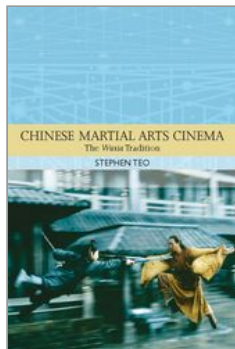


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Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition

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Introduction

Stephen Teo

The *wuxia* film is the oldest genre in the Chinese cinema that has remained popular to the present day. Yet despite its longevity, its history has barely been told until fairly recently, as if there was some force denying that it ever existed. Indeed, the genre was as good as non-existent in China, its country of birth, for some fifty years, being proscribed over that time, while in Hong Kong, where it flowered, it was generally derided by critics and largely neglected by film historians. In recent years, it has garnered a following not only among fans but serious scholars. David Bordwell, Zhang Zhen, David Desser and Leon Hunt have treated the *wuxia* film with the critical respect that it deserves, addressing it in the contexts of larger studies of Hong Kong cinema (Bordwell), the Chinese cinema (Zhang), or the generic martial arts action film and the genre known as kung fu (Desser and Hunt).¹ In China, Chen Mo and Jia Leilei have published specific histories, their books sharing the same title, 'A History of the Chinese *Wuxia* Film', both issued in 2005.²

This book also offers a specific history of the *wuxia* film, the first in the English language to do so. It covers the evolution and expansion of the genre from its beginnings in the early Chinese cinema based in Shanghai to its transposition to the film industries in Hong Kong and Taiwan and its eventual shift back to the Mainland in its present phase of development.

Subject and Terminology

Before beginning this history, it is necessary first to settle the question of terminology, in the process of which, the characteristics of the genre will also be **(p.2)** outlined. Used to refer to a type of film in the Chinese cinema since the late 1920s, *wuxia* is today an accepted and established nomenclature. However, there is no satisfactory English translation of the term, and though it is often identified as 'the swordplay film' in critical studies,³ such a marker of *wuxia* offers only a partial definition and is therefore deficient in furthering understanding of the genre. In addition, *wuxia* is often confused with 'kung fu' and 'martial arts' such that all these

terms are erroneously thought of as synonymous although there are certainly overlapping constituents between all three.

Simply put, 'wuxia' and 'kung fu' are genre-specific terms, while 'martial arts' is a generic term to refer to any type of motion picture containing martial arts action, mostly including the martial arts of China, Korea and Japan but also Thailand and other countries in Asia. It is perhaps more useful to consider the martial arts cinema as a movement, as Jubin Hu has done.⁴ As a movement rather than a genre, we can then see more clearly how it engenders the genres of *wuxia* and kung fu and influences other genres (such as the comedy and gangster film). As a movement, it is also clear that it appealed to nationalist sentiments and represented part of the 'Sinicization' of Chinese cinema in its infancy.⁵ I will return to the nationalist aspects of the *wuxia* genre later.

Since this book concentrates on the *wuxia* film, it already implies a division or separation from 'kung fu', which will be defined shortly. The division is far from absolute and it must be said that kung fu evolved out of *wuxia*, forging its own style and manner of development. To appreciate their differences as well as similarities, it is necessary to break down both terms etymologically. *Wuxia* is derived from the Chinese words *wu* denoting militaristic or martial qualities, and *xia* denoting chivalry, gallantry, qualities of knighthood and heroism. It was originally coined by the Japanese as a neologism in the late Meiji period at the turn of the twentieth century. The early science-fiction writer and baseball enthusiast Shunro Oshikawa (1876–1914) first used the term in the titles of a series of militaristic adventure stories to denote militaristic virtues of heroism and gallantry, as in the title of his 1902 adventure novel, *Bukyo no Nihon* (in Chinese *Wuxia zhi Riben*, or 'Heroic Japan').⁶ In a reference to Oshikawa's evocation of the word *wuxia* (or *Bukyo* in Japanese), Ikuo Abe declares that it is 'very hard to translate *Bukyo* into English, but *Bu* means samurai, and *Kyo* denotes manly character',⁷ and adds that Oshikawa's *Bukyo* is closer in spirit to the militaristic ethos of the samurai code of *bushido*.⁸

Chinese writers and students studying in Japan brought the word back to their homeland in the hope that China would follow the Meiji example of adopting science and modernising the military. The word thus was in wide usage in China from the late Qing, early Republican period onwards. In the nineteenth century, the literature at the time went by the name of *xiayi* (the stress being on heroic chivalry), indicating that the shift to *wuxia* in the twentieth century was influenced by modern currents of thought putting the **(p.3)** emphasis on the militaristic principles (*wu*) which had made a country like Japan a major world power.

