CHAPTER 1
THE WARRIOR HERO

The Western Hero and the Samurai

In the early 1960s, when gun-toting cowboys dominated movie screens across America, audiences got to watch three Westerns with a curious connection. It was not the films' directors, stars, or stories that linked them to each other. *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), directed by John Sturges, is about an ill-assorted group of gunmen who defend a Mexican village from a band of brutal bandits (see Close-up: *The Magnificent Seven*). *The Outrage* (1964), directed by Martin Ritt, centers on an incident involving a robbery, a rape, and a corpse. In *A Fistful of Dollars* (*Per un pugno di dollari*, 1964), a Man with No Name arrives in a Mexican border town and sees a chance to make some money by playing two feuding families against each other. The movie was filmed in Spain by Sergio Leone, an Italian, featuring Clint Eastwood and a cast of European actors using phony American names. What these three movies had in common was their source. Sturges's film was based on *Seven Samurai* (1954), Ritt's film on *Rashomon* (1950), and Leone's on *Yojimbo* (*Bodyguard*, 1961). All three films were from Japan and directed by Akira Kurosawa.

Kurosawa set his movies during the long feudal period of his nation's history when samurai swordsmen roamed the countryside much as men with six-guns once wandered through the American West. Relics of a warrior society, masterless samurai called *ronin*, having lost their social status but not their skill, offered themselves as hired swords for money or adventure. The samurai hero, with his personal code of honor and swift sword, has fascinated Japanese audiences since the early days of cinema much as the Western film hero has captured and sustained popular interest both in the United States and abroad. Like other Japanese directors, Kurosawa freely acknowledged his interest in Westerns, just as American directors have acknowledged their debt to samurai films. Comparing these two genres is a good way to explore the dynamics of mutual cultural influence. In this

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FIGURES 1.2 and 1.3 Two ways to settle a dispute: showdowns in the West and in the East.

FIGURE 1.2 Knife vs. gun in *The Magnificent Seven* (Dir. John Sturges, 1960).

FIGURE 1.3 Sword vs. sword in *Seven Samurai* (*Shichinin no samurai*, Dir. Akira Kurosawa, 1954).

chapter, we'll be using the term **warrior hero** to include samurai warriors, Western gunfighters, and a few other cinematic action figures. Although this broad term may not define an established genre as such, it will serve as a convenient starting point for comparing cultures and understanding how genres work.

Let's begin with a close look at two comparable scenes, one from *The Magnificent Seven* (Figure 1.2) and one from *Seven Samurai* (Figure 1.3).

Westerns are filled with violent face-offs, tense moments when two men fight each other to the death with weapons drawn. One of these moments takes place in *The Magnificent Seven* when an unnamed braggart boasts that he can shoot faster than Britt can throw a knife. Britt (played by James Coburn) is lying against a fencepost, his hat covering his eyes, minding his own business. The braggart tries to provoke him, kicking Britt's boot and calling him a coward. Britt rises slowly, saunters to one corner of the fence, and takes his position without saying a word. The other man takes a few paces, faces Britt, and calls for the starting signal. With astonishing speed, Britt's knife flies through the air, striking a post near the gunman before he can even draw. But this braggart will not concede defeat. He wants another round, this time for real. Watch how the scene is staged. The cowboy gear, cattle cars, and corral fence immediately place us in the world of the Wild West. We note how the characters are defined through dialogue and gesture, how the camera builds suspense by cutting back and forth between them. We pay attention to the reaction shots of other cowboys, particularly the close-ups of Chris (Yul Brynner), who we know is scouting talent for his squad of mercenaries. Reading these cues, we make decisions about who will win the duel, whose side we take, and why we care.

In *Seven Samurai*, the duelists fight with swords. When we arrive on the scene, they are already squaring off with bamboo sticks. The challenger makes a big show of it, charging at his quiet opponent with a mighty cry. When the braggart claims a tie, the master swordsman Kyuzo (Seiji Miyaguchi) simply says "No" and walks away, declining to kill this foolish stranger with a real

sword. But the challenger, defending his bruised sense of honor, pushes for a battle to the death. We recognize the dramatic situation – two men fighting over a matter of pride – but a quick look at the setting tells us we are in feudal Japan, not on the American frontier. The architecture, weaponry, and clothing are among the many clues to place, character, and genre. Cinematically, Kurosawa uses some of the principles of camerawork and editing employed by Hollywood directors, but his pacing is much slower. He give more attention to the bystanders, especially to Takashi Shimura, Yul Brynner's counterpart, who mutters "What a waste." The social status of the warriors and peasants is clearly marked by their hats and swords, in contrast to the American West, where every cowboy wears a holster and a wide-brimmed hat. In fact, the social context of Kurosawa's action scenes is emphasized throughout *Seven Samurai*, reflecting a broad cultural difference between American individualism and the hierarchical, communal values of Japan. Who are the real heroes? What values do they live by? How are their actions shaped by local circumstances, generic conventions, and the changing trends of filmmaking? These kinds of questions about character and theme, cinematography and culture, are the motivating issues of this chapter.

Men with Guns: The Western Hero

Of all the film forms emanating from Hollywood, none seems as distinctively American as the Western. With its majestic stone mesas and cactus-dotted landscapes, its rowdy saloon brawls and high-noon showdowns, its slow-talking, fast-shooting cowboys in ten-gallon hats, the Western is arguably the American genre *par excellence*. Thomas Schatz calls it "the richest and most enduring genre of Hollywood's repertoire."[1] Historically, it has also been the most popular. As John Belton points out, in a period of more than 40 years, from 1926 to 1967, Hollywood produced more Westerns than any other kind of film.[2] Yet the taste for these films seems to waver. More than 800 Westerns were made during the 1950s, only about 200 in the 1960s, and a mere handful in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by a renewed interest in more recent times. What are the hallmarks of this genre? What accounts for its immense popularity, its rise, fall, and apparent revival? How did it begin, how did it evolve, and how do its shifting forms reflect changes in American culture?

Historians trace the Western to literary sources like *The Leatherstocking Tales*, a series of fictional adventures penned by James Fenimore Cooper in the early 1800s and loosely based on the real-life exploits of frontiersman Daniel Boone. Cooper's romanticized hero, called Natty Bumpo, inspired hundreds of dime novels later in the century, pulp fiction that fed the popular imagination for years to come. With the invention of motion pictures, Bumpo's offspring and their many tales made the leap from page to screen. In *Cripple Creek Bar-Room* (1899), early viewers got to spend one minute in a Wild West saloon. In *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), they witnessed a railroad holdup, and they were jolted in their seats when a mean-looking outlaw with a mustache and black hat pointed a pistol directly at the audience. Both movies were filmed in New Jersey, well before the industry itself headed west to Hollywood.

Anyone who has sat through several Westerns will recognize the genre's classical traits. Its setting is the vast, open western frontier that lured Americans in search of freedom, adventure, and economic opportunity from about 1840 to 1900. They came as pioneers, cattle ranchers, and fugitives, as men and women evading the social and legal restrictions of the East. The Western's cast of characters includes variations of the tough cowboy, the lonely sheriff, the loyal or deceitful Indian, the lady of easy virtue with a heart of gold. Their attire and accessories – a wide-brimmed hat, leather boots with spurs, holsters slung low over the hips, maybe a rifle and a marshal's badge – are distinctive icons. Familiar, too, are the stock scenes of cattle drives, saloon card games, stagecoach holdups, and the cowboy's silhouette riding off into the sunset.

These building blocks, the genre's basic lexicon, have been recombined and recycled at different moments in the nation's history to reflect particular historical concerns. During the Korean War, when American troops were halted at the 38th parallel separating Korea into north and south, Hollywood sent a contingent of cavalry across the Mexican border to victory in *Rio Grande* (1950). When news of the My Lai massacre troubled the conscience of Americans during the conflict in Vietnam, Arthur Penn dramatized a similar massacre of Indian women and children at Washita River, Oklahoma in *Little Big Man* (1970). During the 1990s, well after John Wayne and Gary Cooper had tied their horses to the hitching post for the last time, a number of "revisionist Westerns" breathed new life into old stories by giving fresh interpretations to stereotyped roles. Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990) pitted cowboys against Indians, but this time Native Americans held center stage and got to speak in their own tongues, rendered in English subtitles for audiences ignorant of the Pawnee and Sioux languages. Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992) paired an aging gunfighter (Eastwood) with an African American sidekick (Morgan Freeman) hired to avenge a houseful of women. Far from glorifying its fast-drawing protagonists, *Unforgiven* presented an unattractive picture of the violence, misogyny, and problematic flows of capital in the Old West. A few years later, in Sam Raimi's *The Quick and the Dead* (1995), Sharon Stone showed that women can exact vengeance on their own. Dressed from hat to spurs in the outfit of a cowboy, Stone kicked open the swinging doors of the town saloon and confronted her enemies with six-guns drawn. By following the evolution of this distinctively American genre and its protagonists, it is possible to trace a partial trajectory of American cultural ideals.

In his early, influential essay on the Western hero, Robert Warshow[3] stresses the inner conflict of the gunfighter who lives by a strict code of honor, yet survives by killing other men. Typically, he is a man of action and few words, a rugged individual living on the border of civilized society. In *The Virginian* (1929), Gary Cooper sacrifices his friend to the higher demands of the code. He does what he must and lives with the guilt. In *High Noon* (1952), Cooper has married a pacifist and turned in his marshal's badge, but he is drawn into a violent showdown by the Hadley gang. Unable to recruit townspeople as deputies, he chooses to face the gang alone. In *The Searchers* (1956), John Wayne embarks on a long quest to find the

Comanche Indians who raped and killed members of his brother's family, a quest that he pursues with single-minded, some might say pathological ferocity. In *The Shootist* (1976), Wayne's last film, he plays a retired gunfighter dying of cancer, a legendary figure forced to fight old enemies and young would-be legends who want to kill him. The film is partly biographical (Wayne died of cancer three years later), signaling an end to the kind of ultra-masculine hero epitomized by Wayne.

No doubt, the Western's enormous popularity during the 1950s and 1960s had much to do with the appeal of this hero to American males at the time. A generation of men who had fought in World War II and were now raising families in the suburbs would understand the conflict between civilized society and the violence of the Wild West. Some see the classic Western as a clash of cultures, with women serving as ambassadors of social order and Indians representing the wilderness. In *Stagecoach* (1939), for example, the moralistic "Law and Order League" is run by women from the East while the Indians are faceless savages. Curly, the film's young hero (John Wayne in his breakthrough role), has little sympathy for the League's high-minded ways. In *The Searchers*, Wayne's character is closer to the Indians. He admires their tracking skills, follows their customs, and clearly belongs to their world of open spaces, in contrast to the domesticated interiors of his sister-in-law's homestead. Jim Kitses analyzes this contrast in broad thematic terms. For Kitses, the Western dramatizes a deep and persistent division in American life between the individual and the community, integrity and compromise, pragmatism and idealism, nature and culture, west and east.[4] For Kitses, the Western is a national myth that defines important features of American identity.

Yet, despite its distinctively American character, the genre appealed and continues to appeal to people well beyond the boundaries of the United States. In *The Sheriff of Fractured Jaw* (1958), an English gentleman becomes a sheriff after unintentionally stopping an Indian attack during his travels through the American West. An international co-production featuring stars from two countries (Britain's Kenneth More and America's Jayne Mansfield) and shot in Spain, it ushered in a flood of European Westerns. West Germans made them in Yugoslavia, building on the immense popularity of Karl Mai's adventure books for boys about Indian chief Winnetou and his white blood brother, known as Shatterhand. The actors in these Winnetou films (*The Treasure of Silver Lake/Der Schatz im Silbersee*, 1962, was the first in a long series) might be Germans, Austrians, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Hungarians, or Americans seeking work abroad. Soon Spanish and Italian production companies joined the wagon train, setting their stories in the back lots of Cinecittà Studios near Rome or in the arid desert region between Barcelona and Madrid.

