kong, despite his films’ overwhelming box office success all over Asia. Furthermore, various commentators have noted that even though Bruce Lee choreographies had an immediate, dramatic and lasting effect on Western film choreographies, the immediate effects of Bruce Lee films on the Hong Kong film industry were either slight or difficult to perceive at all, for quite some time (Tan qtd in Miller 2000: 156). Indeed, we might also observe, even today, despite the prominent and popular statue of Bruce Lee on Hong Kong’s Kowloon waterfront (or his waxwork outside of the Madame Tussaud’s waxwork museum that takes its place among the complex of restaurants and shops at the top of Hong Kong’s other primary tourist destination, the viewing area at Victoria Peak), there is actually astonishingly little in the way of a Bruce Lee tourist or cultural industry in Hong Kong. It seems very much as if, in Hong Kong, Bruce Lee is regarded as something for the tourists – or even, as if Bruce Lee is regarded by Hong Kongers as being about as much a Hong Konger as Hong Kong Disneyland.

### 3.

Nevertheless, Bruce Lee is there; and perhaps not unlike Disneyland, Bruce Lee is once again moving from the liminal to the centre. But this time, Bruce Lee is performing a very different kind of decentring and recentring work. For, more recently, Bruce Lee has been deliberately and unequivocally picked up and deployed ideologically by mainstream arms of the Chinese state in a number of different ways. Most notable perhaps is the way that in the run up to the Beijing Olympics, Chinese TV initiated a major and now extremely long-running TV series about the life of this uniquely Sino-American superstar. The ideological dimension and motivation of the Chinese state appropriation and recasting of Bruce Lee (as one of China's beloved prodigal sons) perhaps goes without saying. It is a moment in a process that can be linked to the Chinese state's growing inclination to open its borders to film-makers, on the tacit proviso (so it seems) that China 'itself' be depicted as visually stunning and geopolitically coherent. John Eperjesi (2004) has called this a new form of 'cultural diplomacy' – the rebranding and marketing of 'China itself', via the landscape, as a kind of 'other Eden'. According to Eperjesi, the 'cultural diplomacy' of the invention of a newly visualised or visualizable China was the successor to 'ping pong diplomacy'. Chinese cultural diplomacy – the re-presenting (the re-branding) of China by way of the deployment of its landscapes as visually stunning – can be marked out on a line that runs at least from *The Last Emperor* (1987) to *Crouching Tiger* (2000) to *Hero* (2002) to *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) and so on – and on, I would add, to the recent remake of *The Karate Kid* (2010) – a film which depicts

China in a way that could not easily have been touched up further had it been conceived by a state apparatchik in charge of boosting tourism. (Admittedly, the film is not orientalist through and through, but the major whack of orientalism we are given in the protagonists' pilgrimage to a hyperreal Taoist monastery in a hyperreal version of the already hyperreal tourist and HSBC-advert destination of Guilin is second to none.)

So Bruce Lee is being redeployed in this straightforwardly ideological rebranding of the public image of China. And this is hardly surprising. But at the same time, Bruce Lee is being rather differently reworked by the Hong Kong film industry too, and on a different sort of level.

#### 4.

Much was written about Hong Kong identity in the run up to the 1997 handover of Hong Kong from British rule to Chinese rule. Much of this focused on the understandable anxieties that arose in the face of the prospect of the ultra-capitalist 'jewel in the Orient' being handed over to the last communist superpower on Earth. If the self-writing of Hong Kong in the run up to 1997 was characterised by anxiety, then the situation of the next few years was perhaps a little like the way we all felt when, filled with fear and trepidation, and holding our breath or crossing our fingers, we all tentatively turned on our computers in the morning or afternoon of the New Year's (and new millennium's) Day of January 1<sup>st</sup> 2000 AD. Was the computer going to work? Would the 'Millennium Bug' have destroyed it? Was the sky going to fall on

our heads? Press the button... So far so good... It seems to be working like normal... Phew!

After a decade of Hong Kong cautiously exhaling, nervously relaxing and feeling around for signs of pain or injury, some who had left before 1997 started to return. These included a strangely familiar figure, behind a rather flimsy disguise. It was of course Bruce Lee, but not exactly. For this time, Bruce Lee was not *actually* Bruce Lee. Nor did he take the form of a character originating in Hong Kong (or even the *mainland* China of the Hong Kong peninsula) and travelling to and from America, or to and from Italy or to and from mysterious Fu Manchu-esque island fortresses. This time Bruce Lee was always not only a mainlander but a Chinese subject and a fervent patriot, travelling to and from the mainland and Hong Kong, the mainland and Europe. In this return, sometimes Bruce Lee was Ip Man – a mythologized version of Bruce Lee's real sifu (or sigong), the teacher (or, more correctly, Lee's teachers' teacher). At other times Bruce Lee was Chen Zhen – the Chinese nationalist of popular fantasy immortalized by Bruce Lee in *Fist of Fury/Jing Wu Men* (1972). Virtually every time, Bruce Lee was played by Donnie Yen. And each time, the return of the spirit of Bruce Lee saw also the rather surprising reciprocal return of Japan, playing the role of the terrible imperial enemy.