The term *wuxia* became entrenched in the popular mind following the serialisation of the novel *Jianghu qixia zhuan* (*Legend of the Strange Swordsmen*, first serialised in 1922).⁹ So entrenched has it since become in China, or the Chinese-speaking world, that it is not generally known that the word originated in Japan. The Japanese today hardly use *wuxia* (or *bukyo*) to refer to their own genre of swordfighting samurai movies, the closest equivalent to the Chinese *wuxia* movies, instead preferring the term *chambara* (an onomatopoeic comic-book-like expression deriving from the clanging of swords). Though the origin of *wuxia* may be foreign, both the words *wu* and *xia* have deep historical roots in China. Ye Hongsheng notes that the earliest reference to both *wu* and *xia* in Chinese history is in the writings of Han Fei Zi where he criticised *xia* for transgressing the law of the land for using *wu* or violence (*xia yi wu fan jin*),¹⁰ while Wang Li asserts that in ancient Chinese usage, the single word *xia* was a virtual abbreviation of *wuxia*.¹¹

As Han Fei Zi uses it, *xia* is a noun to denote a breed of male and female (in Chinese, *xia* is not gender-specific) warrior figures in the Warring States Period (403BC–221BC) whom we may loosely call ‘knights-errant’, although, historically, the proper word for this is *youxia* (meaning ‘wandering knight’). The title of James Liu’s book *The Chinese Knight-Errant*, published in 1967, refers to the historical tradition of *xia*, although, Liu notes, the translation of *xia* as knight-errant is inadequate to completely capture the essence of *xia*. I agree with Liu that it is probably unhelpful, when writing in English, to reject the term ‘knight-errant’ as an approximate translation of *xia* since both are generic conceits to refer to a tradition of sword-wielding, swordfighting, horse-riding or gallivanting warrior figure who stands and fights for honour, chivalry and righteousness.¹² I will accordingly treat *xia* and the English term ‘knight-errant’ as interchangeable without necessarily implying or referring to the Western-European tradition of knight-errantry.¹³

The uncertainty of terminology underlines the constructed and contested nature of this whole genre, which, even in Chinese writings is a highly tenuous subject. There is no cultural consensus about *xia*. As Ye Hongsheng informs us, there have been many types of *xia* throughout Chinese historiography, from *youxia* (wandering knight), *renxia* (humane knight), *yixia* (upright knight), *haoxia* (heroic knight), *yongxia* (brave knight), *yinxia* (hermit knight), *ruxia* (Confucian knight), to *jianxia* (sword-carrying knight), *daoxia* (bandit knight), *sengxia* (monk knight), and *nüxia* (female knight).¹⁴ The *xia* is a ‘hard to define figure’, as Y. W. Ma tells us, ‘rendered ambiguous by the passage of time, the changing cultural and political background, the different needs of various genres, and the shifting literary taste’.¹⁵

While acknowledging that there is no cultural consensus, it is the task of this **(p.4)** book to attempt to define *wuxia* as a *cinematic genre*. As an entry point into this process, I propose to follow the method used by Chinese critics of differentiating between *wuxia* and kung fu – two intersecting cinematic genres which for all their similarities have separate specificities – by distinguishing between their fighting styles.

A cult of the sword is associated with the *wuxia* figure. Chen Shan has shown that such an association began from the dawn of the history of *xia*.¹⁶ However, the *xia* is also adept in the use of other weapons (such as the staff or long pole) and in the art of fist-fighting or boxing, skills which are often rendered under the category of ‘kung fu’ (or *gongfu*, in Pinyin). Though ‘kung fu’ is generically used today to denote the martial arts, its literal meaning is the level of skill and finesse of technique that one has attained in any endeavour, not just the martial arts. Kung fu emphasises skill achievable through training and practice, as denoted in the word ‘kung’ (*gong*, meaning achievement or merit). Thus the emphasis of the kung fu film is on the martial arts while the emphasis of the *wuxia* film is chivalry and the pursuit of righteousness. The hero in kung fu films can and often does display the same dedication to chivalry and the pursuit of righteousness as the sword-wielding knight-errant, though their fighting traditions hail from different schools, namely Wudang and Shaolin.

In the popular mythology of the martial arts cinema, Wudang points to the swordplay tradition and Shaolin to the kung fu tradition, although this is not always set in iron and overlapping inevitably occurs. The former is recognised as a ‘soft’ school emphasising inner skills, such as the mastery of *qigong* (inner energy) that enables one to make weightless leaps and fly, while the latter is a ‘hard’ school emphasising the outer physical skills, the mastery of hands, legs, and other parts of one’s body (even including the head) for defence or attack. The element of flight

also distinguishes *wuxia* from kung fu, as Hsiao-hung Chang has noted, with the former allowing for 'phantasmagoric actions' and the latter focusing on 'real fighting on the ground'.¹⁷