The most famous of these "spaghetti Westerns" were directed by Italy's Sergio Leone. Unlike many of his European peers, Leone was not content to follow a prescribed Western formula. In his "Man with No Name" trilogy (*A Fistful of Dollars*; *For a Few Dollars More/Per qualche dollaro in più*, 1965; *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly/Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo*, 1966) and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (*C'era una volta il West*, 1968). Leone bought his own unique vision to the genre. His heroes

and villains look uncannily alike. Dirty, sweaty, and unshaven in his poncho and black hat, the Man With No Name (played by Clint Eastwood in all three films) is a moral cipher, ambiguous in his motives, a man capable of brutal violence and random acts of decency, a loner who might save a poor family in distress for a few dollars, not for the cause of justice. Or he might clean up a town just because the bad guys annoy him. Perhaps because his films were dubbed, Leone paid more attention to their visual qualities and the music track than to their dialogue. Dramatic camera movements, extreme close-ups alternating with lengthy long shots, and Ennio Morricone's emotional scores are features of his signature style.

From Asia to Africa, non-Western filmmakers have also tried their hand at making Westerns. Some of them, like *Sukiyaki Western Django* (*Sukiyaki: Uesutan Jango*, 2007), by Japanese director Takashi Miike, and *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (*Joheunnom nabbeunnom isanghannom*, 2008), by Korea's Kim Jee-woon, are homages to cult classics. Others, like *The Return of an Adventurer*, shot in Niger, bear more complex connections to the genre. *The Return of an Adventurer* (*Le retour d'un aventurier*, 1966) was made by Alassane Moustapha, one of black Africa's first film directors. It begins in a traditional African village when a character called Jimmy steps off an airplane carrying a suitcase filled with blue jeans, wide-brimmed hats, six-guns, and other souvenirs of the Old West. He distributes these outfits to his friends, who take on American names and immediately start to act like cliché cowboys. They drink whiskey, play cards, start a saloon brawl, and ride on horseback down to the local gulf, terrorizing the villagers. The film's imagery is riddled with incongruity: an airplane landing among thatched roofs, cowboys stampeding a herd of giraffes, a council of elders taking on the Kelly Gang. Moustapha exploits the conventions of comedy and Westerns to court African audiences that were raised on those genres. At the same time, he uses parody to poke fun at Hollywood, offering a sly critique of cultural imperialism. In India, Ramesh Sippy put the Western to yet another use. His *Sholay* (*Embers*, 1975) has become a classic in its own right. Set in a region of eastern India that resembles the American badlands, *Sholay* follows two petty criminals who are hired to save a town from marauding bandits. Although it makes frequent, self-conscious references to Leone, Sturges, and Peckinpah, this "curry Western" is also distinctively Indian, reflecting the native themes and aesthetics of Hindi cinema. *Sholay* offers a good opportunity for understanding how one culture appropriates another's native genre and adapts it for a home audience (see Close-up: *Sholay*). It's also an instructive example of how local warrior heroes can become part of a global mythology.

Men with Swords: The Samurai Tradition

When Akira Kurosawa began making *Seven Samurai* and *Yojimbo* in the 1950s and early 1960s, he was, like many other Japanese directors, well acquainted with American films. As a boy, he had laughed at Charlie Chaplin's acrobatic comedies and thrilled to the gritty cowboy adventures of William S. Hart. Kurosawa openly

acknowledged his particular debt to the Westerns of John Ford. But whatever he owed to Hollywood, he was also drawing on a robust native tradition of samurai movies. Like the Western in the United States, the samurai genre was particularly popular for a 50-year period, from the 1920s through the 1960s. Japanese audiences flocked to these pictures to watch men with swords take on their enemies, and sometimes each other, in dazzling displays of courage and skill from a bygone age.

Comparisons between the historical settings of the Western and the samurai film can be tempting, but misleading. While the American frontier sprawled westward into the vast prairie heartland and more rugged regions of the Rockies and southwestern deserts from roughly 1800 to 1890, civilization in Japan spread from west to east into the untamed land of the Kanto Plain, a rich agricultural area inhabited by the Ainu people. Samurai swordsmen were instrumental in fighting and displacing the indigenous Ainu, much as American pioneers, cavalry, and cowboys drove Cherokees and Navajos off their land. In fact, samurai have been called "pioneers with swords."[5] But the samurai belonged to a feudal order that had dominated Japan well before Europeans landed on the shores of North America. Highly trained and fiercely loyal to their lords, they followed a strict code of *Bushido*, "the way of the warrior." A typical samurai carried two swords, a two-foot long *daito* and the shorter *shaku*, but he could also wield the bow and arrow or fight unarmed, either on horseback or on foot. As members of the warrior class, the samurai enjoyed a special status, but during the relatively peaceful Edo era, when all Japan was ruled by the Tokugawa family, many became bureaucrats and landowners. Still others lost their masters and their privileges, joining the ranks of unemployed *ronin* looking for work or adventure. These *ronin* held a particular fascination for Japanese audiences.

As with the storied heroes of the American frontier, tales of famous samurai circulated widely in oral narratives and popular printed fiction before the arrival of motion pictures. Samurai legends like Miyamoto Musashi, the fastest sword in Japan, appealed to Japanese children just as Wyatt Earp and Daniel Boone excited youngsters in the United States. Their exploits were also celebrated in the classical Kabuki theatre, which staged elaborate ritualistic swordfights called *tachimawari*, and later, less gracefully, in the *Shinkokugeki* (New National Drama), which appealed to spectators looking for more thrills than elegance. The bloodier, more realistic form of fighting came to be known as *chanbara*, an onomatopoeic word that imitates the clashing sound of swords: chan-chan, bara-bara.

The distinction between ritual and realism is crucial to any understanding of Japanese art forms, including motion pictures. Donald Richie, one of the West's most influential interpreters of Japanese aesthetics, points out that Japan has no tradition of what we call realism.[6] What passes for realistic in Japan seems highly stylized to most Westerners. Drama in Japan, like gardens and floral arrangements, is considered more lifelike when its elements are carefully trimmed and displayed for viewing. This emphasis on presentation rather than representation applies to movies too. According to Richie, the Japanese regarded film as a new form of theatre, not of photography as it was in France and the United States. To early Japanese directors, the film frame corresponded to the stage, a site where action is composed, not simply captured.

Japanese movies are classified into two broad categories: *jidai-geki*, a generic term for historical dramas chiefly set during the Edo period (1603–1867), and *gendai-geki*, films about contemporary life. In the mid 1950s, *jidai-geki* accounted for nearly 40% of the country's total film production. By 1969, the figure had fallen to 8%.[7] What accounts for the extraordinary appeal of these period films and their most popular variety, the samurai film, at a moment in Japan's history when Westerns were reaching their height in the United States? To find an answer, we might look at the evolution of the samurai genre and its various subgenres.

Before World War II, the most notable samurai pictures tended to be deliberately unrealistic and ironic. Mansaku Itami's classic *Akanishi Kakita* (*Capricious Young Man*, 1936) pitted two swordsmen against each other. One, a superb warrior who follows the *Bushido* code, fights for glory and maintains an unquestionable loyalty to his corrupt master. The other, a comic figure who first seems spineless and inept, turns out to be the better samurai. Both roles are played by the same actor, underscoring the film's moral ambiguities. Sadao Yamanaka's *Humanity and Paper Balloons* (*Ninjo kami-fusen*, 1937) is set in the lower depths of eighteenth-century Tokyo, where a penniless *ronin* tries, but fails, to become a good samurai again. Unemployed and desperately poor, the protagonist becomes involved in a hare-brained kidnapping scheme that ends tragically. Such films, far from glorifying combat, tend to be critical of the militaristic fervor sweeping through Japan in the 1930s. It seems ironic, then, as film historian Michitaro Tada points out, that films like Itami's and Yamanaka's were banned during the Allied Occupation of Japan from 1945 to 1952. Among other things, the Supreme Command for the Allied Powers (SCAP), which controlled Japan after the war, prohibited films "favoring or approving feudal loyalty [and] direct or indirect approval of suicide," effectively making samurai films illegal.[8]

By the mid 1950s, though, the genre was making a huge comeback, led by the success of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (see Close-up: *Seven Samurai*). David Desser identifies four subgenres that flourished in the postwar era.[9] The first of these he calls Nostalgic Samurai Dramas, which include films like Hiroshi Inagaki's *Chushingura*, (1962). Based on a Kabuki classic that was itself based on a true incident, *Chushingura* is an epic story of conflicting obligations and revenge (Figure 1.4). When their master is tricked and unfairly sentenced to death, his 47 vassals are commanded by the Shogun to break up his estate and disperse. They must decide whether to follow orders or obey their individual sense of justice. This conflict between duty (*giri*) and personal inclination (*ninjo* in Japanese) is a recurring theme in Japanese cinema and culture. But what makes Inagaki's film nostalgic is its elegiac tone, the way it savors a vanishing past. Desser links this sensibility to a Japanese predilection for "*mono no aware*," a "feeling of sweet sadness, or an almost inexpressible sensation of life's mortality which is pleasantly painful."[10] This poignant awareness that nothing lasts forever can be traced throughout Japanese art from *The Tale of Genji*, Lady Murasaki's classic novel, to landscape painting and haiku poetry. In *Chushingura*, we do not expect the heroes to outlive

FIGURE 1.4 A band of loyal warriors attack the stronghold of their master's wrongdoers in *Chushingura* (Dir. Hiroshi Inagaki, 1962). To some viewers, their black figures seem to advance across the snow like Japanese writing on rice paper.

the story, but we may take a deep, bittersweet satisfaction in acknowledging the transience of life.

Desser's second subgenre, the Anti-Feudal Drama, is exemplified by Masaki Koboyashi's *Harakiri* (*Seppuku*, 1962), in which the samurai hero loses his position through no fault of his own and avenges the death of his cherished son-in-law. Koboyashi's film, like others of its kind, is critical of the feudal order that placed individuals at odds with their better instincts. Desser finds a possible political message in the Anti-Feudal subgenre. By questioning the moral status of an outmoded system of military alliances, such films could be seen as protests against the Mutual Defense Pact of 1960 that made Japan a Cold War ally of the United States.

Desser calls his third category "Zen Fighters," a subgenre that allows the samurai hero to transcend the social contracts of his times by leaping into the spiritual realm. In Hiroshi Inagaki's *Samurai* (*Musashi Miyamoto*, aka *Samurai Trilogy*, 1954–1956), the hero learns the art of fencing from a Zen Buddhist monk. For years, he practices the martial arts, becoming a perfect samurai ready to face his lifelong enemy. In the paradoxical philosophy of Zen, the best swordsman never uses his sword. What enables him to triumph in battle is not caring if he wins or dies. Through such contradictory feats of logic and swordplay, Zen-based films like *Samurai* opened the way to yet another form of swordfight films. Desser calls this subgenre "The Sword Film," noting that its detractors use the term *chanbara* while its admirers connect the films to *jidai-geki*. Taken as a group, the Sword Film is characterized by generous bloodletting and towering body counts. The more limbs hacked off the better. In films like Kenji Misumi's *The Tale of Zatoichi* (*Zatoichi monogatari*, 1962) and the *Lone Wolf and Cub* (*Kozure Okami*) series (1972–1974), the heroes, far from being samurai or even *ronin*, might be humble peasants or even blind men who happen to be handy with a sword. Typically, the protagonist's main motives are money and spectacular displays of martial dexterity, though he may

have a good heart and harbor a sense of justice. Ultimately, though, his efforts are empty and meaningless. A relentless strain of nihilism runs through this most popular of movie entertainments.

The rough progression of samurai films from celebrations of a vanished past to ahistorical slaughterfests seems much like the evolution of Westerns from Ford to Tarantino, part of a global trend toward more explicit violence. But we should not lose sight of the differences between the pasts being celebrated or the sources of these violent impulses. Japanese society during the Edo period was strictly hierarchical, a system of castes and loyalties fixed by birth. If you were born into the samurai class, you enjoyed the rights of your rank but you were also bound by certain prescribed duties. Your identity, your meaning as an individual, was dependent on your place within the social order. The rules by which you conducted your life were not personal, but part of the *Bushido* code. The central conflict for a samurai, then, is usually a choice between competing social commitments (*giri*) or between *giri* and his individual humanity (*ninjo*), but always in a social context.

The Western hero, by contrast, lives on the frontier of civilization and the wilderness, continually drawn to the call of the wild beyond and within. Whereas the samurai is usually tied to a distinct social role, the cowboy is more likely a loner, answerable only to his conscience and his personal code. While the samurai follows a centuries-old tradition of stringently defined conduct, the cowboy adheres to a vaguely articulated sense of honor. As Lee J. Cobb puts it to Clint Eastwood in Don Siegel's *Coogan's Bluff* (1968), "a man's got to do what a man's got to do." But the behavior of both figures is very much alike. They both do a lot of heavy drinking, engage in occasional womanizing at the saloon or the local public house, and continually practice their fighting skills, the swordsman even more than the gunslinger. Rarely seen without their weapons, they strike iconic poses when confronted with a duel. The images of John Wayne, palms poised above his holsters, or Toshiro Mifune set to unsheathe his deadly *daito* were irresistible models for millions of young males.