All of these films are haunted by Bruce Lee. They are *structured* by Bruce Lee, who operates as what film theorists used to call an 'absent presence' (or was that a 'present absence'?). They are induced by Bruce Lee. The first *Ip Man* film came out in 2008, starring Donnie Yen. This film was reputedly both in something of a race with another similar film, and a squabble about the title; because Wong Kar-Wei was at

the same time also developing a film focusing on the character of Ip Man. However, the latter's film became mired in production problems and has not appeared yet. But there could have been both an *Ip Man* and another film about Ip Man appearing in the same year. *The Legend is Born: Ip Man* and *Ip Man 2* both appeared in 2010; the former focusing on the early life of Ip Man; the latter on his later life. In the same year, *Legend of the Fist: The Return of Chen Zhen* also came out. In this film, the Chen Zhen who was apparently shot and killed at the end of Bruce Lee's 1972 *Fist of Fury* turns out not to have died after all, but to have gone into hiding and to have gone off to fight along with other Chinese in subservient role in the trenches and front lines of the First World War in France. This time Chen Zhen returns to Shanghai and becomes a semi-superhero crime-fighter, bizarrely wearing the Kato mask and uniform that Bruce Lee's character (Kato) wore on the US TV show *The Green Hornet*.

So, most of these 'returns' star Donnie Yen. But this is more than a good couple of years' work for Donnie Yen. What is more significant is the extent to which all of the characters and all of the films are irreducibly entangled with, indebted to, constituted by, and structured through Bruce Lee, in condensed and displaced form. The question is why, or what this might be signifying or doing.

## 5.

In the first *Ip Man* film, Bruce Lee is not literally present until the end. And when I say 'literally' I mean literally: in words: for it is only at the very end of the film, after Ip Man has defeated the Japanese martial arts expert General, publicly and decisively,

and then been shot and had to flee, that words appear on the screen to tell us that Ip Man fled to Hong Kong whereupon he returned to martial arts teaching, training thousands of students including (drum roll, dramatic pause) Bruce Lee. End of film. Of course, this means that all of this Ip Man stuff was but a prelude or subplot to the real news, the real story: Bruce Lee – with Ip Man standing to Lee as a kind of John the Baptist to Jesus. As such, then, Bruce Lee has been there, present in the film, for quite some time – from before the beginning.

From the outset – from *before* the outset – as you all now know we will come to learn in the big reveal about Bruce Lee at the very end, those in the know will already have known that the single, solitary reason why *anyone* outside of Hong Kong knows *anything* at all about Ip Man is *exclusively* because of the international filmic success of Bruce Lee. This filmic success led to the popularity of the martial art that Bruce Lee studied as a teenager – Wing Chun [or Yong Chun]. And – it is important to note – it is not the other way around. The post-Bruce Lee popularity of wing chun was regarded with no little dismay by Western martial arts scholars and historians such as Don Draeger and Robert Smith (1999), who could not comprehend the new power of cinema and celebrity to transform the status of one pretty minor Chinese martial arts style among many derived substantially from Shaolin White Crane into something internationally regarded as a definitive or superior fighting art. Many Hong Kong and Chinese martial arts traditionalists do not even regard wing chun as a ‘proper’ martial art at all – because, for one thing, it is not old enough, and for another, again, its popularity derives from Bruce Lee movies.

Without wishing to disparage wing chun at all, it nevertheless seems fair to say that such historians as Smith and Draeger had a point, even if they vented their spleen about Bruce Lee and wing chun rather than the strange power of the cinematic apparatus over cultural practices, cultural memory and the cultural writing and rewriting of history and mythology. For, as we see clearly through films like *Ip Man*, history can be dramatically reconstituted. The cart very often gets put before the horse. For what is emphasized in the film, which rewrites Ip Man's life, is that Ip Man ought primarily to be remembered as a patriotic Chinese hero, rather than a martial arts instructor, one of whose student's students happened to become immensely famous. And the film also proposes that Ip Man *only* chooses to leave China for Hong Kong in order to escape *Japanese* occupation and persecution.