For the purposes of this book, I will use the terminology 'martial arts cinema' to refer to both strands of *wuxia* and kung fu in that they both feature all kinds of martial arts action. But since *wuxia* refers to a *specific* martial arts genre, it therefore refers to a type of film which portrays the warrior *xia* and his or her style of swordfighting action as well as the themes and principles of *xia* (chivalry or knight-errantry). Shu Guozhi argues that the term *wuxia* is a misnomer since most novels in the genre tend to concentrate on the training and use of martial arts and not on the *xia* concept as such. He proposes that the term *wuyi* (literally, 'martial arts') should replace *wuxia*.¹⁸ There is, however, more than one term for martial arts in Chinese. Another terminology is *wushu* which is used more commonly in the field of sports.¹⁹ As far as the cinema is concerned, the Chinese do not generally make references to *wushu pian* or *wuyi pian* ('martial arts cinema').

(p.5) A rendition closer to the meaning of martial arts cinema is *wuda pian*, literally, 'martial action cinema,' but the term can refer to both *wuxia* and non-*wuxia* films and it begs the question of just what type of martial action, and weapon, is being referred to. During the Song dynasty, literary historians subdivided martial arts fiction into categories of 'swords' (*pu dao*) and 'cudgels and staffs' (*gan bang*), that is, by the implements used in the fighting.²⁰ In the twentieth-century art form of cinema, subdivisions of *wuxia* and kung fu have come about, applied to martial arts films in general. Insofar as *wuxia* and kung fu denote respectively the swordplay movie and the fist-fighting movie, they can usefully be seen as two distinct but interrelated genres. Chinese critics have on the whole stuck to these distinctions.²¹

The kung fu film's emphasis is on the training and techniques of martial arts. Thus the fighting styles (primarily fist-fighting but also leg-kicking and even head-butting) differ from those of *wuxia* though the heroes of both espouse *xia* principles. The Wong Fei-hung (in pinyin Huang Feihong) series in the 1950s Hong Kong cinema is now taken as the paradigm of a *wuxia* hero forging his own line of kung fu techniques that are somehow different from *wuxia* styles of combat. The most important qualification of kung fu was its claim of realism as a reaction against the fantastic premise of *wuxia* (this will be examined in Chapter 3). This implies that the nature of *wuxia* is more abstract and philosophical in terms of its application of concepts such as chivalry, altruism, justice and righteousness (all of which come under the rubric of *xia*), while kung fu apparently emphasises the *actual and pragmatic* application of combat techniques as well as the training.

There is furthermore a north-south divide that distinguish *wuxia* from kung fu, pointing to the different sources of their origins in Wudang (a northern school) and Shaolin (a southern school, or at least, the school of Shaolin martial arts that was largely disseminated in southern China following the destruction of the northern Shaolin temple and the dispersal of its adherents to the south, according to cinematic legend²²). Such divisions were most likely appropriated from the *wuxia* literature of the so-called 'Guangdong School' in the 1930s which gave rise to the Wong Fei-hung phenomenon and which can be differentiated from the literature of the Old School, written by essentially northern writers.²³ The division of Old School and New School literature will be dealt with in Chapter 2. *Wuxia* is in the main a Mandarin genre, while kung fu is a Cantonese one ('kung fu' in fact is Cantonese and the use of the term automatically

acknowledges that kung fu is acknowledged as a Cantonese, thus Southern, tendency in the martial arts).

There are, in addition, distinguishing features in terms of periods and settings. To some Chinese critics, *wuxia* is now inseparable from the periodcostume movie (*guzhuang pian*),²⁴ though in its early development, the *wuxia* film was not necessarily thought of as a period film. Dai Jinhua tends to see **(p.6)** *wuxia* films as a sub-type within the generic form of the 'historical film' or *guzhuang baishi pian* (classical-costumed tales of anecdotal history) which took their ancient stories from popular tradition.²⁵ The settings of *wuxia* films are now regarded as almost exclusively historical or mythical, reinforcing the Mandarin cinema's tendency to invoke ancient China more naturally and successfully. One reason for the ancient settings, according to the screenwriter Liu Tianci, is to accentuate the qualities of myth and magic.²⁶ The kung fu picture is usually more modern and less historical though the genre can include the historical costume movie (usually late Qing dynasty). Kung fu films are also usually but not always set in southern China (and then, almost always Guangdong province) in the time of the early Republican period beginning in 1911.