While the samurai film is traditionally a male-dominated genre, women often appear as prostitutes or innocent girls about to be turned into courtesans. Like the samurai himself, they are indentured to the system; they are owned. Their main weapon is their sexuality. But they may also be fighters. The Kabuki theatre had its *onnabudo* (samurai women), and some cinematic female fighters, like the heroine of Tokuzo Tanaka's *Wet Haired Beauty* (*Nuregami Botan*, 1961), could cross swords with the best male fighters. By the beginning of the new millennium, women warriors were soundly beating their male and female opponents with swords, guns, and bare hands. Watch how Uma Thurman takes on Lucy Liu (Figure 1.5), Vivica A. Fox, and David Carradine in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* series (2003–2004), reshuffling the weaponry of Hollywood Westerns and the samurai tradition in a multicultural, trans-Pacific bloodfest.

The term warrior fits the samurai better than the Western gunslinger. Samurai were professional combatants, born into a military class and trained to live or die by the sword. The Western hero assumed his role by choice. He became a sheriff

FIGURE 1.5 West meets East. Uma Thurman crosses swords with Lucy Liu in *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* (Dir. Quentin Tarantino, 2004).

or a hired gun because he was a better shot or possessed more courage than other men. Yet both inhabited a world where violence ruled the day. If the American frontier was not officially a combat zone, it still required a soldier's skills and outlook to survive. This may help to explain why the samurai film, like the Western, enjoyed such popularity soon after World War II. For American and European males, the historical West resembled the lawless, violent no man's land of combat. The Western became a stage for acting out aggressive impulses unleashed beyond the pale of ordinary civilized society. For Japanese audiences, the Edo period may have served a similar purpose, but with a gloomier perspective. The sun seemed to be rising on America's future and setting on Japan's celebrated past. At the end of the movie, while the cowboy rides off into the sunset to live another day, the samurai knows his day is done.

Enchanted Swords and Flying Fists: Wuxia and Kung Fu

Meanwhile, somewhere in China, another kind of warrior hero was preparing to enter the fray. Armed with magic swords, deadly potions, and feats of gravity defying acrobatics, this sword-wielding warrior with supernatural powers burst forth on the global screen at the beginning of the new millennium in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). To most Western audiences, the sight of a beautiful young woman (Zhang Ziyi) exchanging sword thrusts with her male antagonist (Chow Yun Fat) high in the canopy of a bamboo forest appeared as something fresh and alluringly strange. Leaping and parrying from branch to branch, swaying with the motions of the wind, the couple seemed to be caught in a medley of erotic dance and mortal combat.

For Chinese viewers, though, the movie's characters and props were nothing new. They belonged to an ancient narrative tradition dating back well before the advent of American cowboys or Japanese samurai, a form of storytelling known as

wuxia. *Wuxia* is a kind of chivalrous combat. The word *wu*, connoting valor, refers to the Chinese word for martial arts, *wushu*. The word *xia* has been variously translated as hero, swordsman, adventurer, soldier of fortune, warrior, or roving knight. The *wuxia* protagonist is often an independent mercenary swordsman who follows a strict moral code, not unlike the Japanese *ronin*, the European knight errant, or the hired gun of the American West. Historically, *xia* warriors dominated the Warring States period in China before the first Qin emperor suppressed them around 220 BC and replaced the old feudal system with a legalistic monarchy. The *xia* class gravitated to the lower levels of society, tarnishing their reputation, but emerged again at different times as Shaolin monks, secret societies, and various disenfranchised groups, which sometimes included women and minorities. During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), stories were told of a secret Underground – *jianghu* in Mandarin, literally "rivers and lakes" – composed of vagrants, priests, cultists, beggars, outlaws, impoverished scholars, and other refugees from the social mainstream. In the legendary *jianghu*, a high value is placed on extraordinary martial skills, honor, loyalty, and the sacred duty of revenge. There are also strong strains of fantasy and romance in *wuxia* literature. The young lovers are often masters of the martial arts with superhuman skills fighting side by side.

The Chinese films from which Ang Lee drew much of his inspiration grew out of this *wuxia* literature much as the American Western sprang from the pages of pulp fiction. The visual elements of the genre – exciting action, exotic settings, larger-than-life heroes, ingenious props – and its appeal to mass audiences made it a natural for the mass medium of motion pictures. Like Hollywood Westerns, wuxia movies date back to the early days of silent films. *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* (*Huo shao hong lian si*, 1928), based on a book by Xian Kairen, spawned a generation of violent fighters who delivered lethal blows and flew across the screen. The escalating violence and political subtexts in these films led the government to ban their production in the 1930s. In the 1950s, they reappeared in a more traditional form, linked stylistically to Chinese opera and conventional moral themes. It was in the 1960s, however, that the genre really took off. Energized by feats of graceful choreography, ingenious wirework, and increasingly complex characters and plots, the "new style" wuxia movies of this period gained widespread popularity.

After the Communist Revolution, when the People's Republic of China stopped making martial arts films, the genre's creative center shifted to the island of Taiwan and to Hong Kong, the British Colony on the mainland's southern coast to which much of the Shanghai film industry had fled during the 1930s. The largest producer in Hong Kong was the Shaw Brothers Studio, led by Sir Run Run Shaw and his brother Runme Shaw. Efficiently run, with a large stable of stars, the Shaw Brothers Studio made Hong Kong the "Hollywood of the East." In the mid-1960s, many of these films were made in Mandarin Chinese for a population in exile, nostalgic stories set in the old homeland like King Hu's *Come Drink With Me* (*Da zui xia*, 1966). Meanwhile, a new generation was coming of age in Hong Kong, less rooted in the mainland. When this generation started making movies in the mid-1970s, they

adopted the local Cantonese language and breathed new life into a film form known as *kung fu*. Kung fu featured fighting without weapons. It favored masculine heroes like Bruce Lee, who popularized the form with *Way of the Dragon* (*Meng long guo jiang*, 1972) and *Enter the Dragon* (*Long zheng hu dou*, 1973). Like their wuxia predecessors, kung fu movies were mostly high testosterone ritual combats between men. It is this masculine subgenre, with its male bonding and secret brotherhoods, that made the strongest impact on American audiences. It also left an imprint on American films, from *First Blood* (1982) and *Lethal Weapon* (1987) to *The Matrix* (1999) and *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*.

The gradual merger of these two traditions, as with the cross-fertilization of Westerns and samurai films, is part of the larger story of globalization. Today's action movies, with or without subtitles, are likely to blend elements of kung fu hand chops, wuxia wirework, samurai swordsmanship, and a Western saloon brawl in a single fight scene.

Evolution of the Wuxia Hero

When Zhang Shichuan showed *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* in 1928, he hardly realized that his silent film would start a cinematic conflagration. Released serially in 18 installments over three years, it offered thrilling action scenes that kept local audiences coming back for more. Its extravagant displays of the martial arts, androgynous women warriors, and elaborate special effects set standards for the industry and inspired a flock of imitators. During the four-year period from 1928 to 1932, some 50 studios turned out an estimated 241 wuxia films, about 60% of the city's total motion picture output.[11] Many of these films were loosely based on classical texts, like *The Cave of the Spider-Spirit* (*Pansi dong*, 1927), adapted from the popular sixteenth-century novel *Journey to the West* (*Xi you ji*). Others took their plots from contemporary newspapers, magazines, or comics, which catered to the craze with serialized stories of dark magic and flying assassins.

In contrast to the early Westerns and samurai films, the women in these pictures were often fierce and valiant fighters, as their titles announced: *The Female Knight-Errant* (*Nuxia li feifei*, 1925), *Five Vengeful Girls* (*Wunu fuchou*, 1928), *The Great Woman* (*Wu dalishi*, 1929), *The Female Pirate* (*Wu haidao*, 1929), *Girl Bandit* (*Lan guniang*, 1930), *Woman Bodyguard* (*Nu biaoshi*, 1931).[12] Actresses like Wu Lizhu (1910–1978), Hu Die (1908–1989), Wu Suxin (1905–?), and Fan Xuepeng (1908–1974) were stars on a par with their male counterparts. Audiences cheered when the heroine in *Swordswoman of Yellow River* series (*Huangjiang nuxia*, 1929–1932) leapt across chasms and over courtyard walls. They roared as Cloud Maiden, the orphan girl in *Red Heroine* (*Hong xia*, 1929), learned the martial arts from her old Daoist mentor, the White Monkey, defeated an evil band of scantily dressed females, and vanished into the sky in a cloud of smoke.

If the wuxia fad excited the masses, it did not go down well with the new Nationalist government and intellectuals from the left or right, who wanted to

modernize the country. Concerned that superstitious tales and images of China's feudal past might impede the march of progress, or perhaps worried by the low production values and competitive chaos of the movie market, officials soon banned the genre on the mainland.

When it reappeared again in Hong Kong in the 1960s, wuxia took on new directions. Chang Cheh, who directed more than 100 films for the Shaw Brothers studio in his long career, introduced the hero with a handicap. In *One-Armed Swordsman* (*Dubei dao*, 1967), Fang Gang, the top student at a martial arts school, is scorned by his high-born classmates for his lowly origins. When the master's jealous daughter challenges him to a fight without weapons, he easily defeats her, but in a moment of impetuous rage she cuts off his arm with a sword. Despite this disability, he masters the art of one-armed swordplay with the help of a secret manual and a beautiful orphan. Like Gary Cooper's Quaker wife in *High Noon*, the orphan implores Fang to give up his violent career for the peaceful life of farming, and he agrees, but an insistent sense of duty to his master and his comrades keeps calling him back. In the film's bloody conclusion, Fang hacks his way triumphantly through a throng of foes before returning to his woman and walking with her hand in hand into a landscape that looks a little like the American prairie. Chang gleaned some of his ideas from samurai films, especially the Zatoichi Blind Swordsman series. His protagonists typically spring from the lower classes and achieve their skills through diligent practice, forming strong bonds with other young men. Like Robin Hood and his merry followers, these robust bands of brothers in arms protect the weak and innocent from harm, but they wreak more bloodshed and destruction than their English counterparts. In time, they learned to mix their swordplay with the flying fists and rapid legwork of kung fu. Chang (also known as Zhang) has come to be revered as "the godfather of Hong Kong martial arts cinema," leaving a legacy for filmmakers like Zhang Yimou and Quentin Tarantino, who dedicated *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* to him.

Another master of wuxia films was King Hu (aka Hu Jinquan), who brought a new level of technical artistry and a touch of Buddhist philosophy to the genre. Hu also drew on his knowledge of samurai movies, integrating their camera techniques with Western editing conventions and adding elements from Chinese opera to usher in a new style of swordplay cinema. In *Come Drink With Me*, Cheng Pei-Pei plays Golden Swallow, sent to rescue her brother from a gang of bandits who hold him hostage at a local inn. She quickly dispatches the brigands (Figure 1.6) and befriends a drunken beggar who turns out to be a master of the martial arts and head of a secret society. In contrast to the rough and tumble male vs. male fighting in Chang Cheh's films, King Hu staged his fight scenes like ballets, emulating the ritualized action of Peking Opera. It's no accident that Cheng Pei-Pei had been a professional dancer. When Ang Lee made *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* in 2000, he cast Cheng Pei-Pei as the evil mentor to his young wuxia heroine, played by Zhang Ziyi, who dispatches her foes in balletic leaps (Figure 1.7), much as her predecessor did in the 1960s.

King Hu, originally a northerner from Beijing transplanted to Hong Kong, left the Shaw Brothers in 1966 and moved to Taiwan, where he made cult classics such

FIGURES 1.6 and 1.7 The wuxia woman warrior then and now.

FIGURE 1.6 Golden Swallow (played by Cheng Pei-Pei) routs a gang of armed thugs at the inn in *Come Drink With Me* (*Da zui xia*, Dir. King Hu, 1966).

