

## GINA MARCHETTI

### **Martial Arts, North and South: Liu Jialiang's Vision of Hung Gar in Shaw Brothers Films**

“You can't make a good kung fu movie without knowing kung fu. You got to know how a punch is thrown. A lot of directors and action choreographers don't know anything about the martial arts and the different schools.” – Liu Jialiang<sup>1</sup>

Although Liu Jialiang (Cantonese: Lau Kar-leung, Wade-Giles: Liu Chia-liang) is one of Shaw Brothers' most prolific martial arts directors, his career has not received the level of attention from critics and film scholars this output warrants.<sup>2</sup> Liu began as an apprentice to Zhang Che (Wade-Giles: Chang Cheh),<sup>3</sup> working under his direction as a martial arts choreographer, until his first directorial effort at Shaw Brothers with *Spiritual Boxer* (Hong Kong, 1975). Trained in the same line of Hung Gar (pinyin: Hong Jia; a.k.a Hung Fist) as Huang Feihong (Cantonese: Wong Fei-hung), Liu Jialiang has used Hung Gar kung fu as the basis for much of his martial arts choreography<sup>4</sup> as well as inspiration for the plots of several of his features. An actor and choreographer as well as a director, Liu helped to stamp Shaw Brothers action features as distinctive amalgams of southern kung fu (pinyin: *gongfu*) (primarily Hung Gar) inflected by the theatricality of Peking Opera and wedded to other systems of martial arts including northern Shaolin.

From the origins of the system in the legendary destruction of the southern Shaolin Temple during the Qing Dynasty through Huang Feihong's exploits during the late-

Qing/early Republican period and contemporary renderings of Hung Gar in Hong Kong and within the Chinese diaspora, the story of Hung Gar, under Liu's direction, becomes an allegory of Chinese history seen through the lens of Hong Kong cinema.<sup>5</sup> Hung Gar speaks to dynastic changes, cataclysmic political forces, resistance to authority, radical reorganisations of hierarchies based on class, region, and gender, as well as other factors that had as much to do with Hong Kong, the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora, as with the specifics of a kung fu system or the occult history of the martial arts. Liu's films address a time of change, uncertainty, and possibility for the global Chinese, and Hung Gar becomes the instrument to discuss tensions between China and the diaspora, the North and South, the profane and the religious, the established authority of the state and the justified rebellion of the citizenry, the world of the outlaw/folk traditions and the domain of the government/official culture, the domestic/female and the public/male, etc. Blending Shaw Brothers' pan-Chinese style, use of Mandarin, and studio personnel with Liu's immersion in a specifically southern, Pearl River Delta-developed traditional art form, these films address an audience that may be moving between, within, or around various formulations of Chinese ethnicity, language, and national identity. The encounter often becomes violent, and kung fu the medium for its angry expression.

Beginning with his work as martial arts choreographer, Liu has been drawn to stories involving Hung Gar history, particularly those concerned with the system's roots in the Shaolin Temple. Four of Liu Jialiang's Shaw Brothers films highlight different periods in the history of Hung Gar, the Shaw Brothers studio, and popular Chinese-language cinema.

*Executioners from Shaolin* (Hong Kong, 1977) deals with the family melodrama/romance at the root of Hung Gar's origins. *Challenge of the Masters* (Hong Kong, 1976) takes up Huang Feihong's career as an apprentice practitioner, and *Martial Club* (Hong Kong, 1981)

continues Huang's development as a young martial artist. *The Lady is the Boss* (Hong Kong, 1983) brings Hung Gar into the 1980s with a cross-cultural story of the Chinese diaspora.

In the wake of Bruce Lee and the rise of Golden Harvest as a major rival to Shaw Brothers' hegemony within Greater China, Liu's oeuvre speaks to a new world through the idiom of international action still framed by an earlier era, dominated by the "swordplay"/ *wu xia pian*. Although Liu helped to initiate a new period in Chinese transnational co-productions after China began to open its borders with films like *The Martial Arts of Shaolin* (China/Hong Kong, 1986), his career declined when Shaw Brothers moved away from feature production. In fact, *The Martial Arts of Shaolin* (a.k.a. *Northern and Southern Shaolin*), with Jet Li, was the studio's swan song. Liu returned to Shaw Brothers to do *Drunken Monkey* (Hong Kong, 2002), starring Jackie Wu Jing, which did little to revive the studio as a major film producer. Although Liu Jialiang did make other films about Hung Gar (specifically, those featuring Huang Feihong, *Drunken Master II* and *III*, both Hong Kong, 1994), neither involved the Shaw studios. This study explores the way in which Liu interpreted Hung Gar during his tenure at Shaw Brothers, and how Liu's Hung Gar films reflect a specific period within Hong Kong film history.

### **Hung Gar as Metaphor**

Of the various forms of southern Shaolin martial arts, Hung Gar has probably had the most enduring impact on Hong Kong martial arts cinema.<sup>6</sup> Although few stars, stuntmen, or martial arts choreographers have mastered the system, most have a passing familiarity with it. Hung Gar was popularised in Hong Kong by the flamboyant Lam Sai-Wing/Lin Shi-rong (1861-1942), portrayed by many stars in the cinema, but most memorably by Sammo Hung in *The Magnificent Butcher* (Yuen Wo-ping, Hong Kong, 1979). Lam helped to spread the legend of his master Huang Feihong (1846-1925), and Huang, Lam, and Hung Gar were

already part of the popular consciousness when Kwan Tak-Hing (pinyin: Guan Dexing) began to play Huang Feihong in films beginning in 1949.<sup>7</sup> Hung Gar, then, has two aspects—one as a traditional martial arts system and the other as an element of popular culture. Throughout the system’s history, the two have been intertwined in ways that made the system particularly amenable to public performance and popular entertainment.

Since the times of its founder, Hong Xiguan (Wade-Giles: Hung Hsi-kuan), the titular hero of *Hong Xiguan* (a.k.a. *Executioners from Shaolin*), until the end of Manchu rule, the system has depended for its survival on a balancing act between active recruitment of new members and hiding from Qing authorities. Dedicated to overthrowing the non-Han Qing Dynasty and restoring the Ming Dynasty, Hung Gar traces its history back to the same point in time as do the triads and a number of other secret societies dedicated to anti-Manchu (and, often, other illegal) activities.<sup>8</sup> As *Executioners from Shaolin* indicates, the Hung Gar practitioners intermingled with opera troupes travelling around southern China on what were known as “red boats,” Chinese junks plying the Pearl River Delta area used by itinerant acting companies. Since the Chinese opera repertoire includes stories based on military exploits, covering martial arts skill with theatrical bravura allowed for the system to spread—theoretically, training an army to combat Manchu rule, while allowing the rebels to eke out a marginal livelihood on stage. Although the oral history of the system indicates a lineage based on Shaolin martial arts with a literal “marriage” of Hong Xiguan’s tiger expertise with his wife Yong Chun/Wing Chun’s<sup>9</sup> crane training to create Hung Gar (“gar”/jia means “family”), the actual development of Hung Gar is probably more eclectic—incorporating anything that “worked” (i.e., either for combat or theatrical display) into the system.

Even after the system became more settled in Guangdong (far from the imperial court), Hung Gar retained many of its theatrical elements—including a reputation for dramatic lion dancing, a staple of folk ritual used to celebrate the Lunar New Year, bless new

enterprises, and keep martial arts students in top shape without engaging in actual combat. In addition to one-person shadow boxing forms, Hung Gar is also known for elaborate two-person sets. These sets, similar to their less bellicose opera cousins, allow for the basic elements of the system to be displayed publicly to entice new recruits while still veiling the martial (and implicitly rebellious) nature of the art from the authorities.

The late Qing/early Republican period that Huang Feihong represents was a time of momentous political change, colonial incursion, social upheaval, and cultural transformation. As it had since its break from its religious roots in Buddhism, Hung Gar survived at the social margins, providing essential services. Hung Gar was associated with revolutionaries as well as triads (who were very often one and the same), operating as a putative militia, policing the province unofficially, attempting to maintain traditional Chinese culture at the height of colonial empire, dispensing medical care, and providing military schooling. Huang's Po Chi Lam (pinyin: Bao Zhi Lin), was a combination of medical dispensary, clinic, and kung fu *wu guan* (martial institute or "club"), founded by his father Huang Qiying (Wade-Giles: Wong Kei-ying), also a Hung Gar master and one of the famous Ten Tigers of Canton. As its success in Hong Kong indicates, Hung Gar also spread with the Chinese diaspora. With a tendency to be a little "looser" in its criteria for recruits than other systems, Hung Gar not only welcomed strong young men of the working and middle classes, but also women (including, of course, Huang Feihong's last wife who popularised the system and perpetuated her husband's legend long after his death).