Historically, the *wuxia* form was the earliest type of martial arts cinema and kung fu was a later development, associated with the Hong Kong cinema. My account will include aspects of the kung fu form as it emerged more firmly in Hong Kong beginning in the 1950s, and developed in the 1970s and 1980s to the extent that it supplanted the *wuxia* film and became a separate genre. The history of the kung fu film is much more recent and is not so much in need of urgent retelling. In any case, it is a saga well covered by others, notably by Leon Hunt in his book *Kung Fu Cult Masters*. Though Hunt's book acknowledges the presence of *wuxia*, it treats the kung fu film as the dominant martial arts cinema and does not give any historical account of the *wuxia* film nor dwell in depth on its relationship with kung fu. Hunt offers a vision of kung fu as a modern, transnational, avidly cross-cultural, genre with a large fan base around the world. As a result, though perhaps unintentionally, the *wuxia* film is regarded more like an abstract and inaccessible subset of the kung fu genre. My book acknowledges the kung fu film as a part of the tradition of *wuxia* but it is the latter which is the primary subject and the key to the martial arts cinema.

Wuxia Historicism and Nationalism

The impression of *wuxia* as a parochial, old-country, China-centric genre is no doubt an outcome of its overwhelming reliance on, and exploitation of, history, historiography, and historicism. History is an interminable feature and characteristic of the genre and of Chinese literary culture in general. This pre-eminence of history has a 'quasi-religious' ring to it, as Andrew Plaks has noted, emphasising that there is a 'noticeable preponderance of historical subjects and historiographical format in Chinese fiction'.²⁷ The *wuxia* genre is a microcosm of this larger reliance on history and historiography in Chinese fiction, but though this 'quasi-religious pre-eminence of history' in the genre is apparent, I suggest that the genre transmutes history and engenders a historicism. First, this implies a theoretical movement of history subjected to conditions of change and **(p.7)** transformation; second, it also involves a mechanistic adherence to the religion of history (history-worship, so to speak).

History is a natural resource of historicism, and truth and fiction are embedded in the practice of historiography. The historiography of *wuxia* perpetuates the notion of history in the making, or history denominating action. The *xia* or knight-errant acts as an agent of history, conscious of his

or her role in shaping events and the destiny of the nation, for example, by assassinating a tyrant. This is the theme of Zhang Yimou's *Yingxiong* (*Hero*, 2002) and many other *wuxia* films. Zhang's *wuxia* films also show the aesthetic facet of historicism in that they exhibit history as fashion and architecture (this will be discussed in Chapter 7).

Historicism also refers to the nature of the knight-errant as dictated by past traditions. Some of these traditions, as Y. W. Ma has elucidated them, include

the image of female knights-errant from Tang (dynasty) tales, ...the readers' expectations of the knight-errant (valour, deadly fighting skills, sense of justice, and the like),...the stylistic and contextual features required of the genre (action-packed episodes, black-and-white contrasts between heroes and villains, etc) and...the availability of stock motifs (for instance, the invariable majestic appearance of the knight-errant) and stock situations (like establishing credentials through combat).²⁸

Ma's list of traditions offers only a guideline to the genre's stylistic characteristics which are formed by historicism. While in essence, the nature of the genre is best expressed through *xia* or the chivalrous behaviour of the knight-errant, chivalry can involve other themes such as revenge (*baochou*) and the just or unjust use of violence. Jian Zhao points out that the concept of *bao* (reciprocation or reprisal) developed as an 'important ethic' from the *xia* tradition in the Spring and Autumn period (Chunqiu) and that the knights-errant carried the tradition into the Han period during which the historian Sima Qian praised the *xia* as personalities of heroic virtue.²⁹ Later literature such as *Wuyue chunqiu* (*Annals of the Wu and Yue in the Spring and Autumn Period*) and the *Yue jue shu* (*The Book of the End of the Kingdom of Yue*) developed the thread of revenge as a common theme.³⁰

Karl Kao has examined the concepts of *bao* and *baoying* (retribution) as motor forces of narrative causality in *wuxia* fiction.³¹ Revenge therefore motivates martial arts action and brings about the idea of redemption. Chen Pingyuan states that the development of twentieth-century *wuxia* literature has relied on the dramatizing of, first, the *jianghu* (literally 'rivers and lakes', an anarchic domain with its own codes and laws in which knights-errant roam and operate and commit acts of violence based on revenge), second, martial arts action, and third, Buddhist concepts.³² One could say that without revenge, all **(p.8)** three elements would be meaningless. Violence and revenge form an unbreakable thread of the historicist fabric of *xia* literature, adjusting and adapting to historical circumstances as well as to the various forms of artistic apparatus and conceptual frameworks.

While I account for the historicism of the *wuxia* genre, my counterintuitive proposition is that a genre that possesses flexibility in spite of its limitations will survive the buffeting of social, political and technological forces. My research will show that the genre has consistently rebounded against its historicist expectations due to the circumstances of political and social transformations. The genre is unified by its cultural history and its historicism but at the same time is ruptured and torn apart from its historical continuity by history itself, which is far from a smooth process, and by the interruptions of outside forces (chiefly, the influences of foreign genres).