FIGURE 1.7 King Hu's wuxia heroine inspired a similar scene in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (*Wo hu cang long*, 2000), in which Zhang Ziyi is the heroine and Cheng Pei-Pei plays a villain.

as *Dragon Gate Inn* (*Long men ke zhan*, 1966) and *A Touch of Zen* (*Xia nu*, 1971). His heroines occupy a superior position in these films. Morally and physically, they stand above the rabble, tough yet graceful, energetic yet disciplined, never losing their femininity. One of Hu's favorite settings is the inn, which becomes a mythical space where the principles of physics are suspended and the confinements of architecture are transcended. In *The Fate of Lee Khan* (*Ying chun ge zhi Fengbo*, 1973), the waitresses at the Spring Inn are all skilled martial artists who defy the rules of gravity, leaping among the tables and gliding over rafters, propelling the bodies of their foes through space like weightless dolls. Their actions, though, are not gratuitous roughhousing. They are motivated by a patriotic cause: to rid the country of foreign rulers, the Mongol invaders. The fact that these women come from the margins of society is typical of wuxia heroes. One is a pickpocket, another a street performer, a third is a con artist, while a fourth specializes in highway robbery. Together, they form an underground sorority of extraordinary fighters, much like the Tang Dynasty rebels in Zhang Yimou's *House of Flying Daggers* (*Shi mian mai fu*, 2004). These women, like drunken masters and one-armed swordsmen, can be seen as symbolic figures in a national narrative. Their seemingly weak and afflicted bodies represent the body of the beleaguered Chinese people waiting for the right moment to emerge strong, resilient, and victorious.

Zhang Yimou's "Hero" and Chinese Aesthetics

Zhang Yimou went further still, refining the genre and redefining its notions of the hero. In *Hero* (*Ying xiong*, 2002), he invented a new kind of action scene, lyrical in its rhythms and more deeply dyed with emotions. Conventional wuxia action scenes are first and foremost fights: bone-jarring contests between martial artists out to prove their prowess. Zhang's scenes are more like dances of color, highly choreographed moments that interrupt the story like lyrics in a musical. Yet they also continue the narrative, using movement instead of words to drive the story

forward. His actors convey a wide range of feelings in balletic lunges, swoops, and glides. Their actions come from the heart, not just from the hip. Sometimes, the emotional tenor of a scene is underscored with music, often in striking counterpoint to the action, as when a flight of melancholy female voices soars above the pointed thrusts of Moon and Flying Snow fencing in the oak grove. Sometimes a scene's emotional textures are reflected and magnified in the landscape, in the serene surface of a lake or the steady pulse of rain dripping from the eaves of a pavilion. There is something uniquely personal in Zhang's style, and something distinctly Chinese, an aesthetic sensibility rooted in the graceful rigors of classical Chinese music, poetry, and painting.

One of the film's most striking features is its use of color. Each segment of the story is associated with a different hue. The first section saturates the screen in a vivid red, the color of love and death. The walls of the calligraphy school and the students' robes are bathed in a deep scarlet. When Moon challenges Flying Snow in the autumn grove, the falling leaves turn crimson. The setting that ends section two, when Nameless confronts Broken Sword on the lake, sets the tone for another episode: a span of blues echoed in the sky, the water, and the warriors' robes. In the third segment, when Flying Snow rides to save her lover in the desert, the camera picks up the sandy whites of Kazakhstan, a tint repeated in the costumes and in the décor of the bamboo library. Later on, a pale green tinges the flashback in which Broken Sword and Flying Snow attack the palace in flowing lime-colored robes, a hue reflected in the still, jade waters of the Li River and which prefigures the fight between Nameless and the king among cascades of floating emerald curtains.

A prism of perceptions and perspectives, *Hero* is also a beautifully painted work of art. Zhang has always been an extraordinary colorist, a fact that shines through the glowing reds of *Raise the Red Lantern* (*Da hong deng long gao gao gua*, 1991) and *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gao liang*, 1987) or the brilliant yellow swaths of cloth hanging in the dye factory of *Ju Dou* (1990). Such rich colors are atypical of traditional Chinese painting, which favors the subtle shades of pen and ink. They are more characteristic of Chinese folk art, the brightly colored "peasant paintings" produced in the northern province of Shaanxi where Zhang worked on his first films. The style is said to have developed in the late 1950s when peasants working on a new reservoir began documenting their progress in pictures. Without ready-made materials, they created their own paints from soot, lime, and the local red soil. Later, during the Cultural Revolution, professional artists sent into the hinterlands were fascinated by this work and publicized it abroad. Zhang's cinematic palette may owe something to this vivid local color drawn from the natural surroundings. But Zhang makes movies, not paintings. If the primary ingredient of motion pictures is motion, his movies are pure cinema. In *Hero*, the entire screen is filled with things in movement: countless raindrops pouring from the sky, hosts of arrows soaring through the air, a cyclone of red and yellow leaves whirling round the characters as they carry on their deadly duel. At times, the actors and their actions seem to blur into a work of abstract art, like a Jackson Pollock canvas in motion.

Some critics found *Hero* too abstract, too kinetic, too "arty." Asian viewers accused Zhang of selling out to Western audiences with a big-budget action epic. Others, mostly non-Asian, found him guilty of distorting history, of emphasizing visual effects at the expense of character development, and of muddling the story with a convoluted structure. Zhang justified his choices in transcultural terms. "I tried to get across themes that would be understood by a Western audience," he said. "There are elements that are purely Chinese, but I made an effort to keep a balance between the two."[13] *Hero*, he emphasized, is not so much an art house film as a commercial action movie.

On the Chinese side, *Hero* connects swordplay to other forms of traditional culture like chess, music, and calligraphy. When Sky faces Nameless at the chess pavilion, the location itself is telling. The ancient Chinese board game of Go (*weiqi* in Mandarin), often likened to chess, is a cerebral game of martial strategy. Each player tries to eliminate the other player's army, represented by smooth black or white stones, by encircling the opponent's stones. Simple in appearance, the game is actually highly complex and analytic. Among good players, every move is first carefully planned and executed in the mind. These parallels between Go and the martial arts are underscored by the black and white scene in which Sky and Nameless do battle with lance and sword. The entire sequence of lunges, parries, and elaborate evasions takes place in their heads, indicated by the colorless photography, while both men stand motionless confronting each other. When the fight begins, a blind musician starts to play an ancient song. "Martial arts and music share the same principles," says Nameless. "Both wrestle with complex chords and rare melodies." As the clash of weapons mingles with the old man's strident voice, raindrops land on blades and chess board like individual notes of music. A string breaks and the fight resumes in color. Nameless's sword smashes through ribbons of rain, turning them one by one into spray as we hear his weapon slashing toward Sky, catching him just under his lance, and he falls. Nameless sheathes his sword before Sky's weapon falls to the stone floor, yielding to stillness and the sound of dripping rain.

Zhang explores another set of analogies between traditional Chinese arts and the martial arts in the calligraphy school sequence. Nameless has come to the school, he says, to get a scroll for his dying father. He asks Broken Sword to write the word for sword (*jian*), alluding to the rumor that Sword's skills with the blade (*jianfa*) are rooted in his calligraphy, or writing skills (*shufa*). Holding a stick above a sandbox like a pen over paper, Broken Sword begins to write in the sand but decides that red ink is required for the job. Later, with the arrows of Qin's attacking army whizzing past him, Broken Sword plucks an arrow from the air and holds it like a pen. In the act of writing, his whole body moves as if he were wielding a sword (Figure 1.8). His movements are not so much external actions as emanations from within. Calligraphy and combat, we understand, require coordinated motions of the wrist and heart.

The journey to this insight calls for more than physical agility and skill, as King Qin explains: "In the first stage, man and sword become one and each other. Here even a blade of grass can be used as a lethal weapon. In the next stage, the sword resides not in the hand but in the heart. Even without a weapon, the warrior can

FIGURE 1.8 Zhang Yimou explores affinities between the traditional Chinese arts of calligraphy and sword fighting in *Hero* (*Ying xiong*, Dir. Zhang Yimou, 2002).

slay his enemy from a hundred paces. But the ultimate ideal is when the sword disappears altogether. … only peace remains." This description of the hero's progress evokes ancient principles of Daoism that precede the Qin Dynasty. Laozi, the supposed founder of Daoism, sought an alternative to the feudal warfare of his times in the balance and harmony of nature. The path to universal peace requires a willingness to embrace nothingness, a total renunciation of the self – a path trodden by countless Chinese individuals throughout their history.

Male or female, nameless or renowned, the wuxia hero shares a mythic dimension with other wandering warriors. Like the medieval knight errant, the Western gunman, and the masterless samurai, he or she appears during times of anarchy. These people are usually underdogs, drawn from the flotsam and jetsam of a world in disarray, subversive figures who do battle with the unworthy powers in charge, aiding the poor and oppressed, following strict codes of justice and integrity. Historically, they evoke the lawless eras of the American West, Tokugawa Japan, or the Warring States period of China, reappearing on the screen in our own times of distress when people seek icons of personal empowerment. Psychologically, as followers of Carl Jung might say, their magical abilities and supernatural powers spring from the realm of the collective unconscious, a reservoir of archetypal images that represent deep-seated spiritual and emotional needs. Watching these movies together in the dark, we share a kind of universal dream. The breathless, heart-pounding action on the movie screen, a projection of our innermost fears and desires, engages us in a visceral experience, enabling us to work out the psychic tangles of our inner lives by proxy, leaving us elated, cleansed, and satisfied.

The Kung Fu Craze Begins

Tough and irrepressible, ever shifting with the times, the warrior hero with a thousand faces underwent yet another transformation in 1970s Hong Kong. Although its precise origin is obscure, the term *kung fu* (local dialect for Mandarin *gong fu*)

means something like "skill master." The kung fu practitioner fights expertly with bare hands and feet. In contrast to the wuxia swordsman and swordswoman, who rely on polished blades and supernatural stunts, kung fu artists depend on their bodies alone, achieving mastery through rigorous training and practice. While the wuxia hero belongs to the chivalrous fantasy world of ancient China, kung fu is more straightforward and pragmatic, an achievable skill for those who live in a modern urban environment like Hong Kong, Singapore, or Los Angeles.

How does a transnational genre like kung fu emerge in a particular place at a particular time? Hong Kong, remember, is a city, not a nation, a multicultural community with strong connections to mainland China, yet increasingly cosmopolitan in attitude and outlook. As a former British colony, a harbor town, a settlement of immigrants, it has absorbed influences from the greater Southeast Asian region and the West. In this atmosphere of receptivity and open competition, with easy access to international resources, and relatively free from the government restrictions imposed in Shanghai, Beijing, or Taiwan, filmmakers in Hong Kong were able to follow their creative impulses, producing new subgenres and fresh styles. By the 1960s, Shaw Brothers and their rival studio Cathay had established a vertically integrated infrastructure for producing, distributing, and exhibiting movies not only in local theaters but throughout the Chinese diaspora and into non-Chinese-speaking communities abroad. The popular genres of earlier years – historical costume dramas, musicals, romantic melodramas, and wuxia films – had run their course. Something new was needed, something to appeal to a young generation of urbanized filmgoers, better educated, comparatively more affluent, less tied to the traditional values of their rural parents and ready for a new kind of hero. The time was ripe for Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan.

Enter the little dragon: Bruce Lee

In his short lifetime (1940–1973), Lee achieved the status of a global kung fu icon. A Chinese American actor, director, screenwriter, and founder of the Jeet Kune Do fighting philosophy of "Intercepting Fists," no other figure accomplished so much to promote the martial arts throughout the world. He was born in San Francisco's Chinatown (his Cantonese name was Lee Jun Fan, and he later adopted the stage name of Li Xiao Long, or "little dragon") and moved to Hong Kong with his father, a leading film and Cantonese opera performer, just months before the Japanese invasion of the city. The crowded neighborhood where he grew up teemed with refugees. The streets were ruled by rival gangs. Young Lee was forced to defend himself, learning the Wu style of *t'ai chi* fighting from his father and eventually enrolling in the Wing Chun School of close combat, but ultimately developing his own hybrid form of self-defense.