Visible, but occult, open, but very difficult to master, traditional, but revolutionary, Hung Gar spread as both a martial arts system and as a popular representation of the contradictions rocking China. In 1949, Kwan Tak-hing as Huang Feihong emerged on screen in colonial Hong Kong the same year that Mao Zedong established the People's Republic across the border, and Kwan's Huang belongs somewhere between Mao's socialist realist

model soldiers and Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist military heroes. Although Kwan's Huang operated "Under the General's Orders" as indicated by the theme song with which he became so inextricably linked, he continued to negotiate the *jianghu*—that public realm of "rivers and lakes" in which criminal triads, bandits, knights-errant, and kung fu masters operate somewhere at the contested edges of official governments, anti-government forces, clan associations, and the criminal underworld.<sup>10</sup> Circulating in Hong Kong and within Greater China, Hung Gar films took up the system as a metaphor for this negotiation of momentous social change.

### **Liu Jialiang, Hung Gar, and Shaw Brothers**

For Liu Jialiang, the "gar" or "family" in Hung Gar, which is the same word as the middle character of his name "chia"/"jia," takes on multiple and complex meanings in his film oeuvre. As Roger Garcia notes,

The family is the nexus of all Liu's work. Martial arts is a family of styles, related like brothers or distant cousins but essentially springing from the same source, the Shaolin Monastery. In the same way, kung fu schools are also family units where all pupils are like brothers presided over by the paternalistic master. Furthermore, History is also like a family, a diversity of interrelated facts constantly giving birth to 'new' reproductions of itself. The cinema is also a family, from the corporate status and identity of Shaw Brothers, through the genre of the martial arts film, to Liu's use of his brother Liu Chia-Jung and his mother's godson, Liu Chia-Hui, in his films. In addition, what appears on the screen is a family of recurrent images, important figures in the family ancestry—Hong Xiguan, Lu Acai. Underlying all of this is the concept of China as a large family and it is within this parameter that Liu can synthesize all the different elements—History, personal experience, national identity, martial arts style, legend—to form a narrative of Being.<sup>11</sup>

Like most southern systems of kung fu, Hung Gar relies on real and fictive family associations to maintain itself. The son of a Hung Gar master Liu Jialiang came to the system through actual family ties. His father Liu Zhan, a student of Lam Sai-Wing, also worked in the movie industry, often portraying his *shifu* Lam, and, as a child, Liu Jialiang worked with his father on the Huang Feihong series with Kwan Tak-hing. Several members of the Liu

family practiced Hung Gar and used their martial skills as choreographers, stunt doubles, and actors. However, Liu Jialiang's principal star and closest collaborator, Gordon Liu (Liu Jiahui), came to the system as an outsider without any blood ties to Liu Jialiang, was adopted by the Liu family, and used the name professionally. As Gordon Liu has stated and reiterated in a recent interview with Roger Garcia,<sup>12</sup> the stigma associated with practising the martial arts led him to hide his involvement with the Liu family and Hung Gar from his parents. In fact, he practised secretly, and only revealed his training when he began to work in the film industry—first doing stunts to help his “elder brother” Liu Jialiang and, eventually, taking up starring roles.

Outside established martial arts families, a stigma associated with martial arts seems to be fairly common and somewhat understandable. Kung fu involves demanding (sometimes physically debilitating) training, long hours (away from studies that may lead to a lucrative career), beating up others and getting beaten up oneself. Although Hung Gar offers discipline and fitness benefits, it also has an insistent link to the *jianghu*. The “Hung” in its name refers not only to its putative founder, but to the “Hung” used by the Ming emperors, which is the same “Hung” used by the Heaven and Earth triad societies in their rituals. The common history and persistent links (actual and imagined) between kung fu and triad enforcers cannot be shaken off easily.

All of this, however, makes Hung Gar a likely candidate for the cinema. Its flamboyance and theatricality, its patriotic associations, its ability to navigate between legitimate and underground society, its openness as well as its occult aspects, its popularity in Hong Kong, which emerged as the centre of Chinese-language commercial film production in the post-war era, all helped to promote this particular kung fu style on global screens. While most actors and most choreographers came from Chinese opera<sup>13</sup> or other systems (or both),

the Liu family, particularly Liu Jialiang, made Hung Gar a fixture at Shaw Brothers, starting in 1965, and solidified its presence within the Hong Kong film industry.

Although Hung Gar has its roots in Fujian Province, its nineteenth- and twentieth-century history marked it as distinctively Cantonese—in terms of folk culture, religious practices, and other traditions. With Kwan Tak-Hing's later Huang Feihong films in direct competition with Shaw Brothers' new style of *wuxia pian*, Shaw Brothers and Liu Jialiang had an opportunity to use Hung Gar as a bridge—a compromise between Cantonese culture and a Mandarin-speaking, exilic, Peking Opera-influenced previous generation of directors. As Leon Hunt points out, Shaw Brothers' Shaolin Temple films fit the bill perfectly:

The Shaolin films can be seen as a refinement of the kung fu film's dialogue with colonialism. Shaolin heroes like (Hong Xiguan) constitute a kind of diaspora, cast out of paradise by aliens who pose as 'Chinese' (anti-imperialism inflected by anti-Maoism). Moreover, the predominant southern focus suggests a revival of the genre's interest in the 'local' (manifested earlier in the Wong Fei-hung series). While the Shaw Brothers Shaolin films are located institutionally within Mandarin dialect cinema, culturally they anticipate the Cantonese emphasis of the 'new' Hong Kong cinema that emerged at the end of the 1970s.<sup>14</sup>

Hong Kong, the film industry, and Greater China were all changing, and Hung Gar provided an idiom to talk about these changes—at least, indirectly.

In addition to an interest in this northern/southern dynamic, Liu's Shaw Brothers films have a distinctive authorial style and persistent themes. Although not the only director in world film history to include lengthy pre-credit sequences and ending freeze-frames, Liu does use both consistently as marks of his authorial vision. He also highlights particular aspects of the genre that unite his films—e.g., graphic depictions of training, privileging of forms and form work over actual combat, emphasis on women and domestic matters, a focus on tensions between the spiritual and the material world (nationalism, patriotism, revolution, religion, etc.), a questioning of the authority of the *shifu* (Cantonese: *sifu*) and the legitimacy of the master-pupil relationship, Confucian ethics in crisis, and, of course, a cinematic



rendering of Hung Gar oral history. Liu envisions Hung Gar for himself, for his actual and fictive family, for his kung fu community, for Hong Kong, the Cantonese viewer, the greater Chinese public, and, later, the international fan (e.g., people like Quentin Tarantino), and Liu's depiction of Hung Gar serves many purposes as a consequence. Liu makes Hung Gar speak to a new generation of filmgoers not as nostalgia for an imagined, shared past, but as a way of understanding a common present and possible future.

### ***Executioners from Shaolin (1977)***

Liu Jialiang would return again and again throughout his career to the origins of Hung Gar in the Shaolin Temple of Fujian (most notably as director with *The 36<sup>th</sup> Chamber of Shaolin*, Hong Kong, 1978).<sup>15</sup> Although the very reality of the temple, let alone its burning, has been disputed, the temple's existence and destruction, the escape of a handful of monks, and, in some accounts their lay followers, have become important parts of the oral history,<sup>16</sup> folklore, and ritual practices of many kung fu and triad societies. In the pre-credit sequence of *Executioners from Shaolin*, Zhi Shan (Lee Hai-shung) fights with Pai Mei (Lo Lieh). These two both hold prominent places in kung fu oral history as important figures in Hung Gar and Pai Mei (White Eyebrow, pinyin: Bai Mei) kung fu respectively. Both systems still exist and boast practitioners around the world. Since Liu knows Hung Gar history intimately, he follows that version of the story, which features Pai Mei as a traitor cleric<sup>17</sup> in league with the Manchu government.

There are several striking features of the initial duel between Zhi Shan and Pai Mei that resonate not only throughout this particular film but throughout many of the other films Liu directed for Shaw Brothers. On the most obvious level, it represents a battle between two opposing political parties—anti-Qing and pro-Qing—and between two competing conceptions of the martial arts—the “hard” style of “tiger claw” (an offshoot of Shaolin that

features strong “external” hand techniques based on rakes and gouges) and the “soft” style of Pai Mei (known for its “internal” techniques in which defence is based on “sucking in” vulnerable areas like the testicles and eyes, and offence is based on “sucking in” and crushing the opponent’s blows).

They are complementary styles, and Pai Mei demonstrates the superiority of the “internal,” the “soft,” the *yin* of his system over the “external,” the “hard,” and the *yang* of tiger claw. The sexual dimension of this seems fairly clear (and has been an important part of the genre since its inception). The “soft” is associated with the “feminine,” and the “hard” is masculine. Any given traditional Chinese martial art offers some sort of balance between the “soft” and the “hard,” although virtually every art favours one over the other. In the opening sequence, Pai Mei’s groin serves as the locus of his martial prowess. However, this power does not come from the assertion of the *yang*, masculine element, but from its absence: i.e., his power comes from his ability to suck in his genitals, becoming invincible by negating his masculinity. Moreover, this negation is not simply defensive; rather, Pai Mei, long white hair drawn up in a top knot, opening his flowing robes to entice his opponent to penetrate his groin, uses this internal suction power to defeat Zhi Shan. When Zhi Shan kicks to the groin, Pai Mei sucks in his opponent’s foot and destroys it. His groin becomes a “vagina dentata,” and the feminine art defeats the masculine. The rest of the film’s narrative revolves around a search for a way to defeat Pai Mei, which involves wedding the “soft” to the “hard” to create a new system of kung fu.