In writing this history, I seek to deconstruct the genre from a New Historicist point of view so as to formulate a critique by grasping its multiple facets of constructed identity and history. The genre is constructed from multiple strands of thought and approaches, including historicism, nationalism, transnationalism and orientalism. I will throughout this book bring up all these

issues though I may not always deal with all of them at the same time. Orientalism, for example, will be discussed more fully in Chapter 7 in connection with the analysis of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Hero*. Both films were transnational successes and it is within this context that I have focused on orientalism. Effectively, orientalism (or self-orientalism) is a methodology exploited by Chinese filmmakers themselves to sell the *wuxia* film, but more broadly, I seek to understand how the genre is constructed historically in the cinema as a product through interrelated motifs that might be seen as counterpoints to each other in a symphony of the martial arts – orientalism as a counterpoint to historicism, transnationalism as a counterpoint to nationalism. On the whole, historicism and nationalism are the primary motifs in this symphony.

The *wuxia* film was and is regarded as a national form, fulfilling nationalist desires for self-strengthening at a time when China was weak. In the present, as China has become a rising power on the world stage, the *wuxia* film seems to have become an instrument of the state: *wuxia* as a means to maintain the myth of a warrior tradition and its historicist concepts of chivalry and knight-errantry in order to justify the modern concept of the nation-state. Zhang Yimou's *Hero* is exemplary of this kind of state-minded historicism. However, the historicism of a film like *Hero* is not to be confused with historicity. The genre is informed by history and historicism just as it appears to maintain both as essentialist traits. To a degree, this study of *wuxia* overturns the word 'essentialism' from being currently a term of discredit to one worthy of respect in critical discourse. This is because essentialism must perforce be historicised and contextualised. In the same way, nationalism must also be historicised, and in **(p.9)** fact the history of the genre demonstrates that nationalism and transnationalism often seemed to march in step.

Wuxia as Transnationalist Impulse

Transnationalism suggests that the genre had to refashion itself to suit modern commercial imperatives as an entertainment form while satisfying historicist and nationalist inclinations—an attempt to 'reconnect the past with the present on a simultaneous plane', as Zhang Zhen has described it.³³ Zhang sees the development of the genre within the prism of modernity, 'in particular the question of science and its bearing on the magical new art of cinema in the Chinese context'.³⁴ Modernity and the martial arts cinema of which *wuxia* and kung fu are two traditional forms are closely entangled, but to what extent did the cinema manifest modernisation through the adoption of traditional genres? Paul Pickowicz makes the interesting claim that filmmakers, unlike their counterparts in the May Fourth literature movement, 'did not have to make any emotionally wrenching transitions simply because there was no Chinese tradition of filmmaking to reject', and for this reason, 'early Chinese cinema was more thoroughly modern than May Fourth fiction'.³⁵ However, modernity in the eyes of many Chinese intellectuals of the May Fourth movement was a necessary factor in the strengthening of China and it was in this way conflated with nationalism.

In constructing a national cinema, Chinese filmmakers were complicit in building a modern nation – and the modern nation, as Prasenjit Duara reminds us, 'does not contain only modern elements'.³⁶ Jubin Hu has located the whole movement of martial arts filmmaking into a phase of 'industrial nationalism'.³⁷ Thus the interlinking of nationalism with modernity and industry suggests a far from straight path of development. As the Chinese cinema in the 1920s was still a developing model, the national and the modern combines the urge for self-sufficiency with the search for a system of self-signification. The national was to be articulated through native, traditional genres. Within *wuxia* literature itself, it has long been the practice to regard *xia* as a concept often equivalent to a declaration of the national, best represented by a line in one of

author Jin Yong's novels, 'the apex of *xia* is to serve the nation and the people' (*weiguo weimin, xia zhi da zhe*).³⁸ Variations or similar expressions of such a line are found throughout the *wuxia* genre as well as the latter-day kung fu film.

However, the national is subjected to social and political transformations. Though the *wuxia* genre stems from a long history of Chinese tradition and culture, it also tended to be derided by intellectuals, not least by the May Fourth literati. To the critics, the genre betrayed a basic inconsistency between modernity and tradition, between the outlaw-rebel status of its heroes and the conformist tendencies of the old world Confucianist societies they were meant to **(p.10)** protect. Weihong Bao makes the crucial point that the technological magic achieved by the genre 'posed a threat to the nationalization and modernization agendas upheld by cultural forces from the right and the left', which was why it was eventually banned in 1931, though the actual reason invoked was superstition.³⁹

Yet the genre in the cinema was a manifestation of modernity in that it abstracted reality. Chinese intellectuals condemned the genre because they saw it as divorced from reality. As Theodore Hutters has noted of the intellectual literary scene in China during that era, Chinese intellectuals, such as the writer Lu Xun, were tied to the 'Chinese conservative ethos that an idea cannot serve both as an indicator of a particular social reality and at the same time as an abstraction from reality'.⁴⁰ *Wuxia* cinema was an abstraction from reality which also served to cast a light on social reality. This was a very modern idea that could not have been accepted by the intellectuals. *Wuxia* abstracted nationalism even as it served to display the national through its very historicism – and nationalism was transmuted by the impulse and the impact of transnationalism.