Like many martial arts forms, Wing Chun evolved in Southern China during the resistance movement against the foreign Qing dynasty. Its philosophy stresses body structure and balance. The Wing Chun stance is like bamboo, flexible yet firm. Rooted in the ground and positioned along a vertical axis, the practitioner

recovers swiftly from attack or strikes out with straight punches and short kicks. The Wu family style of *t'ai chi* training involves a lot of jumping, tumbling, and grappling. It stresses the philosophy of "pushing hands," enabling the fighter to redirect an opponent's force instead of resisting it. The Wu practitioner learns to sense her foe's intentions, using her opponent's energy and strength against himself. David Bordwell, an astute observer of the action in martial arts films, contrasts this "soft" approach of southern *t'ai chi* (fist fighting) styles to the "hard" style favored in northern China. The soft style relies on upper-body strength, perhaps because so many people in southern China developed their hands and arms through centuries of carrying heavy burdens or pushing boats with poles. The hard approach, where force meets force directly in explosive bursts of energy, depends more on fancy legwork, akin to the graceful acrobatics of Peking Opera, perhaps because northerners were used to walking long distances and controlling horses with their legs.[14] Bruce Lee assimilated elements from all these styles, as well as Western boxing and European fencing, in his Jeet Kun Do philosophy. Lee did not consider this a system or a school but a pragmatic compilation of methods and ideas, a set of tools that should be practiced and applied to different situations.

In his first major movie, *The Big Boss* (*Tang shan da xiong*, 1971), Lee plays Chen Zhen, an immigrant from southern China working with his cousins in an ice factory in Thailand. When he learns that the boss is behind the mysterious disappearance of his cousins, he vows to take revenge. Released in several versions for different markets, *The Big Boss* made Lee a star throughout Asia. Lee plays the same character in his next film, *Fist of Fury* (*Jing wu men*, 1972), set in an international compound in Shanghai, where the native population is harassed by Japanese racists. Once again, he assumes the role of protecting his people against ill treatment by foreigners. Neither of these two films was initially popular with American audiences, a fact reflected in the confusing array of titles they were given in the United States.[15] Lee's international career really took off with his next two movies, the first of which he wrote and directed himself. *Way of the Dragon* (1972) is set in Rome. Lee's character, Tang Lung, has come from Hong Kong to help out with a restaurant owned by friends of the family but which is under threat by the local crime syndicate. The film's big showdown, a one-on-one match between Tang and the famous karate fighter Colt (played by Chuck Norris), takes place in the Colosseum, a battle to the death. Despite its fierce combat scenes, *Way of the Dragon* is more playful than the earlier films. Tang's naivety and ignorance of European ways is the target of much humor, though he always has the last laugh (see Close-up: *Way of the Dragon*).

Lee's last completed work was *Enter the Dragon* (1973), a Hong Kong/Hollywood coproduction, the first Chinese martial arts film to be produced by a major American studio (Warner Brothers) in conjunction with Hong Kong studios (Golden Harvest and Lee's Concord Production Company). As directed by Robert Clouse, *Enter the Dragon* is an action film. Its focus is on spectacle and physical sensation rather than the coherence of its plot or the psychology

of its characters. It is also another chance to see Lee's body in performance, stripped to the waist and ready for a fight. This time he is a member of a Shaolin Temple, recruited to investigate an alumnus of the Temple, the mysterious Han, who is suspected of using a tournament on his private island to front an opium operation. Lee teams up with two Americans, a white gambler hiding from the mafia and a black activist on the run from the law, to infiltrate the competition.

Lee never made another movie. He died under mysterious circumstances six days before the film's scheduled release. He was hailed by some as a nationalist hero, a fierce foe of foreign intervention. For Asians and many urban minorities, particularly African American and Hispanic youths, he stood as a model of non-white masculinity, a positive force for power and dignity in the face of racial prejudice. For others, he appeared xenophobic and narcissistic, inciting ill will against outsiders and indulging in excessive admiration for his own body. Perhaps the most important lesson of his screen persona and his private life can be summed up by the ironic wisdom of his Shaolin master: the enemy is only an illusion; the real enemy is oneself.

Jackie Chan: Master of kung fu comedy

If the 1970s was the decade of Bruce Lee, the 1980s belonged to Jackie Chan. Born in Hong Kong in 1954 (his given name, Chan Kong Sang, means "born in Hong Kong"), he shaped his personal life into a successful screen persona that catapulted him to the top of the Southeast Asian movie charts, where he dominated the box office for more than 20 years. With over 100 movies to his credit, his impressive resume spans the occupations of actor, action choreographer, comedian, entrepreneur, director, martial artist, producer, screenwriter, stuntman, singer, and producer. In contrast to Lee's screen character, who is sternly confident of his ability from the beginning, Chan's character starts out as a cocky, often bungling novice who comes by his fighting skills the hard way, through painstaking training and determination, with plenty of beatings along the way. If Lee is an emblem of cultural pride, a rock-solid model of ethnic identity, Chan offers a self-ironic hero, a comic figure who undercuts his obvious talent with playful acts of buffoonery. His character is basically decent and upstanding, but lazy and mischievous, a mediocre student of the martial arts until something or someone changes his attitude. Then he undergoes a lengthy preparation and an escalating series of fight sequences that inevitably lead to the main villain. He emerges victorious but often bruised and bandaged.

When he was six years old, Chan's family moved to Australia, but he was sent back after a year to a special Peking Opera school. This is where he learned the skills of music, dance, tumbling, acrobatics, and kung fu. For ten years, young Chan endured the strenuous instruction and frequent beatings that figure so notably in his films. It is also where he began performing, both on stage and on screen, getting small roles in films by Han Hsiang Li (*The Love Eterne/Liang Shan Bo yu Zhu*

FIGURE 1.9 Jackie Chan, doing his own stunts, hangs from a clock face in *Project A* ("*A" gai wak*, Dir. Jackie Chan, 1983).

Ying Tai, 1963), King Hu (*Come Drink with Me*), and Bruce Lee (*Fist of Fury*, *Enter the Dragon*).

Chan came into his own in 1978 with *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* (*Se ying diu sau*) and *Drunken Master* (*Zui chan*), which set the bar for kung fu comedy. In these films, Chan befriends disheveled old beggars who turn out to be kung fu masters in disguise and teach him a style of fighting that enables him to trounce his adversaries. Both films were directed by Yuen Woo-ping, who later choreographed the action for *The Matrix* (1999), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and the *Kill Bill* films. After several pictures for Lo Wei Studio and Golden Harvest in Hong Kong, Chan appeared in a few Hollywood films (*Battle Creek Brawl*, 1980; *The Cannonball Run*, 1981) before returning home to make *Project A* (*"A" gai wak*, 1983), *Wheels on Meals* (*Kuai can che*, 1984), and *Police Story* (*Ging chat goo si*, 1985). In all these films, Chan performed his own stunts, much as did American comedians of the silent period. In a scene in *Project A* reminiscent of Harold Lloyd in *Safety Last!* (1923), he falls 60 feet from the hands of a clock tower through two flimsy awnings to the hard ground, head first (Figure 1.9). In *Wheels on Meals*, he zooms around a square in Barcelona on a skateboard (think of Chaplin on roller skates in *Modern Times*, 1936), serving food to tourists and whipping a gang of surly bikers. *Police Story* ends in a shopping mall, where Chan leaps from a ledge and slides down a pole wrapped in light bulbs, popping the bulbs and crashing through a glass ceiling on the way down. Buster Keaton couldn't have made a better exit.

With their overseas settings, multiethnic casts, and sly allusions to world cinema, Chan's movies catered increasingly to an international market. Audiences around the globe warmed to his everyman character, enjoyed his humor and grace, and appreciated the fact that he did his own acrobatics with a minimum of gimmicks or special effects. When you watch Jackie Chan, you feel his energy. The constant motion of his body propels the movie forward, carrying you with it from the first staccato punches through all the tumbling, stumbling, and rumbling to the end of the dance.

Hong Kong's Movie Industry Comes of Age

While Lee and Chan were carrying their audiences through the progressive stages of kung fu, the Hong Kong film industry moved forward through its own evolutionary process. In 1970, two executives from Shaw Brothers formed their own studio, Golden Harvest. Raymond Chow and Leonard Ho followed a more flexible approach to film production and distribution than the old centralized model. By offering higher salaries and more creative freedom to their talent, they attracted stars like Lee and Chan. They also entered into pioneering co-productions with Hollywood. By the end of the decade, they were running the top movie studio in Hong Kong.

Meanwhile, smaller independent producers began to spring up, flooding the market with martial arts films and other popular genres in Cantonese. In 1980, three comic actors – Raymond Wong, Karl Maka, and Dean Shek – founded Cinema City. Their first movie, *Aces Go Places* (*Zuijia paidang*, 1982), was a spoof on James Bond spy films. Directed by Eric Tsang, it features Sam Hui as a debonair ex-burglar named King Kong who teams up with a bungling American detective (played by Maka) to fight criminals in Hong Kong. In one zany scene reminiscent of the Marx Brothers, the odd duo stumbles onto a stage production of Swan Lake and brings the house down. With each sequel, their stunts become wilder and increasingly high tech. In *Aces Go Places 3* (*Zuijia paidang zhi nuhuang miling*, 1984) they ride motorcycles off a roof and fly a motorized hang glider through the Hong Kong subway system with Maka hanging from the tail. Local audiences enjoyed seeing the familiar landmarks of their own city on the screen, encouraging more directors to follow suit. Tsui Hark, who had set his earlier films in traditional landscapes, made Hong Kong the setting in his postmodern parody, *All the Wrong Clues* (*Gui ma zhi duo xing*, 1981), adding his own brand of visual polish and rhythmic control to the comic scenes. Sammo Hung continued the trend with kung fu comedies like *Winners and Sinners* (*Qi mou miao ji: Wu fu xing*, 1983) and *Twinkle, Twinkle Lucky Stars* (*Xia ri fu xing*, 1985), both with Jackie Chan. These films, with their improved production values, modern special effects, and easy-to-get, non-stop, slapstick humor, appealed more and more to the international market.

Much has been made of Hong Kong's reputation as "Hollywood of the East." As the dominant force in today's commercial movie world, Hollywood is the yardstick against which other global film industries are measured. So we hear frequent references to Bollywood (centered in the Indian city of Mumbai, once known as Bombay) or Nollywood (in Nigeria). As David Bordwell points out, most countries are too small to support a vibrant film industry on the basis of local audiences alone. To pay for production costs, they must export their cinematic products to other lands or receive hefty government subsidies, as in the case of Europe. Since only one in five European films is screened outside the country where it was made, Bordwell does not consider any European nation to have a truly global cinema.[16] And except for Hollywood and India, with its immense, self-sustaining home markets,

neither does any other film center, including Hong Kong. Yet as we have seen, this tiny region on the southern tip of China has enjoyed a vigorous cinematic history for more than 60 years. During the 1980s and early 1990s, when Hollywood controlled so many markets around the world, less than 30% of the theatres in Hong Kong screened American films. Studios like Shaw Brothers, Golden Harvest, and Cinema City not only catered to the local taste for action genres, but they also whet and fed a growing appetite for martial arts films in places like Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Korea, and Taiwan as well as in the Chinatowns of North America and cult audiences throughout the West.

But in the mid-1990s, even before Hong Kong's 1997 handover to the People's Republic of China, this boom suffered a drastic decline.[17] Hollywood blockbusters began to encroach on local markets. Overproduction, reliance on tired formulas, and lower standards took a toll on audience demand. The Asian fiscal crisis and video piracy contributed to the problem. By the end of the decade, the industry's production and revenue were reduced by half. Yet Hong Kong directors continued to explore new directions. Tsui Hark revived the legend of China's kung fu hero Wong Fei-hung in his *Once Upon a Time in China* series (*Wong Fei Hung*, 1991–1997) with Jet Li in the leading role for four of the six films. John Woo experimented with police films, adding guns to the traditional arsenal of fists, feet, knives, and nunchucks in *A Better Tomorrow* (*Yin hung boon sik*, 1986) and *The Killer* (*Dip huet seung hung*, 1989) before going off to Hollywood. When he returned to Asia, it was to direct *Red Cliff* (*Chi bi*, 2008), a lavish, four-hour epic set during the Han Dynasty. On a lighter note, Stephen Chow combined new digital effects and surrealistic parody in *Shaolin Soccer* (*Siu lang juk kau*, 2001) and *Kung Fu Hustle* (*Gong fu*, 2004), two of Hong Kong's most commercially successful movies ever. *Red Cliff* was another success, breaking the box office record previously held in mainland China by *Titanic* (1997). Following in the wake of Zhang Yimou's blockbusters – *Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers*, and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (*Man cheng jin dai huang jin jia*, 2006) – Woo's co-production marked a new spirit of collaboration between the former Crown Colony and the People's Republic, a pooling of impressive talent, financial resources, and cinematic styles.