None of this is strictly speaking the case. Now, I do not want to undertake a process of nit-picking about the factual correctness or fictional fabulousness of any of these films. Nevertheless, one crucial historical detail deserves to be mentioned. The real Ip Man left China to escape not the Japanese during the Sino-Japanese War, but rather to escape the new Communist regime of mainland China. Yet, in all of these films, it is overwhelmingly Japan that is used to play the evil empire. Communist China is thereby screened off, concealed from view, and hence from comment of any kind. A psychoanalysis might call this 'foreclosure'. It is certainly a different sort of structuring absence or absent presence to the traces of Bruce Lee that are perceptible within the fabric of the film texts themselves. But Bruce Lee is still its bearer. This can be seen in the recurrence of what I will call the Dojo Fight Scene.

## 6. The Return of the Dojo

In 1972's *Fist of Fury*, the Chinese Jing Wu kung fu kwoon in the Japanese controlled zone of the international settlement in Shanghai in the 1930s is targeted by a Japanese martial arts institution. As it turns out, the Chinese master, Huo Yuanjia, has been poisoned by Japanese impostors working as cooks in the Chinese school. This is presumably because the Chinese master is too skilful a martial artist and the Japanese felt threatened. As befits the basic aesthetic of celluloid treachery, the leader of the Japanese martial artists sends a delegation to Huo Yuanjia's funeral, bearing the offensive gift of a framed scroll which reads 'dōng yà bìng fū':<sup>2</sup> 'Sick Man of Asia'. This is of course at least doubly offensive: for not only did the Japanese poison the Chinese man because of his superior martial skill, but also because, since the onset of European colonialism and Japanese imperialism (not to mention the British-induced introduction of large scale opium use in China), the characterization of China itself as the sick 'man' of Asia had grown into a common stereotype – perhaps at its peak in the colonial period of the film's setting, but no less current during the era of the film's release. So the slur works excellently on several levels, having several interlocking levels of offensiveness: national geopolitical weakness, corruption of the body politic, masculine weakness, and drug-addled weakness being the key coordinates. In this film it has the added twist of being uttered by the very people who have poisoned and weakened both the Chinese man and the Chinese nation itself. So we can see, straight away, when Bruce Lee returns the spiteful and twisted letter to its sender in the form of his visit to the Japanese dojo and his defeat of every single one of the students and teachers there, why this scene of dramatic retribution would have a very strong – overdetermined – affective charge. Let us have another look at this wonderful scene:

<<Show dojo scene from *Fist of Fury*>> [10 minutes]

The choreography here – as in all Bruce Lee fight scenes – is magnificent. Second to none, I would say, even to this day. But the power, memorability, and intense emotional and affective charge of this scene would not have been so strong were it not that it comes in response to the ‘Sick Man of Asia’ provocation, which, as just mentioned, activates decades upon decades of national and diasporic ethnic Chinese hurt. [Moreover, the catharsis provided by Bruce Lee’s victory for many viewers has long been matched, evidently, by a kind of cultural repudiation, disavowal or repression (or whatever is the opposite of catharsis!) in Japan. For, despite its immense global success, *Fist of Fury* has never been screened on terrestrial Japanese television.<sup>3</sup>]

This overdetermination is doubtless why the scene returns so frequently in Hong Kong martial arts film. It is so good, in fact, that it returns even within *Fist of Fury* itself. In the first dojo fight scene, at the start, in response to the stinging cultural insult, Lee humiliates and hurts the Japanese martial artists. But in his subsequent return, after he has learnt the full extent of the Japanese institution’s murderousness, he pulls no punches, takes no prisoners, and kills everyone who stands in his way. The scene returns again in Jet Li’s *Fist of Legend*; unsurprisingly, as this is a direct remake of the Bruce Lee film. And it also returns – as a return – in *Legend of the Fist: The Return of Chen Zhen*, with Chen Zhen returning, after his return as if from the grave, to fight the son and heir of the Japanese master he killed the first time around:

<<Show scene from *Legend of the Fist?*>> [10 mins]