The *wuxia* genre's representation of the national was mediated not only through a native genre but also through its relationship with transnational forces and the global influence of Hollywood. Zhang Zhen states that the martial arts film 'stems from a promiscuous family tree that complicates any facile definition of the genre as such'.⁴¹ It also complicates any facile definition of the Chinese national cinema within the terms of the genre itself, because the national was from the beginning related to the transnational. Here we might more profitably engage with Jubin Hu's notion of 'industrial nationalism' in that the Chinese cinema was preoccupied with establishing itself as a *film industry* (Hu's emphasis) that would need markets to expand and survive.⁴²

Where the 'industrial nationalism' of the burgeoning Shanghai film industry was concerned, it was intermixed right from the start with the notion of transnationalism. Extant examples of early *wuxia* films, such as *Hong xia (The Red Heroine, 1929)*, display idiosyncratic glimpses of early Chinese filmmakers feeding upon Hollywood and other Western cinemas even as they draw on indigenous traditions. Many early *wuxia* films were nothing more than imitations of the western, the swashbuckler, or the European medieval romance even though *wuxia* was meant to countervail these genres.⁴³ Weihong Bao has traced the vernacular influence of Hollywood's Pearl White serials on the evolution of the female knight-errant figure in early Chinese cinema.

However, all such influences today and even at the time appear caricatured (one reason why it was viewed contemptuously by the literary critics), leaving the impression that some essentialist feature of the genre was missing or was barely touched upon, as if proving the law of genre, as expounded by Derrida, that where genres mix or intermix, they tend to confirm some 'essential purity of their identity'.⁴⁴ The growth of the Chinese cinema was due to the *huaqiao* **(p.11)** (overseas Chinese), as Lu Xun reported in one of his essays: 'whenever there was a new film

released, the old would bring their grandchildren to the cinema and point to the screen, saying “look here, this is how our people in the mother country look like”.⁴⁵ From this quote, we can discern the cultural essentialism that was a part of how Chinese filmmakers balanced the national and the transnational. Yet this essentialism may not have been as potent if it was not associated with the essentialism of another medium – cinema.

Wuxia's Cinematic Appeal

In the course of its development, *wuxia* has responded to trends and mutations as well as to challenges and debates over its own tendencies towards fantasy and wishful thinking, and it has successfully crossed over media, from literature to cinema to television to video games. In the cinema, the *wuxia* genre itself can be said to be schizophrenic. An early association with the historical periodcostume film (*guzhuang pian*) evolved into further associations with another genre, *shenguai*, which has historical literary roots as deep as *wuxia*. *Shenguai* denotes gods and spirits (*shen*) and the strange and the bizarre (*guai*: which could also refer to monsters and creatures of legend and the imagination). *Wuxia's* integration with *shenguai* and its absorption and imitation of foreign genres, which is discussed in depth in Chapter 2, attest to my central proposition that the genre was highly adaptable in spite of its historicist roots.

The basic nature of *wuxia shenguai* can be compared with the fairy story in the West, which became a form in the silent cinema that Vachel Lindsay called 'the pictures of Fairy Splendour'.⁴⁶ The genre might have been the Chinese cinema's first model of the fairy picture- and 'fairy splendour' is perhaps the key to its cinematic appeal. The magical properties of *shenguai* revealed through the technology of special effects inform the chivalric sensibility of *wuxia*, which fundamentally make the genre a purely *cinematic* attraction. The genre remains relevant to this very day because it exhibits a natural correlation with the film medium- that through the medium of film, it makes the impossible real. Without the intrusion of an antithesis between fantasy and reality, the *wuxia shenguai* genre is probably irrelevant to cinema and would have remained primarily a literary vehicle.

The other part of the genre's *cinematic* appeal is the feature of the body, by which I mean the purely physical qualities of action sequences involving choreography, training, and expertise. The martial arts can be treated as a dance form, and as early as 1948, Maya Deren's short film *Meditation on Violence* demonstrated this facility. The film shows a performer (actor Chao-li Chi) executing martial arts movements based on traditional Wudang and Shaolin styles. First, he dances against an interior background accompanied by the sound of oriental flute music. The sudden onset of Haitian drum music magnifies the more violent **(p.12)** strokes and movements of the performer. There is a cut to exterior. The performer now clad in costume and holding a sword performs the 'Wudang' section of the choreography. Occasionally, the performer appears to be fighting with the camera. Freeze frames punctuate the sequence. Then, the action runs back in reverse. There is a cut back to the interior, with the same performer, naked to the waist, performing his Shaolin kung fu moves shown earlier.