Kung Fu, Wuxia, and the Aesthetics of Action

Although popular genre films are often criticized for lacking the originality, subtlety, and depth of art house oriented cinema, there are good reasons for attending to their aesthetic qualities, their look and sound and feel. There is a kind of genius in the genres, a stylistic brilliance that reflects the way they have evolved over time in response to audiences' tastes and the demands of the marketplace. Whether or not specific names and dates can be assigned to particular breakthroughs in sound effects, camerawork or editing, an impressive body of technical achievements and stylistic trends has emerged from so many filmmakers trying to capture the martial arts in action.

What makes Hong Kong action films so distinctive? One outstanding trait is their sheer speed. The kinetic performances, brusque movements, clipped dialogue, rapid cutting, split-second shot length, and energetic sound tracks all keep the story moving forward at a breathless pace. Esther Yau relates this rapidity to the frantic pace of production in a competitive market, which ranged from seven days in the 1960s to an average of three to five months in the 1980s and 1990s.[18] Speed also reflects the rhythms of the city itself and the schedules of spectators who consume films like fast food. Another trait that viewers often notice is a drive to excess. Movies made in Hong Kong have more blood, more violence, more dismemberment, more pains per minute than the average Hollywood film. They are also louder and often more sensual and visually flamboyant. So much so that export versions often are toned down for Western markets. This audacity can be read as vulgarity or vitality, a lack of subtlety that David Bordwell calls "expressive amplification."[19] The deliberate use of exaggerated violence and sound effects magnifies the emotional experience.

Bordwell believes that the fight scenes in Hollywood action films are comparatively clumsy and ineffective. While *Lethal Weapon* (1987) and *The Fugitive* (1993) go for "massive carnage and incessant hustle," Hong Kong films offer "well-calibrated views of precise, staccato movement."[20] This precision is achieved partly through constructive editing, the Soviet approach to building a scene inductively from partial views of the action as opposed to analytic editing, the classical style of showing a broad establishing shot before the details. Hong Kong editors alternate long pauses with bursts of energy, a technique that may owe something to the explosive movements and frozen poses in Peking opera. This method renders the quick attacks and sudden stops of kung fu fighting as clean, well delineated motions, while Hollywood cutting tends to create a general sense of commotion and confusion. Bordwell sees differences in the camerawork as well. While Hollywood tends to focus on the face, Hong Kong shows the dynamics of the entire body as it leaps, tumbles, and detonates with energy. As a result, the action scenes in Hollywood films are visual experiences, but the Hong Kong scenes are visceral. We feel their "delicious kinetic exhilaration."[21]

In many ways, the art of kung fu is a triumph of imagination both in combat tactics and in film aesthetics. The human body has only two arms and two legs. How many ways can these four limbs be deployed to attack an army or defend against an onslaught of modern weaponry? How many variations of arm and leg motions can be invented to keep a movie moving or a genre going without losing its audience?

Watch Jackie Chan's feats of kinetic engineering in *Drunken Master* when he practices the technique of "drunkard with inner strength." The camera cuts from an open manual to Jackie's face, then pulls back as he sucks in his breath, his rock-hard body taut with determination. He stirs, wavers, leans as if to fall, then regains his balance and leaps into a series of staccato stances. With fingers hooked, elbows cocked, and one leg lifted at an angle, he bounds from one position to another. Now he's in the air, now he's spinning on his back, whipping both legs to propel him in a graceful arc. Later we see these moves in action as a bully attacks him with a formidable stick and Jackie fends him off like child's play, pretending to sip wine from a cup or a jug the

whole time. An hour and a half into the film, he has finally become a drunken master. The camerawork and editing in *Drunken Master* are generally unobtrusive and straightforward (see Figure 1.10, Figure 1.11, and Figure 1.12). Most of the action is photographed at eye level from one side, as in a training video. There are occasional shots from above, below, and even the opponent's point of view, as if the audience is being attacked, but the main focus is the body in motion. There is little attention here to framing, color, lighting, or other elements of cinematic style.

Now look closely at the climactic battle scene in *Once Upon a Time in China*. The setting is an American ship harbored in the southern port of Foshan in the 1800s. A powerful martial artist named "Iron Vest" Yim (Yee Kwan Yan) is out to prove that he can beat the hero, Wong Fei-hung (Jet Li), using a new kung fu technique. Yim has allied himself with the evil Shaho gang and an American profiteer named Jackson. The big match takes place in the cargo hold of Jackson's ship, where Yim and Wong square off one on one. Yim's skills are formidable. He attacks Wong with boundless energy, strength, and ingenuity. Both men draw from large repertoires of martial moves, but they also grab props from the surroundings. Yim reaches for a ladder with this foot and sends it flying toward Wong with a well-aimed kick. A broken rafter or a bale of hay becomes a weapon in his hands. Both men are as spontaneously inventive as Gene Kelly recruiting an umbrella or a lamp post for his dance number in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). The cinematography is equally inventive. Many of the shots show the fighters from oblique angles, accentuating the dynamic forces at work. (Spike Lee calls these "Chinese angles" and uses them liberally in *Do the Right Thing*, 1989.) The camera's wide-angle lens captures the precarious moment when Wong and Yim face each other on a bridge of crisscrossed ladders, then cuts to a high angle to show how the ladders are arranged like pickup sticks. At one point, the action stops abruptly as the men catch their balance and square off. As the camera swoops in on each figure from below, we feel the tension, expectation, an ominous pause before the next round. Smoke fills the air, and tongues of fire flicker in the background. When the action resumes, it happens in a rapid burst of images, some 52 shots within the next minute. During that time, the camera is in constant motion. We watch from high above as Yim grabs a ladder with both hands. We cut to a close-up as he plants one end on his wooden perch, look through his legs in a low angle shot as he kicks it forward toward his opponent (Figure 1.13), and move slightly with the ladder as it falls in a long slant toward Wong, still waiting calmly on the other side, a blue wisp of smoke behind him. A long shot from the side shows both men squaring off again (Figure 1.14), another catches them from high above (Figure 1.15). When Yim rushes toward Wong from rung to rung, we're right below him (Figure 1.16). When Wong leaps up with legs apart and crashes down to snap the ladder in two, we're with him high and low (Figure 1.17). Although the fighters' bodies hold center stage, we're also aware of their surroundings: the earth tones of the wood, the stacks of bags, the entire *mise-en-scène*. We're also aware of the editor at work. Close-ups show the edges of the ladder planted in the dirt, striking a wooden beam, or ripping through a bag of grain. Cross cuts take us back and forth between the main fight and nearby sites of action where a woman is about to be raped and American sailors prepare to fire on a Chinese delegation.

FIGURES 1.10–1.17 Hong Kong kung fu film aesthetics. Yuen Wo-ping's camerawork and editing are relatively unobtrusive in *Drunken Master* (*Zui chan*, 1978), where Jackie Chan does all the work (Figures 1.10–1.12). Compare this cinematic style to Tsui Hark's dynamic use of camera, editing, and wire work (Figures 1.13–1.17) in *Once Upon a Time in China* (*Wong Fei Hung*, 1991).

FIGURE 1.10

FIGURE 1.11

FIGURE 1.12

FIGURE 1.13

FIGURE 1.14

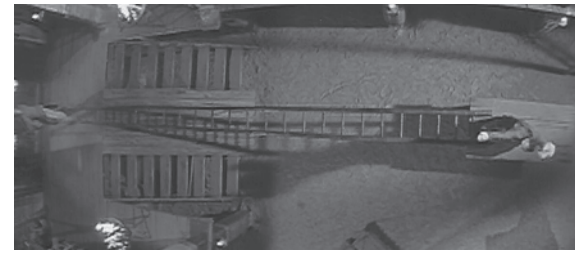

FIGURE 1.15

FIGURE 1.16

FIGURE 1.17

All these strands of the story come together in a final showdown between the foreign villains and the Chinese heroes. Wong and his loyal band of kung fu students win the day, of course, but they learn a hard lesson about Western technology. You can't fight guns with fists.

Once Upon a Time in China gives the kung fu craze a local habitation and a cause. Historically, it refers to the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 when a group calling itself "the Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists" gathered a large following to oppose the dragon of Western imperialism with bare hands. Though some were lightly armed, they believed that China's real strength lay in its people, a mantra repeated often in the film. In contemporary terms, the story captures the exuberance of a people who had come into their own by the 1990s as Hong Kong reached new heights of success and prepared to shed the symbolic mantle of British rule. The choice of Wong Fei-hung as central character is no accident. Wong was a local culture hero, the subject of a long-lived Cantonese-language kung fu cycle that ran from the 1940s through the 1970s and spanning more than 90 films. His role may be an expression of Cantonese pride in the face of Hong Kong's return to the Mandarin bias of mainland China. But why are the villains American? Is this a reference to the big guns of Hollywood who send their global fleet of movies to dominate the world? The independent Hong Kong filmmakers may ultimately be no match for American technology and marketing firepower, but with their resourcefulness, resilience, and the home grown techniques of kung fu, they put up a vigorous and immensely entertaining fight.

Filmography

The entries in this table have been simplified for convenience. Few films fit neatly into a single genre. *Once Upon a Time in China*, for example, combines elements of wuxia swordplay and barehanded kungfu combat as well as a touch of Western gun fighting. The *Kill Bill* movies add features from the samurai tradition to the mix. Students should learn to question these categories as a way of exploring the collaborative, transnational, multi-genre nature of filmmaking today. Many films, although listed as the product of one country, are really multinational co-productions (Sergio Leone's "spaghetti Westerns," for example, typically were made with funding and talent from Italy, Spain, and Germany). Titles vary too. A Bruce Lee movie might have four or five English names, and even the Chinese names of Hong Kong films might differ depending on whether they are given in Mandarin or Cantonese. In most cases, I have used the Mandarin forms, syllable by syllable, except for proper names. Asian names can be confusing to Western readers since the established custom in countries like China, Korea, and Japan is to give the family name first and the given name last. For example, Zhang Yimou's family name is Zhang and his given name is Yimou. For the sake of consistency and clarity, I have followed IMDb's practice of using the Western word order (given name first, family name last) for all names in the filmographies, whether Asian or Western. For example, Zhang Yimou is listed here as Yimou Zhang although he is referred to as Zhang Yimou in the chapter itself. For the dates, I have consulted the International Movie Data Base (imdb.com), which usually gives the original release date.