Images of the penetrated (and/or castrated) male body pervade the martial arts film genre (e.g., virtually any film by Zhang Che). The scene in *Executioners from Shaolin* in which Tong Qianjin (Gordon Liu) dies, like Saint Sebastian, after being pierced by arrows, and is proclaimed by his enemy as a “true hero” afterwards, provides simply one case in point. The association of the villain with the feminine, occult forces of the internal arts also has an

established history in the genre. However, this story of a search for a balanced system that marks the birth of Hung Gar parallels a search for a new audience for a studio (in competition with Golden Harvest's kung fu comedies), a new inspiration within a genre still spinning from the death of Bruce Lee, a renegotiation of identity for a greater Chinese community confronted by the fact of the international women's movement and the rise of feminism, and a further renegotiation of "domestic" relations understood not only on a familial but also national level as China began to deal with the ramifications of the death of Mao the year before the film's release.

Although Hung Gar history speaks of Hong Xiguan learning tiger claw from Zhi Shan and crane from Yong Chun to create his family style of Hung Gar, Liu Jialiang takes liberties with that traditional version. In this iteration, Hong Xiguan (Chen Guantai/Chen Kuan-tai), who reprises the role he had taken up in Zhang Che's *Heroes Two* and *Men from the Monastery*, both 1974, choreographed by Liu) never learns crane from Yong Chun (Li Lili/Lily Li), his wife; rather his son, Hong Wenting (Wade-Giles: Hung Wen-ding, played by Huang Yu/Wong Yue), studies under his mother and takes up his father's tiger claw system from a book damaged by nibbling mice. Hong Wenting emerges as the perfect compromise between the "hard" and the "soft." He wears female attire throughout the film—alluding, in an exaggerated way, to dressing boys in girls' clothing (e.g., hair ribbons, etc.) in order to fool any wandering spirits that may envy the family's good fortune. As rebel outlaws, the family has more to worry about than supernatural malice, and not flaunting a male heir to avenge Shaolin may also explain Wenting's transvestitism. Dressed as a girl and using his mother's "feminine" crane style, Wenting easily takes on and defeats a gang of local bullies. A feminised villain like Pai Mei needs a feminised hero to match, and Wenting manages to defeat Pai Mei by starting with tiger and turning to crane during their climactic battle. With huge *yin/yang* symbols adorning his temple, Pai Mei faces another master of this sexual

balancing act in *Wenting*. A young man dressed as a girl defeats an old man dressed as a woman. Transvestitism feeds martial prowess, concretising an imagined balance of elemental forces. Rather than defeating the feminine, *Wenting* mirrors it, and *Hung Gar* serves less a patriotic cause (his father's mission to attack the Manchus) than a personal dispute (avenging the death of the boy's father).

*Yong Chun* becomes a vehicle, then, for the domestication of *Hung Gar*. As the system's "mother," she contributes her knowledge of the crane system. The crane is one of the principal animals that inspired Shaolin martial arts, and there are various versions and offshoots of crane in northern and southern China as well as Tibet. Liu uses the so-called "goat stance" as the foundation for his own cinematic rendering of this character's system. A modification of the open "horse" stance, this stance features toes pointed in and knees bent together to defend against low kicks (particularly attacks to the groin). The goat stance (more often associated with the rival art of *Wing Chun*) is an essential part of *Hung Gar*, and it may have come into the system through *Ng Mui*, the nun who founded *Wing Chun*, named after her most famous student *Yim Wing Chun*. *Ng Mui*, a practitioner of crane boxing, probably used it as the foundation for the newer art of *Wing Chun*. Also, the "Five Pattern" form of *Hung Gar* may have originated with her.<sup>18</sup>

Certainly, during its formation, the system that has come to be known as "*Hung Gar*" grew out of a number of influences. Some martial arts historians maintain that "*Hung Gar*" really referred to the way anybody associated with southern secret anti-Qing societies fought. If a fighting technique seemed useful, it became known as "*Hung Gar*," and vague associations with the Shaolin Temple simply legitimised it. The institutionalisation of the system and its differentiation from other Fujian/Guangdong based styles of kung fu came later. However, using the goat stance may also be looked at in relation to Bruce Lee's connection to *Wing Chun*. Since *Wing Chun* is associated primarily with Bruce Lee (who

studied under Master Yip Man) in the cinema, this rendering of crane as founded on the same physical foundation as Wing Chun allows Liu to subsume Yip Man/Bruce Lee under his rendering of Hung Gar as a catholic system flexible enough to take in and digest its competitors.

Yong Chun's goat stance parallels Pai Mei's lethal groin—one closed to penetration, the other offering penetration as a trap. Hong Xiguan's courtship and marriage to Yong Chun make this clear. Hong and Yong Chun first meet during a fight. One of Hong's kung fu brothers, Xiao Hu (Cheng Kang-yeh), insults Yong Chun and she pummels him. Hong enters using his tiger claw. Yong Chun's uncle recognises it as a marker of Hong's anti-Manchu pedigree, and he stops the fight with his spear. However, the unfinished duel hangs over them on their wedding night. Following the custom of invading the wedding chamber (think of the drunken party in the hotel room from Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet*, USA/Taiwan, 1993), Xiao Hu bursts in and taunts the couple. Yong Chun astutely articulates the problem. Her kung fu threatens Hong's leadership of his *shi di*, his younger kung fu brothers. His virility must be publicly displayed in order to put an end to this uncertainty.

Out of anger, wisdom (knowing that an "easy" wedding night might make her seem even stronger, due to her lust) or traditional modesty, Yong Chun uses her goat stance to close access to her groin to Hung on their wedding night. Although sequestered in the wedding chamber, festively blessed with double happiness signs and crisp bedclothes, Yong Chun puts her sexuality on public display. The fact that Xiao Hu and the others can eavesdrop makes her decision to resist sex a public act of either defiance or face-saving cunning. The camera moves in to take over the function of the peeping Xiao Hu and create an account of the threat to Hong's martial and masculine supremacy. Yong Chun smiles as Hung tries to grip her knees. He fails, but tries again, and a shift of her legs, while still lying supine

on the bed, puts an end to his efforts. She rolls over to sleep, and Hong extinguishes the bedroom candle, clearly frustrated.

In the morning, an encounter with Xiao Hu, who finds his master asleep outside the nuptial chamber, puts Hong's inadequacy on even more public display. Enraged when asked why he is not in bed with his wife, Hong attacks Hu and knocks him off the boat. Yong Chun's uncle gives him sage advice about countering the strength of his niece's goat stance. That night, Hong tries to open his wife's legs again. After an unsuccessful attempt to pry them apart, he strikes at pressure points in her pelvis and easily pulls her legs open. Yong Chun retaliates with crane beak strikes, but Hong easily draws the curtains, extinguishes the candle, and sounds of fighting yield to sounds of kissing. With Hong's masculine prowess assured, the domestic realm need no longer be open to public scrutiny. The following morning, Hong practices a tiger form on the boat's deck, and he welcomes Hu, who had been sleeping on the streets, back on the boat—reinforcing his mastery of the bedroom, his own kung fu followers, and, by extension, the *jianghu*.

It may be worth noting that the only crane kung fu Hong learns (not from his wife, but her uncle) involves countering the goat stance. However, when his son later uses the stance to demand a piggy back ride from his father, Hong again seems powerless against this apparently “feminine” technique. In fact, although Wenting, who learns kung fu from his mother, seems at home with crane, his father never incorporates the feminine into his tiger system. When both father and son make a mess in the house during one of their many duels, Hong Xiguan has a particularly difficult time with the housework, pricking his finger on a sewing needle.

Hong's martial imagination remains linked exclusively to the male body. He works long hours on his copper training dummy. If the conditions are right and he delivers blows precisely, the male dummy (standing in for his opponent Pai Mei) will deliver his “balls”

(silver balls standing in for testicles/the circulation of his life force *qi*) and be defeated. Xiguan never succeeds, but Wenting manages with a partial understanding of tiger claw and a strong goat stance. Wenting uses the goat stance to piggy back on Pai Mei, as he had practised on his own father, and, thus, positions himself to strike at the right place and the right time with a tiger claw to the eyes, defeating his father's killer and avenging his death. The fact that Hong Xiguan earlier broke the power of this stance in the bedroom allows the defeated founder of Hung Gar to "save face," since, unlike Pai Mei, he had already proved himself superior to the power of this goat stance in the wedding chamber.<sup>19</sup>

However, the fact of a feminised villain defeated by a feminised hero using a technique associated with a maternal presence troubles the oral history of the patrilineage of the Hung Gar system. Liu's signature freeze-frame stops the final defeat of Pai Mei in mid-act, and the triumph of the matriarchal line in Hung Gar remains somewhat unfinished. Working in uncertain times, Liu's unfinished meditation on his system offers a revision of the more macho official cinematic history. It must be kept in mind that many films starring female martial arts performers like Zheng Pei-pei, Angela Mao Ying, Hsia Kuang-Li, Hui Yinghong (a.k.a Kara Hui, one of Liu's discoveries for Shaw Brothers), Xu Feng, Polly Shang Kuan Ling-feng, Shih Szu, Nora Miao and others, were quite popular in the late 1960s to mid-1970s—continuing on, too, with Michelle Yeoh, Cynthia Rothrock, and Brigitte Lin, into the 1980s and 1990s—and Hung Gar had to keep pace with the times.