Meditation on Violence is one of the earliest films made in the US to feature martial arts as dance choreography and on hindsight, looks like a precursor of many of the martial arts films coming out of Hong Kong. The aesthetic intensity of the choreography prefigures the styles of King Hu and Lau Kar-leong, two Hong Kong directors whose works are now regarded as classics of choreographed martial arts; but perhaps more importantly, *Meditation* shows that the martial arts can be interpreted from a feminine perspective. Though the martial arts is generally assumed to be dominated by men, the *wuxia* film, with its concentration of the softer values of Wudang, contains a feminine sensibility that was brought out explicitly in the films of King Hu, particularly *Xianü (A Touch of Zen)*, originally released in two instalments in 1970 and 1971. The figure of the female knight-errant drives the narrative and determines its style and sensibility (choreographic, web-like, metaphysical), rendering the film a true 'meditation on violence' (Hu's

films will be discussed in Chapter 5). As for violence and its association with masculinity, the films of Zhang Che offer their own form of meditation (discussed in Chapter 4).

The direction set by *A Touch of Zen* was followed by *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), whose international success has brought the *wuxia* movie into the contemporary era of globalisation. That the *wuxia* movie has a global appeal is both a source of satisfaction and apprehension. How will the genre shape up in the arena of East – West cultural exchange? Does it foreshadow a major reconfiguration of historicist structures? How do we interpret the cultural referents of this globalised *wuxia* genre? The following history is designed as a resource that will offer the reader some possible responses to these questions, for in themselves, the questions hinge on a proper and comprehensive understanding of the genre's rich and multifaceted history.

Chapter Divisions

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the genre's antecedents and its beginnings in the silent Shanghai cinema; the growth in popularity of the genre; the craze of the *shenguai wuxia* serial and the resulting controversy over its tendencies of superstition and 'feudal thinking'. Chapter 2 tackles the issue of censorship following a backlash against the genre; the consequences of the ban on *wuxia* film are examined and the chapter also looks at the genre's brief period of grace in the *gudao* period from 1937 to 1941 during which *wuxia* reappeared in the film (p.13) industry functioning under wartime circumstances. Chapter 3 examines how Hong Kong inherited the *wuxia* genre in the form of the kung fu cinema which emerged in the 1950s; the chapter explores the nationalistic impulses of kung fu as manifested through the screen identities of Wong Fei-hung and Bruce Lee.

Chapter 4 focuses on the resurgence of *wuxia* through the label of the 'new school' in the 1960s; the *wuxia* films of the two major Mandarin studios, Shaw Brothers and Cathay, are reviewed in order to explore how they interpreted the new school conventions of realism and heroism; the chapter also contains an extensive discussion on the work of one of the key directors of the new school, Zhang Che. Chapter 5 is devoted to an analysis of King Hu's films and his interpretation of the female knight-errant figure. Chapter 6 recounts the development of the genre post-*A Touch of Zen* and its influence on the films of director Chu Yuan and the Hong Kong New Wave; the rise of the New Wave engendered postmodernist versions of *wuxia* films, typified by the works of Tsui Hark, Patrick Tam, and Wong Kar-wai. Finally, Chapter 7 brings the genre up to the present, with analyses of the implications of the transnational success of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, its evocation of orientalism and its impact on subsequent developments in the genre exemplified by such attempts as Zhang Yimou's *Hero* to follow on the same transnational-orientalist path to sell *wuxia* to global audiences; *Hero* is also dissected for its perceived nationalistic stance working apparently as a parallel concern along with its transnational objective. The chapter examines the development of the genre as it journeys back to China, the land of its birth, and how it progresses along the twin tracks of nationalism and transnationalism.

A word about transliteration: all Chinese names, terms, and titles of films and other textual citations quoted in the text and footnotes are transliterated according to the Pinyin system. An exception is made for Cantonese names in reference to the Hong Kong cinema, which are transliterated according to their Cantonese pronunciation (for example, 'Wong Fei-hung' or 'kung fu' rather than 'Huang Feihong' and 'gongfu'). This is done so that a distinction is made

between Mandarin and Cantonese, and between the Chinese cinema and the Hong Kong cinema. A further exception is also made for Mandarin names in reference to Taiwan, which adheres to the Wade-Giles system of transliteration.

All quoted passages from original Chinese language sources which are not available in English are my own translations.

Notes

(1.) See David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2000); Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema 1896-1937* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005); David Desser, 'The Kung Fu Craze: Hong Kong Cinema's First American Reception', in Poshek Fu and David Desser (ed.), *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Leon Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2003).