Filmography

Main Genre	*Country*	*English Language Title*	*Original Title*	*Director*	*Date*
Kung Fu	Hong Kong	*The Big Boss* (aka *Fists of Fury*)	*Tang shan da xiong*	Wei Lo	1971
Kung Fu	Hong Kong	*Fist of Fury* (aka *The Chinese Connection*)	*Jing wu men*	Wei Lo	1972
Kung Fu	Hong Kong	*Way of the Dragon* (aka *Return of the Dragon*)	*Meng long guo jiang*	Bruce Lee	1972
Kung Fu	Hong Kong, USA	*Enter the Dragon* (aka *The Deadly Three*)	*Long zheng hu dou*	Robert Clouse	1973
Kung Fu	Hong Kong	*Drunken Master*	*Zui chan*	Woo-ping Yuen	1978
Kung Fu	Hong Kong, USA	*Battle-Creek Brawl* (aka *The Big Brawl*)	*Shashou hao*	Robert Clouse	1980
Kung Fu	Hong Kong	*All the Wrong Clues*	*Gui ma zhi duo xing*	Hark Tsui	1981
Kung Fu	Hong Kong	*Aces Go Places* (aka *Mad Mission*)	*Zuijia paidang*	Eric Tsang	1982
Kung Fu	Hong Kong	*Project A*	*"A" gai wak*	Jackie Chan	1983
Kung Fu	Hong Kong	*Winners and Sinners*	*Qi mou miao ji: Wu fu xing*	Sammo Kam-bo Hung	1983
Kung Fu	Hong Kong	*Wheels on Meals*	*Kuai can che*	Sammo Kambo Hung	1984
Kung Fu	Hong Kong	*Police Story*	*Ging chat goo si*	Jackie Chan	1985
Kung Fu	Hong Kong	*Twinkle, Twinkle Lucky Stars*	*Xia ri fu xing*	Sammo Kambo Hung	1985
Kung Fu	Hong Kong	*Once Upon a Time in China*	*Wong Fei Hung*	Hark Tsui	1991
Kung Fu	Thailand	*Ong-Bak: Muay Thai Warrior*	*Ong-Bak*	Prachya Pinkaew	2003
Samurai	Japan	*Capricious Young Man*	*Akanishi Kakita*	Mansaku Itami	1936
Samurai	Japan	*Humanity and Paper Balloons*	*Ninjo kami fusen*	Sadao Yamanaka	1937

(*Continued*)

Filmography (*Continued*)

Main Genre	*Country*	*English Language Title*	*Original Title*	*Director*	*Date*
Samurai	Japan	*Rashomon*	*Rashomon*	Akira Kurosawa	1950
Samurai	Japan	*Seven Samurai*	*Shichinin no samurai*	Akira Kurosawa	1954
Samurai	Japan	*Samurai I: Musashi Miyamoto*	*Miyamoto Musashi*	Hiroshi Inagaki	1954
Samurai	Japan	*Bodyguard*	*Yojimbo*	Akira Kurosawa	1961
Samurai	Japan	*The Loyal Forty-Seven Ronin*	*Chushingura*	Hiroshi Inagaki	1962
Samurai	Japan	*Harakiri*	*Seppuku*	Masaki Koboyashi	1962
Samurai	Japan	*The Tale of Zatoichi*	*Zatoichi monogatari*	Kenji Misumi	1962
Samurai	USA	*The Last Samurai*		Edward Zwick	2003
Samurai	USA	*Kill Bill: Vol. 1*		Quentin Tarantino	2003
Western	USA	*The Great Train Robbery*		Edwin Porter	1903
Western	USA	*The Virginian*		Victor Fleming	1929
Western	USA	*Stagecoach*		John Ford	1939
Western	USA	*Rio Grande*		John Ford	1950
Western	USA	*High Noon*		Fred Zinnemann	1952
Western	USA	*Shane*		George Stevens	1953
Western	USA	*The Searchers*		John Ford	1956
Western	UK	*The Sheriff of Fractured Jaw*		Raoul Walsh	1958
Western	USA	*The Magnificent Seven**		John Sturges	1960
Western	Germany	*The Treasure of Silver Lake*	*Der Schatz im Silbersee*	Harald Reini	1962
Western	Italy	*A Fistful of Dollars**	*Per un pugno di dollari*	Sergio Leone	1964

Main Genre	*Country*	*English Language Title*	*Original Title*	*Director*	*Date*
Western	USA	*The Outrage**		Martin Ritt	1964
Western	Italy	*The Good, the Bad and the Ugly**	*Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo*	Sergio Leone	1966
Western	Niger	*The Return of an Adventurer*	*Le retour d'un aventurier*	Alassane Moustapha	1966
Western	Italy	*Once Upon a Time in the West*	*C'era una volta il West*	Sergio Leone	1968
Western	USA	*Coogan's Bluff*		Don Siegel	1968
Western	USA	*Little Big Man*		Arthur Penn	1970
Western	USA	*Buck and the Preacher*		Sidney Poitier	1972
Western	India	*Sholay* (aka *Embers*)	*Sholay*	Ramesh Sippy	1975
Western	USA	*The Shootist*		Don Siegel	1976
Western	USA	*Dances with Wolves*		Kevin Costner	1990
Western	USA	*Unforgiven*		Clint Eastwood	1992
Western	USA	*The Quick and the Dead*		Sam Raimi	1995
Western	Japan	*Sukiyaki Western Django*	*Sukiyaki: Uesutan Jango*	Takashi Miike	2007
Western	USA	*3:10 to Yuma*		James Mangold	2007
Western	Korea	*The Good, the Bad, the Weird**	*Joheunnom nabbeunnom isanghannom*	Jee-woon Kim	2008
Western	USA	*Django Unchained*		Quentin Tarantino	2012
Wuxia	China	*Burning of the Red Lotus Temple*	*Huo shao hong lian si*	Shichuan Zhang	1928
Wuxia	Hong Kong	*Come Drink With Me*	*Da zui xia*	King Hu	1966
Wuxia	Hong Kong	*Dragon Gate Inn* (aka *The Dragon Inn*)	*Long men kezhan*	King Hu	1967
Wuxia	Hong Kong	*The One-Armed Swordsman*	*Dubei dao*	Cheh Chang (Che Zhang)	1967

(*Continued*)

Filmography (*Continued*)

Main Genre	*Country*	*English Language Title*	*Original Title*	*Director*	*Date*
Wuxia	Hong Kong	*A Touch of Zen*	*Xia nu*	King Hu	1971
Wuxia	Hong Kong	*The Fate of Lee Khan*	*Ying chun ge zhi Fengbo*	King Hu	1973
Wuxia	Taiwan	*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*	*Wo hu cang long*	Ang Lee	2000
Wuxia	China	*Hero*	*Ying xiong*	Yimou Zhang	2002
Wuxia	China	*House of Flying Daggers*	*Shi mian mai fu*	Yimou Zhang	2004
Wuxia	China	*Curse of the Golden Flower*	*Man cheng jin dai huang jin jia*	Yimou Zhang	2006
Wuxia	China	*Red Cliff*	*Chi bi*	John Woo	2008
Samurai	Japan	*Hara Kiri: Death of a Samurai*	*Ichimei*	Takashi Miike	2011
Samurai, Kung Fu, Wuxia	China	*The Sword Identity*	*Wo kou de zong ji*	Haofeng Xu	2011
Kung Fu	Taiwan/China	*The Grandmaster*	*Yi dai zong shi*	Wong Kar-wai	2013

*Remakes

Notes

1. Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (Random House, 1981), 45.
2. John Belton, *American Cinema / American Culture*, 2nd edition (McGraw-Hill, 2005), 248.
3. Robert Warshow, "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner" (1954), in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism*, 5th edition (Oxford, 1999), 654–667.
4. Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood* (Indiana University Press, 1998).
5. Michitaro Tada, "The Destiny of Samurai Films," *East-West Film Journal* 1(1) (December 1986): 48.
6. Donald Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film* (Kodansha International, 2001), 22–27.
7. J.L. Anderson, "Japanese Swordfighters and American Gunfighters," *Cinema Journal* 12(2) (Spring 1973): 1–21.
8. David Desser, "Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 8(1) (Winter 1983): 145.
9. Desser, 25–41.
10. Desser, 27.
11. Zhang Zhen, "Bodies in the Air: The Magic of Science and the Fate of the Early 'Martial Arts' Film in China," in Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu and Emilie Yeh, eds., *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 54.
12. Zhang Zhen, 65.
13. Quoted in Craig Smith, "'Hero' Soars, and Its Director Thanks 'Crouching Tiger,'" *The New York Times*, September 2, 2004.
14. David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 201.
15. Since *The Big Boss* was also given the American name *Fists of Fury*, the 1972 film (*Fist of Fury* in

Hong Kong) went by other names in the United States, including *The Iron Hand* and *The Chinese Connection*. *Way of the Dragon* (literally "The Fierce Dragon Crosses the River" in Chinese) is also known as *Return of the Dragon* in the United States. *Enter the Dragon*, originally titled *Blood and Steel* in the United States, is also known in English as *The Deadly Three*.

16. Bordwell, 82.
17. Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* (British Film Institute, 1997).
18. Esther Yau, ed., *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 3.
19. See David Bordwell, "Aesthetics in Action: Kungfu, Gunplay, and Cinematic Expressivity," in Esther Yau, ed., *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 73–93.
20. Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong*, 228.
21. Bordwell, "Aesthetics in Action," 91.

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DEEP FOCUS ON CHINESE CINEMAS

FIGURE 1.18 The three regions of China: Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China (mainland).

World Cinema through Global Genres, First Edition. William V. Costanzo.

In this Unit on the Warrior Hero, we have been looking at Chinese martial arts movies alongside the American Western and the Japanese samurai film. This is a good opportunity to step back and consider how developments in the wuxia and kung fu genres fit into the larger story of Chinese cinema. A brief overview of the geography, history, and cultural identities of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China will help to place Asian martial arts films into a broader context.

The Three Chinas

China is a land of impressive proportions. With a population exceeding 1.3 billion, it embraces a fifth of the world's people within its boundaries, which stretch more than 3,000 miles across East Asia from India and Kazakhstan in the west to the Pacific Ocean and Korea in the east, bordering Russia and Mongolia to the north and Vietnam and Burma (Myanmar) to the south. China also has one of the planet's oldest civilizations, with archeological evidence dating back over 5,000 years. For most of its long history, this area was ruled by powerful imperial dynasties that kept its people united within a remarkably stable system of political, economic, and cultural institutions. For much of that time, China was the wealthiest, most technologically advanced civilization on earth. But after centuries of prosperous isolation, attacked by Western powers seeking lucrative trade advantages and weakened by internal strife, China's great strength began to erode during the nineteenth century.

The system finally cracked in 1912, when a new Republic of China was declared, replacing the lengthy line of Qing emperors with the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang). Soon the country was in the grip of a brutal civil war waged between the Kuomintang, led by General Chiang Kai-shek, and Communist forces led by Mao Zedong, a grip loosened only by the uneasy truce between the two groups when Japanese troops attacked the mainland. The Second Sino-Japanese War, China's piece of World War II, lasted from 1937 to 1945, after which Mao and Chiang resumed their fighting. When the struggle ended in 1949, Mao's Communist Party emerged victorious, founding the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the mainland. Chiang Kai-shek retreated to the island of Taiwan, founding the Republic of China (ROC) in exile. Meanwhile, the tiny, densely populated territory of Hong Kong (about 7 million people squeezed into 426 square miles) was enjoying relative peace and prosperity as a British Colony, with the exception of its occupation by Japan from 1941 to 1945. Hong Kong remained British until sovereignty was handed over to the PRC in 1997.

These events helped to steer the course of cinema in China. Before the Civil War, most movies were imports. For the first 50 years of motion picture history, foreign films accounted for about 90% of the Chinese market. Nevertheless, local talent on the mainland, roused to action by a progressive "left-wing" movement, helped to launch a golden age of Chinese cinema in the 1930s. Many of their films championed the struggles of common people. Sun Yu's *The Big Road* (*Dalu*, 1934) is about workers trying to build a highway in the war against the Japanese. Wu Yonggang's *The Goddess* (*Shennu*, 1934) tells the story of a young woman (played by the era's

biggest star, Ruan Lingyu, in one of her last roles) forced into prostitution to support her young son. During this period, the Kuomintang took steps to bring movies into line with its nationalist agenda. Chiang Kai-shek banned movies it considered frivolous and reclaimed the studios from foreign ownership. This dual policy of censorship and protectionism became cornerstones of government policy under the Communists as well. When Mao established the PRC in 1949, he regarded movies as a powerful tool for unifying the country. The private film studios were consolidated under state control. Familiar entertainment genres – melodrama, martial arts, and costume dramas – gave way to political films glorifying revolution, class struggle, and defeat of the imperialists. Under Mao, the Chinese people got to watch movies like *Woman Basketball Player No. 5* (*Nu lan 5 hao*, 1957), in which the title character falls in love with an athlete and joins the national team to seek victory in international competition. More artistic films like Fei Mu's *Spring in a Small Town* (*Xiaocheng zhi chun*, 1948), a strong romantic drama made just before the Communist revolution, were left to languish because they lacked the required political zeal. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the Beijing Film Academy was closed entirely, and film production nearly came to a standstill.

The extraordinary talent and energy that revitalized Chinese mainland cinema in the 1980s has been called the Fifth Generation movement, named after the first students to graduate from the Film Academy after it reopened. Young men like Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, who had been yanked out of school during the Cultural Revolution and sent out to remote farms and factories for "reeducation," now had cameras in their hands and something meaningful to say. Their program of "cultural reflection" (*wenhua fansi*) and historical reflection (*lishi fansi*) involved both a questioning of tradition and a return to Chinese roots.[1] The earliest Fifth Generation films experimented with the medium, creating stylized images of communal China (*One and Eight / Yi ge he ba ge*, 1983; *Yellow Earth / Huang tu di*, 1984; *Horse Thief / Dao ma zei*, 1986). As the movement evolved, it grew more diverse, encompassing a wide range of subjects and styles from Huang Jianxin's *The Black Cannon Incident* (*Hei pao shi jian*, 1986) to Chen Kaige's *Life on a String* (*Bian zou bian chang*, 1991), but pointedly rejecting the socialist realism favored by Mao and his followers. The events of Tiananmen Square in 1989, combined with China's transition to a market economy, contributed to yet another shift as state funding declined while state censorship continued. Amid the consumerism, pop culture, and postmodernism of the post-New Era (*hou xin shiqi*) there emerged a new generation of independent filmmakers, all in their mid- to late 20s in 1989.