However, the feminisation of Hung Gar does not really provide a "feminist" revisionist history of the system. Rather, it engages with the historical presence of women in that history in a new way, drawing on ancient Taoist wisdom, and explaining the need for a symbolic appropriation of the "feminine" by the martial arts master as a common part of that history. Historically, the "marriage" between the tiger and the crane may have been purely symbolic. When Liu Jialiang visualises that symbolic union in the cinema as an actual

marriage, he brings the oral tradition into conversation with the social changes taking place in the 1970s—from feminism to the death of another “white haired man” (i.e., Chairman Mao) and challenges to his patrilineage (e.g., his wife Jiang Qing and the Gang of Four).

### ***Challenge of the Masters (1976) and Martial Club (1981)***

Liu Acai (Wade-Giles: Liu Ah-tsai) was a contemporary of Hong Xiguan and also a pupil of Zhi Shan.<sup>20</sup> In traditional martial arts, genealogy demonstrates the legitimacy of a system through a Confucian reliance on reverence for ancestors and the purity of the master-disciple relationship. Although Huang Feihong most probably learned Hung Gar primarily from his father Huang Qiyong, Liu Jialiang elevates Huang within the system as an equal of his father by creating (or confirming) a story that he studied with his father’s *shifu* Liu Acai. Liu Jialiang describes his own father’s initiation into the martial arts as follows:

Lam Sai-wing has a school behind Queen’s Road Central. My father watched him every night by the door. One day, somebody came out to throw away some water which spilled over my father. Lam Sai-wing came out and was told that my father was watching day after day by the door. Lam Sai-wing asked my father whether he wanted to learn kung fu. My father said yes but he didn’t have any money. Lam asked my father to go in and watch.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps basing his account on Liu’s father’s initiation into Hung Gar, Huang Feihong persistently stands at Liu Acai’s door in the hope of being accepted by the master. Huang Qiyong’s reluctance to teach his son kung fu opens a path to Huang Feihong’s elevation in the system to a level just below that of Hung Gar’s founder.

Going back to Huang’s early emergence as an exceptional martial artist allows Liu Jialiang to reassert Huang’s place in Hung Gar history by providing a parallel story to the franchise popularised by Kwan Tak-hing (who, by the way, was a White Crane not a Hung Gar practitioner). Gordon Liu, like Jackie Chan (*Drunken Master*, Yuen Wo-ping, Hong



Kong, 1978<sup>22</sup>), reinvigorated Huang Feihong by reintroducing the hero as a young man. In Liu's case, unlike Chan's, it specifically associated him with Hung Gar on and off screen.

*Challenge of the Masters* shows Hung Gar at a much later stage in its history than *Executioners from Shaolin*. As one of the Ten Tigers of Canton, Huang Qiyong brought Hung Gar public recognition, and many practitioners of the art, including Huang Feihong, had semi-official standing in local militias, police units, and, occasionally, in support of actual military operations (including the border war with the French in Indochina). Although still harbouring secret anti-government sentiments, Hung Gar, and other martial arts systems, operated much more openly. The theme song, "Under the General's Orders," inaugurated by the Kwan Tak-hing series, and used in *Challenge of the Masters* and many subsequent films featuring Huang Feihong (including Tsui Hark's *Once Upon a Time in China* series), highlights Hung Gar's public status at this point in its history. *Challenge of the Masters*, made a year before *Executioners from Shaolin*, puts Hung Gar forward in a spirit of openness and reconciliation, and Huang Feihong reestablishes himself as a figure of compassion and compromise—subduing, but not killing or humiliating, his opponents.

However, to reaffirm these Confucian values of compassion and compromise, Huang Feihong jumps a few rungs in the ladder of the Confucian order, bypassing his father and his elders in Hung Gar to emerge as its champion by studying under Liu Acai. If *Executioners from Shaolin* challenged the patrilineage of Hung Gar by elevating the role of Yong Chun as matriarchal force, then *Challenge of the Masters* provides another challenge to patriarchal succession. However, as in *Executioners*, this challenge ends up reaffirming the patriarchal, Confucian base of the system. If the father is not up to the task, then the uncle takes on the job of educating the next generation. Huang Feihong, then, is shaped by a doubling of the paternal influence, just as Hong Wenting, under the layers of female clothing and the techniques of the crane system, remains a male heir to the Hung Gar legacy.

*Challenge of the Masters* begins with a primer on the basics of Hung Gar demonstrated against Liu's customary opening minimalist studio set. Translated as "hard, soft, enforce, direct, inhale, restrain, thrust, and suppress," Huang Feihong (Gordon Liu) and Liu Acai (Chen Kuan-tai) demonstrate various Hung Gar techniques. The fact that Chen played Hong Xiguan twice in 1974 and again in *Executioners* places him in a privileged position to play one of Hong's "younger" kung fu brothers Liu Acai here. The two perform a compendium of the basics from bridge arm techniques, tiger claws, and internal exercises to staff work. Training has always been an important component of the kung fu film, distinguishing it from the emphasis on chivalry and stylised swordplay of the *wuxia pian*. In *Challenge*, after both father and son bow to their *shifu* Liu Acai, the master takes his new pupil to the countryside to train. Although exaggerated for dramatic effect, the training does contain some basic elements of Hung Gar, including stance (or so-called "stepping") forms, horse stance practice, wooden dummy exercises, and, of course, staff work (since Huang Feihong is particularly well known for his mastery of the staff).

While *Executioners from Shaolin* also involves training, the parallel scenes in that film are much more fanciful and less directly related to what martial arts practitioners in the audience might recognise as possible (if not necessarily probable) in their own practice. Although going through a pile of crockery may not be on everyone's training agenda, the basics of forms, equipment exercises, and weapons practice may be. Although neither the fight in the bamboo grove between Uncle Ho (Liu Jialiang) and Huang Feihong nor the ending battle over the *pao* (firecracker) in which the kung fu schools face off could be described as "anti-climactic," I would say that, as in the later 36<sup>th</sup> *Chamber of Shaolin*, the training sequences featuring Huang and Liu provide the visual and dramatic heart of the narrative. As Leon Hunt implies, the ties between training for the film and training within the film were probably quite strong at this time:

Lau Kar-Leung, working mainly as Zhang Che's fighting instructor, was virtually running a martial arts school within the Shaws enclave, training actors to deliver the techniques they would need in the Shaolin Temple cycle that began in 1974.<sup>23</sup>

For those within the martial arts subculture, this emphasis on training mirrors the genuine appeal of kung fu practice for many practitioners. While some cite competition in forms, the thrill of being in the ring, mastery of self-defence, improved physical appearance or health benefits as the main reasons for their love of the martial arts, many others, including people as diverse as Bruce Lee and Gordon Liu, really enjoy training (e.g., from equipment work to non-competitive forms and sparring, as well as everything in between) in and of itself.

Certainly, few would fault *Challenge of the Masters* as a showcase for Hung Gar as a martial arts system. A Website for a martial arts studio featuring the Lau (Liu) Family's approach to Hung Gar boasts: "90% OF THE PEOPLE IN THE WORLD LEARNED Kung Fu because of watching a Lau Kar Leung Movie."<sup>24</sup> However, what for the uninitiated would be the drudgery of daily training seems an unlikely source of material for a commercial film genre. Other genres (sports films, war films, backstage musicals, etc.) do include training as part of their formulae to dramatise the work that goes into creating the performance on screen, guaranteeing the spectator the best value for the price of the movie ticket. However, the visual and dramatic power of the training sequences rarely surpasses the excitement of the climactic battle, competition, or performance.

For Gordon Liu, his right to occupy the place of Huang Feihong on screen needs to be proven, and, probably, within a star system in which the physical prowess of the performer takes centre stage, training helps to legitimise him. Kim Soyoung has also pointed out that training became an important part of the genre around the time that the East Asian economy needed to retool its workforce.<sup>25</sup> Imagining the transformation of the body to meet the challenges of a new age resonates with many in the audience. Coupling this physical training with emotional and moral discipline (i.e., Huang learns to control his temper and show mercy

to his defeated enemies from Liu) provides a blueprint for navigating the changing Chinese (and East Asian, as well as, to a lesser degree, international working class/Third World) realm. Hung Gar mediates the tension between producing an individual hero and manufacturing a skilled and principled class.