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(5.) *Ibid.*, p. 48.

(6.) See Ye Hongsheng, *Lun jian: wuxia xiaoshuo tanyi lu* ('Discourse on the Sword: A Record of the Art of Wuxia Novels') (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 1997), p. 9.

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(9.) See Po Fung (Pu Feng), 'Dai jian chumen de ren, tan jige wuxia pian de jichu gainian' ('Persons Who Travel with Swords: Basic Concepts in the Wuxia Film'), in Bryan Chang (Zhang Weihong) (ed.), *Jianghu weiding* ('The Undecided Jianghu') (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Critics Society, 2002), pp. 9-39, esp. p. 12.

(10.) Ye Hongsheng, *Lun jian*, p. 4. See also Lin Baochun, 'Cong youxia, shaoxia, jianxia dao yixia: Zhongguo gudai xiayi guannian de yanbian' ('From Wandering Knight, Young Knight, Sword-carrying Knight to the Righteous Knight: The Evolution of the Xiayi Concept in Ancient China'), in Tamkang University Chinese Faculty (ed.), *Xia yu Zhongguo wenhua* ('Xia and Chinese

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(12.) See James Liu, *The Chinese Knight-Errant* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1967), p. xii.

(13.) Y. W. Ma also makes the same point in his essay, 'The Knight-Errant in *Hua-pen* Stories', *T'oung Pao*, 61, 1975, 266–300, see p. 268.

(14.) Ye Hongsheng, *Lun jian*, p. 9.

(15.) Y. W. Ma, 'The Knight-Errant in *Hua-pen* Stories', p. 266.

(16.) See Chen Shan, *Zhongguo wuxia shi* ('A History of Wuxia in China') (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 1992), pp. 5–10.

(17.) See Hsiao-hung Chang, 'The unbearable lightness of globalization', in Darrell William Davis and Ru-Shou Robert Chen (ed.), *Cinema Taiwan: Politics, Popularity and State of the Arts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 95–107, esp. p. 98.

(18.) See Shu Guozhi, *Du Jin Yong oude* ('Some Insights on Reading Jin Yong') (Taipei: Yuanliu, 2007, 3rd edn), p. 24.

(19.) Leon Hunt points out that *wushu* was the name used by the People's Republic after it was established by Mao to specify traditional martial arts as a national sport, as part of a programme of national health. See Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters*, p. 31. John Christopher Hamm evokes another term *guoshu* (literally, 'national arts'), which, he explains, is 'a term inherited from the Republican era and enshrining that period's project of reinventing martial traditions in the service of nationalistic self-strengthening'. See Hamm, *Paper Swordsmen: Jin Yong and the Modern Chinese Martial Arts Novel* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), p. 8.

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(23.) For more on the Guangdong school, see Hamm, *Paper Swordsmen*, pp. 32–48. See also Ye Hongsheng, *Lun jian*, pp. 47–48.

- (24.) See Chen Mo, *Daoguang xiaying mengtaiqi-Zhongguo wuxia dianying lun* ('Montage of Swordplay and Swordfighters: A Treatise on Chinese Martial Arts Cinema') (Beijing: China Film Publications, 1996), p. 83.
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- (26.) See Liu Tianci, *Wuxia bianju miji* ('The Secrets of Writing Wuxia Scripts') (Hong Kong: Ciwenhua, 1996).
- (27.) Andrew H. Plaks, 'Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative' in Plaks (ed.), *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 309-352, Eps. p. 312.
- (28.) Y. W. Ma, 'The Knight-Errant in *Hua-pen* Stories', p. 299.
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- (30.) *Ibid.*, p. 84.
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- (33.) Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*, p. 200.
- (34.) *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- (35.) See Paul G. Pickowicz, 'Melodramatic Representation and the "May Fourth" Tradition of Chinese Cinema', in Ellen Widmer and David Der-wei Wang (ed.), *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth Century China* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 295-326, Eps. p. 297.
- (36.) Prasenjit Duara, 'Knowledge and Power in the Discourse of Modernity: The Campaigns against Popular Religion in Early Twentieth-Century China', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 50:1, February 1991, 67-83, esp. p. 68.
- (37.) See the chapter 'Industrial Nationalism (1921-1930)', in Jubin Hu, *Projecting a Nation*, pp. 47-74.
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(44.) See Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', *Critical Inquiry*, 7:1, Autumn 1980, 55-81, esp. p. 57.

(45.) See Lu Xun, 'Luelun Zhongguo ren de lian' ('A Brief Discussion on Chinese Face'), in *Lu Xun zagan xuanji* ('Lu Xun Anthology: Random Thoughts') (Beijing: Jiefang jun wenyi chubanshe, 2000), pp. 136-139, Eps. p. 139.

(46.) See Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (New York: MacMillan and Company, 1922), p. 30.

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