This latter scene is not so powerful or memorable because the affective provocation is less ‘condensed’ or ‘efficient’ in *Legend of the Fist* than in *Fist of Fury*, at the same time as the choreography is not up to par either. This iteration is a shadow of its former self – an echo; more like a dream sequence. Within *Legend of the Fist*, Chen Zhen has had various ‘flashbacks’ to his first fights there in the dojo, and in this scene we are reminded of his reasons for showing no mercy to his opponents in a flashback run-through of every one of his friends who have been killed by the Japanese. Yet, unsurprisingly, perhaps, his own memory seems faulty (he remembers, for instance, stamping on the ‘sick man of Asia’ sign, which is not what Bruce Lee’s Chen Zhen did at all). Meanwhile the hordes of Japanese karateka bumble towards him with bokken held clumsily in the air rather than battering him down, either through skill or through the sheer weight of numbers and the extended reach that a wooden training sword affords anyone. Moreover, it is only in this final fight scene that Donnie Yen is directed to try to imitate Bruce Lee ‘fully’; and this is a pity. For despite Yen’s own magnificence, his attempts to execute Bruce Lee ‘catcalls’ and Bruce Lee gestures and postures seem half-hearted, tagged on, and in any case jarring – for they ultimately merely remind us that Bruce Lee is not actually here and we are being subjected to a cover version performed by a tribute act.

However, in the first *Ip Man* film (not the subsequent prequel), this spectre of Bruce Lee retains or regains something of its 1972 power. One reason for this is surely that, being ostensibly about Ip Man and putatively *not* about Bruce Lee, no actor has to try to imitate the inimitable and fail to measure up. This enables the film to combine

affectively the same ingredients into the build-up to the dojo scene. Thus, the film gives us: an awful social situation of Japanese occupation, suspicions of Japanese iniquity, and the grotesquely unjust murder of an honourable Chinese martial artist. Thus it is that with some palpable, visceral, and readily intelligible rage, Donnie Yen's Ip Man enters another Japanese dojo, and the camera slides up and back to resume the angle and viewing position it has preferred throughout many of the earlier versions of this set-piece – offset and up and back at an angle of around 30 degrees. Close in for the close up of the clenching of the fist of fury; up and back and away for the bird's eye view of the fighting.

7.

Thus, the connections I am making between Bruce Lee and these later films is based in the identifications produced by the viewing position constructed by the camera, first of all, as much as the formal features, tokens and traces of the scenes being viewed. The camera behaves in the same sorts of ways, producing the same sorts of views (or 'visibilities') and effects. And of course, this is not culturally specific. Many films use these angles and these set ups. But switching focus from the question of what is viewed to what enables the viewing and constructs the field of visibility and, by extension, intelligibility can be, shall we say, illuminating.

In the case of this recent wave of Hong Kong martial arts films, the legacies of Bruce Lee, in spectral and condensed and displaced forms, are again becoming apparent. And although films are essentially only ever really 'about' films, I think that it is nevertheless clear that this wave signals a new wave in Hong Kong's self-writing. In

this new chapter, Hong Kong is redrawn – less as the ‘inter-zone’ that it once was (an unclear space of neither/nor and/or both/and) and more the *supplement*, the graft, the transplant, the prosthesis and opening of China. The *actual* recent history of the geopolitical entity of China is ignored. Time is frozen in either the tensions and animosities of the Sino-Japanese war or the of Hong Kong’s pre-1997 ‘crown colony’ status vis-à-vis Britain. Japan is viewed as scourge and menace; Britain with some palpable nostalgia and affection; China with love and pride...

## 8.

As theorists of Hong Kong and postcoloniality have pointed out: nostalgic patriotic longing for an absent motherland is one thing: it allows one to romanticise. Facing the prospect of getting what one claimed to have wished for is quite another. In becoming Chinese, Hong Kong would seem to need to reconcile the capitalist and the communist ideologies it now straddles. At the same time, the stakes of criticising China become higher. This is surely why China only functions as the land, the family, the values and the folk. The evil militarized empire that drives people away from the beloved land and community is played by Japan. Driven away from home by the military tyranny, China’s finest and most noble are embodied in the purity projected onto Ip Man and Chen Zhen, in a mythic rewriting of history.

Ip Man is a (or the) figure of History here. Chen Zhen is a (or the) figure of Myth. Bruce Lee is the constitutive element uniting both of these figures. Bruce Lee is absent, but implied. Were it not for Bruce Lee, neither would be gracing our screens now. Neither would be being used in Hong Kong films. Thus, in these films, we are

witnessing one way that contemporary Hong Kong film is engaging-with *without* engaging-with-directly and talking-about without talking-about-explicitly, the potentially fraught cultural grafting and relation of reciprocal supplementarity that now exists between China and Hong Kong. The unspoken or unspeakable element (or ‘elephant in the room’) of Communist China is displaced onto Japan; and Ip Man and the return of Chen Zhen are the repatriation of Bruce Lee, a repatriation that is intimately intertwined with the repatriation of Hong Kong, rewriting itself, cinematically.

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<sup>2</sup> 東亞病夫

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