Roger Garcia also sees the training sequences as generative of the cinematic form itself:

The master/director constructs the pupil/actor through the mise-en-scene of the Look, Gesture and Voice and is himself re-constructed by the shifts in the text which are improvised through contact with the subject. These training scenes become rehearsals, phantasy plays and scenarios for the actual tests, the set piece combats against 'enemies.' The latter, who are there for the purpose of engagement, become cinematic insertions of the audience; kung fu which has been learnt and rehearsed is tried out on them.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, training produces the filmmaker, performer, and the spectator as well. Hung Gar becomes the point of contact—a battleground that also promises imaginative regeneration and reconciliation. Women, in the form of a fellow student played by Li Li-li, also have a place in this picture, although a more subordinate one. Reconciliation (between father and son, master and pupil, righteous and criminal, male and female) takes precedence over the vengeful hero, and Hung Gar's ability to mediate and survive becomes the vehicle for this story.

Another film about Hung Gar from Liu Jialiang, *Martial Club*, takes this a step further by adding the competition between northern and southern systems of Chinese martial arts into the mix. Again, Gordon Liu plays a young Huang Feihong, who becomes embroiled in a rivalry between two competing kung fu schools involved in a lion dancing rather than *pao* competition. Although lion dancing exists in the north, it does not hold the same significance as it does within the martial arts community of southern China. Performed religiously to drive away evil and promote good luck during the Lunar New Year and on other auspicious occasions, the lion dance serves a civic function, allows martial artists to display their

physical prowess openly, raises money (since the lions “eat” red envelopes—*hong bao, lai see*—filled with lucky money), and entices new recruits. A strong lion dance team signals a prosperous and stable *wu guan*. In this film, the focus on the lion dance underscores the differences between northern and southern arts. Considerable care is taken, during the opening moments of the film, to introduce the “rules” of lion dancing to the audience. Liu Jialiang explains the opening of the film as follows:

I just love shooting the customs and practices of the martial trade: how you do the lion dance, its etiquettes, how you must not blink your eyes or raise your foot, how you must not kick your opponent, or raise the lion’s head above people, or smell the lion’s tail... the etiquette, the morality, the movements and manners of the lion, how with just one lift you build a human tower... it’s just mind-boggling.<sup>27</sup>

The following fight featuring lions from rival schools also illustrates the way in which tensions among competing *wu guan* often erupted publicly and were played out on the streets (a reminder of the often thin line between a martial arts school and a street gang).

In *Martial Club*, Huang faces a northern practitioner Master Shan (Johnnie Wong/Wang Lung-wei) who ends up a guest at a corrupt rival school. In the final fight between Huang and the northerner, the film harkens back to the Kwan Tak-hing series with the battle staged in a narrow alleyway (a staple of the earlier films). This puts Huang at an advantage, since Hung Gar was developed to be effective in confined areas. As Ng Ho describes it:

When Hong Xiguan returned to Guangdong from the North, the story goes, he found that the streets of Guangzhou were very narrow, compared with those of northern cities. Since Shaolin fighting styles are characterized by broad, sweeping movements, they can be employed only in relatively unconfined spaces. In the narrow streets and alleys of Guangzhou, they were robbed of most of their potency. Hong and Zhi Shan therefore jointly adapted the Shaolin styles to suit this different environment. Both the ‘Horse’ stance and the footwork associated with the Hong Fist were revised so that they could be used with their original power in an area of no more than four brick tiles.<sup>28</sup>

Another version of the story has it that the muddy rice paddies, mountainous terrain, and time spent on boats made practising the more expansive northern Shaolin style impractical, and Hung Gar stances emerged to be effective in this new environment. In sharp contrast to his opponent who has some difficulty executing his techniques in the alley, Huang displays the virtues of Hung Gar's basis in the major Shaolin animal forms—e.g., tiger, crane, panther, snake, and dragon—as well as Iron Wire Fist (also considered to be an invention of the nun Ng Mui/Wu Mei, the founder of Wing Chun, developed for close combat in close quarters) within the constraints of the alleyway.

As the mainland opened its doors more and more for investment and trade, looking north became more important for the film industry. Shaw Brothers took advantage of the opportunity to promote their films in the newly reopened Guangdong Province as well as to make a play for a broader market. Northern/southern stories, eventually co-productions like *Martial Arts of Shaolin* set in the mainland with mainland talent, became part of the martial arts film lexicon. In *Martial Club*, the point of view of the northerner becomes an important aspect of the narrative. The corruption within the Guangdong kung fu community shocks the northern martial arts master. Caught between his obligation to his hosts, who are corrupt, and the challenge of the upstart Huang Feihong, who may be righteous but clearly on the “wrong” side in the dispute, he attempts to navigate a course in which he can maintain his own integrity. As in many of Liu's other films, the conflict remains somewhat unresolved when the film ends.

### ***The Lady is the Boss* (1983)**

The themes of the survival of Hung Gar as a system, the role of women and the overseas Chinese within the martial arts, and the relationship between kung fu and triad societies, form the bedrock for *The Lady is the Boss*. What were rivalries within the martial arts world based

on political alliance in *Executioners from Shaolin* and differences in style in *Challenge of the Masters* and *Martial Club* become differences within a system (between the old and new order within Hung Gar) and between the “legitimate” place of kung fu in society as opposed to criminal triad gangs who share so much of the same history. As a follow up to *My Young Auntie* (1981) also directed by Liu Jialiang and starring Liu, Xiao Hou (Wade-Giles: Hsiao Hou), and Kara Hui, *The Lady is the Boss* deals with many of the same themes, including tradition versus modernity, local wisdom versus global education, and the emergence of women as a force within the martial arts community.

Although often dismissed as a lesser work by critics, *The Lady is the Boss* uses comedy to examine the state of Hung Gar in Hong Kong and overseas in the mid-1980s. Even though Liu uses satiric hyperbole to comment on Hung Gar, the issues that surface—from a backlash against increasing diversity in the *wu guan* to problems of student recruitment and triad relations—ring all too true for any viewer actively involved in the martial arts subculture. In this case, by bringing Hung Gar into the contemporary world, Liu pushes the use of Hung Gar as a metaphor for Hong Kong even further by using it as a lens to take a close-up look at Hong Kong society through the microcosm of the Hung Gar *wu guan*.

The place of the *men*/door in the Chinese title *Zhang Men Ren* needs some elaboration, since it figures in the film’s Chinese title and becomes the focus of the film. The “door” in the title of so many kung fu films goes beyond the physical gate of the training studio. It represents entry into the system with a proprietary sense of inclusion and exclusion within the art. As one of Liu Jialiang’s relatives, Liu Jiayung (Cantonese: Lau Kar-wing) explains it:

They call it “in the door student,” and “out the door student.” Out the door students are when you are teaching just to make a living. People are coming to pay a fee and learn. Maybe they learn for a week, a month, a few months, maybe a year, two years, and then you never see them again. In the door students actually kneel down and [bow to] sifu, so they’ll give their sifu a red [envelope] (also known as “Lai See,” which contains a small amount of lucky money), and then they will take the tea and drink.

They give the sifu tea. These are closed door students, these ones are expected to be the next generation, and take what we have a step further.<sup>29</sup>

A good deal of the plot of *The Lady is the Boss* surrounds this issue of the relationship between the “in the door student” and the “out the door student,” and Hung Gar’s commitment to each type of student, as well as the role of the *shifu* in handling the needs of each.

A somewhat neglected Hung Gar school in Hong Kong becomes a point of controversy when the colonial government steps in to evict the school from a building site it needs as part of a road expansion project. Tradition meets the bulldozers of modernity, with the road serving as a concrete reminder of speed and movement as the inexorable forces of “progress.” The *shifu* of the school, Hsia Yuan (Liu Jialiang), meets with the elders of his branch of Hung Gar to determine the fate of this *wu guan*. Unlike many of Liu’s other films, this film does not begin with a demonstration of martial arts; rather, it opens with a semi-formal gathering of a group of older men who serve as advisors, and, probably, financial supporters of the *wu guan*.<sup>30</sup>

In *The Lady is the Boss*, Liu provides a picture of a martial arts world that has changed dramatically from the days of Hong Xiguan and Huang Feihong. Hung Gar has become an enclave of traditional culture within a rapidly changing urban environment. No longer a rebel sect or serving a semi-official police/medical/religious function, Hung Gar becomes a bridge between the older semi-religious ceremonial functions and the modern world of martial arts, with its emphasis on self-defence, health, and “entertainment.” Hung Gar had already gone “global” in the later Qing/early Republican period with the rise in East-West contacts from trade, colonialism, and the growth of the overseas Chinese community through the success of merchants as well as the exploitation of Chinese “coolie” labour. However, following Thatcher’s visit to Beijing in 1982, thoughts of Hong Kong’s changing



role in the world and the power the influence of one woman may have on the colony's fate must have been on the minds of many in the audience both in Hong Kong and abroad, around the time *Martial Club* appeared on screen.

In this case, the grandmaster's emigration to the United States has created a vacuum, and the elders are at a loss. They agree to contact him about moving the school. In the meantime, Hsia Yan rallies his students to protect the "door" of the *wu guan* from a demolition crew backed up by the police. The students represent a cross-section of the working classes—cook, fishmonger, butcher, and bicycle gas deliveryman. Unlike the elders, who, dressed in suits, seem to be more upwardly mobile and middle-class, these core kung fu students represent the illiterate "backward" aspects of Hung Gar with low-level jobs and an inability to read the telegram that eventually arrives from the grandmaster. The split in the supporters of the *wu guan* represents the widening gulf in the larger society between the educated elite and the working classes, who were becoming increasingly marginalised as Hong Kong's economy moved from manufacturing to a finance, service, and information base. The core students represent an impoverishment of Hung Gar, a step down from the cultivated hero Huang Feihong of an earlier generation.

The grandmaster, however, has a plan. He has agreed to move the school and send someone from the United States to run it and "modernise" it. However, when his daughter, Chan Mei-ling (Kara Hui) arrives at the airport, no one recognises her as the new *shifu*—the *zhang men ren*/"keeper of the door" or "boss"—who will lead the school. Letting slip expletives in English like "oh shit," she appears with a guitar slung over her shoulder, headband, sun glasses, shorts, and tank top, weighed down with motley-coloured bags, providing a sharp contrast with the traditionally dressed kung fu delegation there to meet her. To counter their scepticism, she proves her affiliation to the system by reciting the principles of Hung Gar and giving a traditional kung fu bow (cat stance with clenched fist covered by

an open palm—fist and defensive stance to show martial readiness covered by the peace and goodwill of the open palm). Along with the photo of her father the grandmaster, this places her within the system and, more specifically, within a certain order within the system, and her acknowledgement of Hsia Yan as “elder brother” confirms her standing as superior to the students and on a par (although not quite the same level) as their *shifu*.

The characters in the film spend the rest of the narrative trying to make sense of this contradictory figure who represents the future of Hung Gar. Liu Jialiang articulates the irony of the situation:

If you want to learn martial arts, you have to learn it from foreigners. Since everyone is teaching overseas, eventually foreigners will be teaching us Chinese kung fu.<sup>31</sup>

Female, yet elevated above the men of the system with a clear claim to this place within the Confucian structure of the *wu guan*, a foreigner brought in to teach traditional Chinese martial artists about what should be their own local culture, a female *shifu* who criticises the traditional methods of training, a *zhang men ren* who opens the door too wide to entice a younger generation of students into the system, and a force within the *jianghu* who challenges the triad/kung fu status quo, she may be a “progressive” force that will save Hung Gar from extinction or a “destructive” force that will doom it to oblivion. Women and the Chinese of the diaspora offer a promise as well as a threat to Hong Kong—emphasising the port’s “progressive” posture as a place where even women and foreigners may succeed in its open, democratic, multicultural milieu, as well as its reactionary aspect as a city suspicious of women, non-Chinese cultural influences, people who mingle with other races, and those who do not conform to the status quo.

Chan Mei-ling, basically, represents an environment in which women and unorthodox business tactics have emerged in the mid-1980s with a vengeance as forces of globalisation, the information economy, and finance/service sectors eclipse heavy industry and even light

manufacturing in the booming economies of East Asia. Hung Gar becomes the platform for the exploration of Hong Kong's place within a changing business environment with a "backward" China to its north and a painfully "progressive" world beyond its borders in Europe and America. Tradition aside, Mei-ling, following the direction of the new economy, takes an interest in the *wu guan* as a business and dedicates her attention to publicity, promotion, and recruitment.

The film contrasts Hsia Yuan and Chan Mei-ling as extremes. Hsia has too few and Chan too many students; Hsia is too traditional and Chan too unorthodox; Hsia too accommodating and Chan too confrontational, etc. While both struggle to confirm Hung Gar's place within the modern world, they end up in a battle of wills that neither can win. As within most of Liu's oeuvre, the emphasis ends up being placed on balance and reconciliation. (Given that Liu himself plays Hsia, the scales may be tipped in the direction of nostalgia and the pull of the traditional strengths of the system. However, Mei-ling is played by one of Liu's martial arts protégés with whom he was intimately involved, and this off-screen relationship may also have some bearing on the narrative.)

Mei-ling's gender (female) and nationality (American) mark her as a disruptive outside force. However, given the fact that the original *wu guan* has been razed for a road, Hung Gar has already been disturbed by the forces of modernity. Her difference marks her kung fu. Rather than encouraging stance training, Mei-ling prefers aerobics and calisthenics. Echoing the martial arts discourse of the time found in magazines devoted to kung fu, she wants to make Hung Gar "scientific" and critiques traditional training as "past tense." Citing Chinese ethnicity as a point of difference, Hsia Yuan tells her: "Little sister, you've been Westernised in America, but Hong Kong has many Chinese people, so I think we should be more traditional."

Literally turning her back on tradition (by refusing to take part in her own initiation ceremony as head), Mei-ling embarks on a programme of dragging Hung Gar into the modern business world. To achieve this, she takes her handful of “in the door” students and sets them on a campaign to recruit as many “out the door” students as possible. Attracting a crowd by guzzling beer in a *dai pai dong*, Mei-ling encourages them to be as outrageous as possible to promote the *wu guan*. Their campaign includes soliciting non-Chinese at the Star Ferry, using a traffic accident to promote the benefits of kung fu for improved reflexes, promising a career in stunt work at a screening of Tang Jia’s<sup>32</sup> *Shaolin Prince* (Hong Kong, 1982), and encouraging betting on sparring matches involving young children. Their stunts get them in trouble with the law, and Hsia Yuan reprimands Mei-ling. However, she sticks with her plan to open the school up, and the older master leaves in frustration.

Mei-ling next targets disco-dancing, pot-smoking youth as potential kung fu students. She dresses her five followers in what passes (comically) for “cool” clothing circa 1983, including Afro wigs, shaved heads, sun glasses, make-up, jewelry, vests, and bell bottoms. They begin with a small after-hours dance club. A poster of John Travolta from *Saturday Night Fever* (USA, 1977) is affixed to the door. Given that Tony Manero (John Travolta) has a poster of Bruce Lee in his bedroom in the American film, this disco-era poster seems to bring this eclectic mix of youth cultures full circle. However, dipping into youth subcultures for students gets her into trouble, since she draws from the same pool used by the triads for their recruits.

Unlike her elders, Mei-ling has apparently had no experience with triads. However, her cocky attitude, phalanx of strongmen, and knowledge of kung fu mark her as belonging in the *jianghu*. When she begins to assert herself in the disco, the triad in charge does not challenge her, but, instead, makes her aware of his presence and association with the underworld by offering her a triad handshake and asking her about her own associations. One

of the most basic “laws” of triad society requires that other triad members be properly acknowledged when met. However, Mei-ling answers with a kick to the groin.

When the abused gangster reports to his boss, the triad head does not appear displeased. Instead, he says Mei-ling should be allowed to train the young gangsters, since they will return with better skills. In a similar way, Hsia Yuan gets little sympathy from the Hung Gar elders, who tell him to be patient with Mei-ling’s plans to modernize the *wu guan*. In fact, although the film makes it the target of satire, Mei-ling has opened the door to students formerly excluded from the martial arts community, including women, gay men, and participants in spectacular youth subcultures (e.g., disco). This parallels a trend in the martial arts worldwide to open up to people who had been ostracised, particularly in the United States, but also in Europe and Asia as well. For example, although African Americans had trained in East Asian martial arts for decades (many because of their contacts with the arts in the military), the fact that Bruce Lee took on African American students gave this fact added visibility in the 1970s. With a greater public presence in all walks of life, gay men began to study Chinese martial arts more openly.<sup>33</sup> Also, with the growth of East Asian martial arts coming at a time when feminist calls for self-defence—“to take back the night”—and visibility of women in sports were on the ascent, more women also surfaced within the martial arts community globally.<sup>34</sup>

Initially, Mei-ling’s outrageous tactics appear to work. The students seem satisfied with their training, and a group of bar hostesses uses some of the self-defence techniques they have learned against their unruly clients. Again, although the film makes light of their abilities and judgment in using their skills, the fact remains that, with growing awareness of issues involving violence against women and sexual harassment, these prostitutes, fully supported by their female *shifu*, use Hung Gar to take a stand against the male establishment. Going back to the roots of Hung Gar in resistance to the Manchus, *The Lady is the Boss* again

champions the underdog against unjust authority. In fact, rather than just supporting Hung Gar as the women do in *Executioners from Shaolin*, *Challenge of the Masters*, and *The Martial Club*, Mei-ling acts as a *nuxia* (a martial heroine) and demands “justice” (if not “equality”) in the *jianghu*.

Hsia Yuan, needless to say, has more luck handling the triads than his female “boss” or his non-traditional students. His display of martial skill and willingness to acquiesce to triad demands for money put him in the mobsters’ good graces. However, when he asks the Hung Gar elders for advice on handling Mei-ling’s disappearance later in the film, he meets with less sympathy. They complain that he has turned his back on his Confucian obligation to take care of the grandmaster’s daughter. His inability to handle the problem with the triads to her satisfaction has led to his failure as a Hung Gar practitioner and loss of face as a *shifu*. Rubbing the failure in, the elders suggest bringing in the police (an egregious “loss of face” for a traditional martial artist), but the humbled Hsia refuses and vows to find and protect the grandmaster’s daughter on his own. To do so, he modifies his commitment to tradition slightly by telling his “younger brothers” to dance in order to distract their attackers at the disco<sup>35</sup> and to use flash cameras to blind their opponents at a raid of the triad stronghold.

Unlike Hsia Yuan, Mei-ling refuses to accommodate triad demands or seek help from the elders, and she plots an ambush on gang headquarters. Blending martial arts skill with a new craze in mountain bikes, she leads a Cavalry charge on the gangsters, and triumphs. Mei-ling’s penchant for aerobics wear, interest in disco music, and passion for cycling bring her closer to the world in which many martial artists would find themselves in the 1980s and 1990s: i.e., the fitness studio. Moving from the mainly male, mostly Asian world of the *wu guan* to the broader arena of personal fitness, kung fu changed, and Mei-ling leads the way for Hung Gar.

However, the gym has another aspect as well, since it is connected to competitive sports and the nationalism that can be evoked in an international arena like the Olympics or Asian Games. The triads hold Mei-ling, whom they have kidnapped, in a sports stadium. Hsia Yuan and his top disciples charge in to take over the gymnasium. Although allowed in martial arts competitions, kung fu is not recognised internationally as a sport. To address this issue, the People's Republic developed competitive *wu shu*. Meaning simply “martial arts” in Chinese, the term has taken on a stigma, in some circles, as a contrived hybrid, drawing mainly on northern Shaolin, with a mixture of Peking Opera acrobatics and other arts. Not traditional, not designed for combat, and overtly theatrical, the PRC's bid to amalgamate and institutionalise Chinese martial arts has met with scorn from many in the kung fu community. Aligned with gymnastics, competitive *wu shu* bases its evaluation on set routines—empty-hand as well as weapons forms. Hsia Yuan bursts in to take control of a space—filled with parallel bars, trampolines, and rings—dedicated to competitive gymnastics and *wu shu* that have drained many martial arts schools of their more promising students. The modern gym holds Mei-ling, and her version of Hung Gar reform, captive, and she must be freed by a return to tradition.

Gordon Liu and Xiao Hou, who play supporting roles as Hung Gar students, emerge in this penultimate fight scene to reprise roles they played in other Liu Jialiang films. Citing *36<sup>th</sup> Chamber*, Gordon Liu appears with a bald head, naked to the waist, and sits in a lotus posture to remind the audience of his portrayal of San De (“Three Virtues”), Liu's portrait of the monk who opened Shaolin to lay practitioners and encouraged the beginning of Hung Gar. Xiao Hou leaps in to fight in the monkey style he used in Liu's *Mad Monkey Kung Fu* (Hong Kong, 1979), in which he played opposite Liu, his kung fu master. Traditional arts defeat the villains, and the traditional Chinese martial artists affirm their “purity” through affiliation

with the Shaolin Temple, Buddhism, and Chinese opera, as well as a clear Confucian legacy in Chinese kung fu.

This quotation also helps to push to the fore Shaw Brothers' record of successful martial arts films. Although coming at the end of a generic cycle, making a turn to comedy, parody, and the baroque, *The Lady is the Boss* still boasts Shaw Brothers' stars, production values, and off-screen talent. The ending reinvigorates the genre by putting its past successes at the service of a new generation of performers and viewers. In this case, Hung Gar's face may have been irrevocably changed by more diverse practitioners, but the martial arts of the imagination remain male, Chinese, and traditional. Competing with Golden Harvest and a slew of new companies emerging on the scene with a turn to comedy, Shaw Brothers allows comedy in the door and puts it at the service of its cinematic tradition. New audiences, like new adherents to Hung Gar, must bow to the old order or be alienated by the film's principal address to its "ideal" viewer, who laughs *at* women, gays, and the younger generation and *with* the wiser older men with superior martial skills.

At the end of the fight, after demonstrating his ability to wield knives (the *dao*—knife, broad sword, or hatchet—has always been the favoured weapon of triads), Hsia Yuan triumphs over the gangsters, but Mei-ling seems less concerned about defeating criminals and her own rescue from their clutches and more excited by the beauty of Hsia's "free fighting," which she feels will definitely attract more students to the *wu guan*. However, Mei-ling's days as the *zhang men ren* have come to an end. Whether she leaves because of her failure as a *shifu*, a continuing threat from the triads, or the fact that she misses her father and the United States, remains unclear. Dressed in Chinese attire for the first time in the film, Mei-ling waits to say farewell to Hsia Yuan. A figure, dressed in a Western tuxedo, appears, carrying flowers. The students mistake him for a pervert and leap to attack him. A freeze-frame captures them in midair about to strike Hsia Yuan who has come to the airport to see



Mei-ling off. The image also grabs a moment of reconciliation between the old and the new, traditional and the modern, native and the foreign, the male and the female within Hung Gar, Hong Kong, and Greater China. However, whether the flowers and the tuxedo point to a real romance (and a possible marriage) is left an open question.

## Conclusion

It may be worth noting that Liu Jialiang's renegotiation of the martial arts film through issues of gender mirrors a phenomenon that Yvonne Tasker has seen as part of the global emergence of the action genre around the same time. Although transvestitism, gender bending, and the importance of the *yin* and the *yang* of martial arts to the genre go back decades, Liu Jialiang's foregrounding of precisely these issues through his re-imagining of Hung Gar as a system brings Shaw Brothers more in line with global trends. The "softer" hero, like Hong Wenting and, to a lesser degree, the young Huang Feihong, parallels the rise of an action hero who can incorporate attributes considered "feminine," from extreme masochism to gentleness and compassion, within the "hard" male body, often outdoing the "femininity" of biological females.

Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill Volume 2* (USA, 2004) brings the issue of gender full circle.<sup>36</sup> For Tarantino the reference to Hung Gar fades out of the picture (only an echo remaining in the Bride's assertion that she knows "tiger-crane," the foundation of Hung Fist), and *Executioners from Shaolin* (within the postmodern realm of citation in which the image refers to another mass-produced, mass-mediated copy rather than any "original") becomes the direct citation for the depiction of the Bride's initiation into kung fu under the tutelage of Pai Mei (Gordon Liu). Ironically, Gordon Liu, who fought against the forces of Pai Mei in the Shaw Brothers film (although not directly against the master himself), takes up the role of the arch opponent of his own kung fu system, Hung Gar. Dressed as a carbon copy of the

character's incarnation in *Executioners*, Pai Mei trains two women, Bride (Uma Thurman) and Elle (Daryl Hannah), in an unspecified martial art that includes close range punches characteristic of Wing Chun, eye gouges similar to those found in Hung Gar, and classic Chinese straight sword techniques. Robbed of an eye by the master during training, Elle returns, as shown in flashback, to kill Pai Mei. The "feminine," which the flowing robed, white haired master has perfected in his art, turns against him in the physical body of the woman.

Elle's execution of Pai Mei parallels the Bride's killing of Bill (David Carradine);<sup>37</sup> thus, two women kill their masters in the film. *Kill Bill* moves far beyond Liu Jialiang's acquiescence of women's role in the martial arts in *Executioners from Shaolin* and dialogue with feminism in *The Lady is the Boss*. In fact, Tarantino pushes beyond the Shaw Brothers (whose logo introduces the saga), bypassing camp aesthetics on his road to postmodernity. Hung Gar, in the body of one of its most public practitioners, Gordon Liu, and through the citation of the system's history indirectly with reference to *Executioners from Shaolin*, tags along.

Hung Gar also emerges as a player in Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle* (Hong Kong/China, 2004). Chu Chi Ling, an actual Hung Gar master, plays an effeminate tailor, who surfaces as one of the kung fu masters hidden among the inhabitants of Pig Sty Alley. Hung Gar's Ba Gua staff (Eight Diagram Pole) also makes an appearance in the film. Following in the footsteps of Liu Jialiang, Chow "queers" Hung Gar by making it the speciality of an apparently "gay" character. Like Tarantino, Chow works within an imagined kung fu world, shaped by Shaw Brothers and the contribution of Liu to it under Zhang Che and, later, as a director in his own right. It seems fitting, then, too, that Tsui Hark should bring Liu and the history he represents into his own imagination of the Qing supporters'/Ming loyalists' martial arts battles of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in

*Seven Swords* (Hong Kong/China, 2005). A holdout of an old order, Liu's character, much like the kung fu underground in *Kung Fu Hustle*, serves as the cynosure of a martial arts world under siege from outside forces. Embattled and/or disguised, Hung Gar, feminised, if not emasculated, holds out in *Kill Bill*, *Kung Fu Hustle* and *Seven Swords* as a citation that inevitably leads back to Liu's Hung Gar films for Shaw Brothers.

The postmodern turn Hung Gar has taken in the movies may, indeed, be a consequence of Liu Jialiang's own aestheticising of the martial arts. Referring to himself in the third person, he describes his own approach to teaching and training as follows:

I think there are four motives for learning kung fu—even when training a disciple, I have to ask which aspect he intends to learn. The first aspect is defence, the second is health, the third is performance, and the fourth type is mine—to make movies. Why did I use kung fu to make movies—to display the art and to aestheticise fist fighting. If you want to learn all those aspects of kung fu, you will have to spend a lot of time. Ever since entering the film industry to make movies and aestheticising kung fu, Lau Kar-leung has himself become the kung fu movie.<sup>38</sup>

As Liu chronicled Hung Gar history at the Shaw Brothers, he also transformed it. Moving beyond the *wu guan* and the streets, Hung Gar, like Liu, has become “the kung fu movie” within a global postmodern cinematic aesthetic.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in “Interview with Lau Kar-leung: We Always Had Kung Fu,” in Li Cheuk-to, ed., *A Tribute to Action Choreographers* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong International Film Festival Society, 2006), 62.

<sup>2</sup> There are, of course, some notable exceptions: Roger Garcia, “The Autarkic World of Liu Chia-Liang,” in Lau Shing-hon, ed., *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film* (Hong Kong: Urban Council of Hong Kong, 1980), 121-134; Garcia's “Postscript” appeared in Italian in *Cinemasia*, Vol. 1, Marsilio Editori, 1983; Tony Rayns, “Resilience: The Cinema and Liu Jialiang,” in Li Cheuk-to, ed., *A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Eighties* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1984), 51-7. See also remarks on Liu in Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), Leon Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters: From Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), and Bey Logan, *Hong Kong Action Cinema* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press), 1995 (Logan has also trained in Hung Gar and seems particularly well acquainted with its depiction in Hong Kong cinema).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that both Zhang and Liu worked closely with scriptwriter I Kuang (pinyin: Ni Kuang), who wrote the scripts for *The Challenge of the Masters* and *Executioners from Shaolin* as well as many other key works by both directors. For more on the Zhang Che films that led up to Liu Jialiang's own directorial career, see David Desser, "Making Movies Male: Zhang Che and the Shaw Brothers Martial Arts Movies, 1965-1975," in Laikwan Pang and Day Wong, eds., *Masculinities and Hong Kong Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 17-34.

<sup>4</sup> There has been considerable recent attention given to the role of the choreographer in martial arts films: see Mélanie Morrissette, "Choreography: Unknown and Ignored/Demystifying the Choreographer's Role in Martial Arts Cinema" (*Off-Screen*, August 31, 2002, [http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new\\_offscreen/choreography.html](http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new_offscreen/choreography.html)); Aaron D. Anderson, "Asian Martial Arts Cinema, Dance, and the Cultural Languages of Gender" (*Asian Journal of Communication* 11.2, 2001), 58-78; Aaron Anderson, "Violent Dances in Martial Arts Films" (*Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 44, Fall 2001, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc44.2001/aarona/andersontextonly.html>).

<sup>5</sup> For more on Hung Gar in the cinema, see my essay, Gina Marchetti, "Going to the Source: *Kung Fu Hustle* and Its Cinematic Roots at the 29<sup>th</sup> HKIFF" (*Hong Kong CineMagic*, May 5, 2005, <http://www.hkcinemagic.com/en/page.asp?aid=135>).

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the history of the martial arts that figure most prominently in Hong Kong cinema, see Ng Ho, "When the Legends Die—A Survey of the Tradition of the Southern Shaolin Monastery," in Lau Shing-hon, ed., *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film*, 56-70.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the series featuring Kwan Tak-hing, see Yu Mo-Wan, "The Prodigious Cinema of Huang Fei-Hong: An Introduction," in Lau Shing-hon, ed., *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film*, 79-86.

<sup>8</sup> Zhang Che's *Five Shaolin Masters* (Hong Kong, 1975) deals with the five "ancestors" who escaped the burning of the temple and founded the Heaven and Earth Society/Hung Society triad.

<sup>9</sup> This is not the same Wing Chun who lent her name to Wing Chun kung fu. However, Wing Chun kung fu is certainly related to White Crane and was developed, supposedly, as a counter to the dominant Shaolin boxing of the time.

<sup>10</sup> For a definition of *jiang hu*, see the entry in Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jiang\\_Hu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jiang_Hu)).

<sup>11</sup> Garcia, "The Autarkic World of Liu Chia-Liang," 125.

<sup>12</sup> Roger Garcia, unpublished interview with Gordon Liu, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the Chinese opera training of many in the Hong Kong industry during this period, see Yung Sai-shing, "Moving Body: The Interactions Between Chinese Opera and Action Cinema," in Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li, and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu, eds., *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 21-34.

<sup>14</sup> Hunt, 48-9.

<sup>15</sup> It must be noted that most of the films Liu directed during his career do not deal directly with Hung Gar history, although many beyond the four examined here do reference the system directly or indirectly.

<sup>16</sup> I am basing my accounts of kung fu oral history on my own experience talking with kung fu practitioners, Internet sites devoted to the various systems, and materials from *Inside Kung-Fu*, *The Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, etc.

<sup>17</sup> The story goes that Pai Mei is a Buddhist monk who turns against his Shaolin brothers, and, in some versions, he turns to Taoism. In this film, he is dressed as a Taoist.

<sup>18</sup> See the various accounts of Ng Mui in Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ng\\_Mui#Ng\\_Mui\\_in\\_the\\_traditions\\_of\\_Five-Pattern\\_Hung\\_Kuen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ng_Mui#Ng_Mui_in_the_traditions_of_Five-Pattern_Hung_Kuen)).

<sup>19</sup> In a sequel of sorts, *The Clan of the White Lotus* (Hong Kong, 1980), directed by Lo Lieh with martial arts choreography by Liu Jialiang, a story about avenging the death of Pai Mai takes up many of the same themes as *Executioners from Shaolin*.

<sup>20</sup> For a genealogy of Hung Gar, see the entry on the system on the *Hong Kong CineMagic* Web site (<http://www.hkcinemagic.com/en/lexique.asp?alpha=H#128>).

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Hong Kong Film Archive, eds., *The Making of Martial Arts Films—As Told by Filmmakers and Stars* (Hong Kong: Provisional Urban Council, 1999), 70.

<sup>22</sup> He reprised the role much later in *Drunken Master II* (Hong Kong, 1994), the sequel directed by Liu Jialiang.

<sup>23</sup> Leon Hunt, 10.

<sup>24</sup> For more, see the Web site devoted to the school (<http://www.laufamilyhunggar.com/>).

<sup>25</sup> Kim Soyung, "Genre as Contact Zone: Hong Kong Action and Korean *Hwalkuk*" in Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li, and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu, eds., *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*, 97-110.

<sup>26</sup> Garcia, "The Autarkic World of Liu Chia-Liang," 132.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in "Interview with Lau Kar-leung: We Always Had Kung Fu," in Li Cheuk-to, ed., *A Tribute to Action Choreographers* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong International Film Festival Society, 2006), 62.

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<sup>28</sup> Ng, 63.

<sup>29</sup> Eric Pellerin, "INTERVIEW: Mark Houghton and Lau Kar-yung on Lau family kung fu and moviemaking" (*Kung Fu Cinema: Screen Fighting News and Reviews*, November 16, 2005, <http://www.kungfucinema.com/articles/111601.htm>). Lau Kar-wing has also been involved with a film project devoted to the history of Hung Gar called the *Hung Gar Story*.

<sup>30</sup> I will refer to the "wu guan" as a "school," but this really is not a proper translation. A *wu guan* does offer martial arts instruction, but it serves many other functions as well—including acting as a ritual hall for the "ancestors" of the system, providing "services" like lion dancing or security for the community, occasionally serving as an informal "clinic" of traditional medicine, or an entertainment or meeting centre for its members, etc.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in "Interview with Lau Kar-leung: We Always Had Kung Fu," 63.

<sup>32</sup> Of course, Tang Jia and Liu Jialiang were the principal martial arts choreographers for Zhang Che during the height of his directorial career at Shaw Brothers.

<sup>33</sup> For more on gay and lesbian martial artists and their international visibility, see International Association of Gay and Lesbian Martial Artists (<http://www.iaglma.org/aboutus.html>).

<sup>34</sup> There are many organisations devoted to promoting women in martial arts, for a sample see "Women in Martial Arts" (<http://winstonstableford.com/women.html>).

<sup>35</sup> This scene, however, also demonstrates the film's commitment to tradition, since the fight in the darkened disco parallels a very famous scene in Chinese opera called "At the Crossroads," in which two allies fight each other mistakenly in the dark, ending up back to back in the same posture that Hsia Yuan finds himself in with Mei-ling.

<sup>36</sup> For a detailed reading of *Kill Bill*, see Aaron Anderson, "Kill Bill's Mindful Violence" (*Jump Cut* 47, 2005, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/KillBill/>). See also Laikwan Pang, "Copying *Kill Bill*" (*Social Text* 23.2, Summer 2005), 133-53.

<sup>37</sup> Given that David Carradine is best known for taking up the part of a Shaolin monk in exile in America in the television show *Kung Fu* that had been conceived by Bruce Lee, killing him may also be seen as a symbolic "revenge" for a past "wrong" in the history of martial arts cinema.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Hong Kong Film Archive, eds., *The Making of Martial Arts Films*, 89.