In contrast to the historical melodramas of their predecessors, these "Sixth Generation" directors made gritty, realistic films about laid-off workers, prostitutes, artists, homosexuals, petty criminals, and other disenfranchised groups living on the margins of China's cities. Using underground production tactics, they turned out edgy films like Zhang Yuan's *Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing za zhong*, 1993), Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycles* (*Siqi sui de dan che*, 2001), and Jia Zhangke's *Unknown Pleasures* (*Ren xiao yao*, 2002). Though made with small budgets and often banned on the mainland, these movies circulated widely at festivals, on the Internet, and through word of mouth on video and DVD. It was largely their

facility with new technologies for producing and distributing their work that enabled bright, ambitious, young filmmakers to circumvent the system and offer creative alternatives to costly or officially sanctioned films.

While cinema was going through these stages on the mainland, there were parallel developments in Hong Kong and Taiwan. In its heyday, Hong Kong boasted the third largest film industry in the world, after the United States and India. It became the East Asian hub for film production and distribution, exporting its hybrid commercial products throughout the Chinese diaspora and creating new markets in Africa, Latin America, Europe, and the United States. Meanwhile, across the Taiwan Strait, the island of Taiwan emerged from decades of insularity and Japanese control to become a creative and financial force in Chinese-language cinema.

Chinese filmmakers were directing movies in Hong Kong as early as 1909 with Western assistance. The first native feature film, dating from 1913, was based on Chinese opera, which continued to have a strong influence on Hong Kong movies for years to come. After sound arrived in the 1930s, regional dialects became an issue. Hong Kong became the center for films in Cantonese, the dialect spoken in southern China, especially after the Kuomintang government began enforcing a policy that made Mandarin, spoken mostly in the North, the official state language. During the Second Sino-Japanese War, patriotic war films became popular, boosted by an influx of refugees from Shanghai. When the British returned in 1945, and as civil war heated up on the mainland, the ranks of immigrants swelled, especially from the South. Cantonese made a strong comeback, and the Hong Kong film industry mushroomed into big business, exporting Cantonese opera movies, low-budget martial arts films, swordplay fantasies, and family melodramas throughout the world. These genre films were now made in both Cantonese and Mandarin, with English subtitles mandated by British law. During the 1970s, the enormously successful Shaw Brothers studio and its rival, Golden Harvest, presided over the kung fu boom. Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan became world figures. The next two decades were boom years for Hong Kong. Its local industry raised production values, perfected distinctive forms of stunt work and visual effects, and learned to market an exportable trio of action, comedy, and sex. By 1997, however, when Hong Kong was handed over to the PRC, the film industry appeared to lose much of its vitality.

On the island of Taiwan, cinema also developed in stages. From 1901 to 1937, under a prolonged Japanese occupation, the industry was heavily influenced by Japanese practices such as live *benzi* narrators for silent films. When the Kuomintang took over in 1945, it encouraged the production of films in Mandarin with a nationalist perspective. Rapid modernization during the 1960s yielded a steady output of commercial entertainment and investments in Hong Kong films. The economic boom also created conditions for a New Cinema in the 1980s. Auteur directors like Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Edward Yang became internationally known for their realistic portraits of native Taiwanese life. Hou's award-winning trilogy (*City of Sadness/Bei qing cheng shi*, 1989; *The Puppetmaster/Xi meng ren sheng*, 1993; *Good Men, Good Women/Hao nan hao nu*, 1995) spans a century of Taiwan history

(from Japanese colonial times through Nationalist rule to modern Taipei) as well as the history of visual technologies (photography, shadow play, theatre).

During the 1990s, the film industries of the "three regions" (*san di*) of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the PRC became increasingly intertwined. As production costs rose, Hong Kong turned to the mainland for cheap labor and expansive settings. As output dropped on the island of Taiwan (from 215 to 33 films in 1992 alone), investment capital began to flow more freely across the Taiwan Straits. By 1993, about a quarter of all films made in the PRC received foreign funding. The mainland government discovered that dropping barriers could raise revenues. In 1994, it initiated a policy of importing ten "mega films" a year, sharing box-office receipts with producers. These imports included Hollywood blockbusters like *The Fugitive* (1993) and *Forest Gump* (1994), but also Hong Kong kung-fu films like *Drunken Master II* (*Jue ken II*, 1994) with Jackie Chan.

Significantly, some of China's best-known filmmakers have migrated to the West. Ang Lee moved from Taiwan to New York in the 1980s. John Woo left Hong Kong for Hollywood in the 1990s. Their work straddles the split world of the Chinese diaspora, one foot set in the traditional culture of the mainland while the other steps out into Western territory. Other directors, like Wayne Wang, grew up outside of China. Wang was named after John Wayne by his American father. Many of his films, like *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* (1984) and *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), dramatize the generational conflicts of culture among Chinese Americans. These overseas Chinese filmmakers have added new dimensions to the issue of Chineseness in a global age.

Timeline (Figure 1.19)

Dates	Chinese History	Mainland Cinema	Hong Kong Cinema	Taiwan Cinema
1644–1911	Qing Dynasty			
1842			Hong Kong becomes a British Crown Colony	
1894–1895	First Sino-Japanese War			
1900	Boxer Rebellion opposes foreign influence in China			
1895–1945				Japanese occupation of Taiwan influences local productions
1912	Republic of China founded		Hong Kong begins producing local films	

(*Continued*)

Timeline (*Continued*)

Dates	Chinese History	Mainland Cinema	Hong Kong Cinema	Taiwan Cinema
1919	Students lead "May Fourth Movement," stirring Chinese nationalism			
1925	Chiang Kai-shek assumes leadership of right-wing Nationalist army			
1927–1950	Chinese civil war between Kuomintang Nationalists and Communists			
1928		Zhang Sichuan's *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* (*Huo shao hong lian si*)		
1931	Japan invades Manchuria		Hong Kong becomes center for Cantonese language films	
1934		Sun Yu's *The Big Road* (*Dalu*)		
1937	Nanjing massacre			
1937–1945	Second Sino-Japanese War			
1941–1945			Japan occupies Hong Kong	
1943–1976	Mao Zedong, Chairman of Communist Party			
1948		Fei Mu's *Spring in a Small Town* (*Xiaocheng zhi chun*)		
1949	People's Republic of China founded on mainland, Republic of China on Taiwan		Influx of filmmakers from Shanghai boosts local production	Filmmakers sympathetic to Nationalist government begin arriving from mainland

Dates	Chinese History	Mainland Cinema	Hong Kong Cinema	Taiwan Cinema
1950		Beijing Film Academy founded		
1958–1961	Great Leap Forward	Communist government promotes "socialist realism"		
1966			King Hu's *Come Drink With Me* (*Da zui xia*)	
1966–1976	Cultural Revolution	Feature film production stops on mainland		
1970			Golden Harvest studio opens	
1972			Bruce Lee's *Way of the Dragon* (*Meng long guo jiang*)	
1976	Mao Zedong dies	"Exploratory films" move away from revolutionary models		
1978–1992	Economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping's leadership opens PRC to "market socialism"			
1982		Fifth Generation directors graduate from Beijing Film Academy		
1983			Jackie Chan's *Project A* ("*A" gai wak*)	Edward Yang's *That Day on the Beach* (*Hai tan de yi tian*)
1984		Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tu di*)		
1988		Shift to market-driven cinema	New rating system spawns adults only "Category III films"	
1989	Tiananmen Square incident			Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *City of Sadness* (*Bei qing cheng shi*)

(*Continued*)

Timeline (*Continued*)

Dates	Chinese History	Mainland Cinema	Hong Kong Cinema	Taiwan Cinema
1991		Zhang Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern* (*Da hong deng long gao gao gua*)	Tsui Hark's *Once Upon a Time in China* (*Wong Fei hung*)	
1993		Zhang Yuan's *Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing za zhong*)		Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *The Puppetmaster* (*Xi meng ren sheng*)
1994				Ang Lee's *Eat Drink Man Woman* (*Yin shi nan nu*)
1997	British give Hong Kong to PRC			
2000				Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (*Wo hu cang long*)
2002		Jia Zhangke's *Unknown Pleasures* (*Ren xiao yao*)		
2004			Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle*	
2008		John Woo's *Red Cliff* (*Chi bi*)		Wei Te-sheng's *Cape No. 7* (*Haijiao qi hao*)
2011	PRC joins World Trade Organization		Wong Kar-wai's *The Grandmaster (Yi dai zong shi)*	

Chinese Language and Identity in a Global Culture

What makes a film Chinese? Is it a matter of where the film is made, or who makes it, or what it is about? Is it a question of culture or language? To what extent is Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* a Chinese film if its director has lived half his life in North America and imbues its story with Western elements? Even *Hero* (*Ying xiong*, 2002), made in China and directed by Fifth Generation filmmaker Zhang Yimou, has been accused of being non-Chinese because of its international financing,

global crew, and special appeal to foreign audiences. In an industry increasingly characterized by co-productions, border-crossing film directors, and global marketing, how can one speak of a national Chinese cinema?

In an anthology of studies on Chinese history, politics, and filmmaking, Sheldon Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh suggest replacing the notion of "Chinese cinema" with the term "Chinese-language cinema." By redrawing the cinematic map along linguistic rather than geographical lines, Lu and Yeh broaden the idea of national consciousness and culture. Their definition covers "all the local, national, regional, transnational, diasporic, and global cinemas related to the Chinese language."[2] This wider category accommodates the complex flows of Chinese talent, funding, imagery, and themes across boundaries of the PRC, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau, Singapore, France, the United States, and everywhere else that Chinese-speaking filmmakers practice their craft. The China in many of these films, if pictured at all, is a projection of the imagination, highlighting Benedict Anderson's contention that nationhood itself is an imagined community. What constitutes Chinese culture is particularly abstract in genre films. What gets projected on the screens of wuxia and kung fu movies is not so much a reflection of what one might find on Chinese soil, wherever that might be, but a mythical dimension of airborne bodies, rapid reflexes, and enchanted weapons. It's a China of extraordinary power, energy, and skill, especially appealing to a people who have suffered humiliation at the hands of foreign nations and endured decades of civil warfare, political division, poverty, famine, and natural disasters all within the last century.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: The Making of a Transnational Chinese-Language Film

Directed by Ang Lee, a Chinese émigré working with an international production team and a transnational cast, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a truly global creation. The way it came to be, from funding to scripting, shooting, and distribution, is a prime example of how contemporary filmmaking can cross national and cultural borders with remarkable success. In this section, we'll focus in depth on the global aspects of Lee's film. First, we'll review its production history. Next, we'll consider the story and its heroes: who they are and where they come from. Then we'll look more closely at the film's style and themes: how it's told and what it means. We'll see how *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* builds on a long tradition of warrior heroes and gives them new life on the world's movie screens.

Lee was born in 1954 on the island of Taiwan, where his parents had taken refuge from the Communists on the mainland. Like many other conservative Chinese families, they escaped with their lives during the 1940s civil war and helped to transplant their cultural values in a new land, which was itself emerging from 50 years of Japanese colonialism. Lee left Taiwan for the United States in 1978, where he earned a bachelor's degree in theatre from the University of Illinois and a master's degree in film production from New York University, settling near Manhattan.

FIGURE 1.20 The closing credits from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (*Wo hu cang long*, Dir. Ang Lee, 2000) acknowledge its cross-regional cast, multinational financing, and transnational crew.

By now, he has spent more time in the United States than in his home country, although he still retains his Taiwanese citizenship.

Lee's prolific career spans an impressive array of genres and styles. His first three features, affectionately known among some fans as the "Father Knows Best Trilogy," focused on families caught between traditional Chinese culture and the disruptive forces of modern life. *Pushing Hands* (*Tui shou*, 1992), *The Wedding Banquet* (*Xiyan*, 1993), and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (*Yin shi nan nu*, 1994) were all made with Taiwanese actors and financing, although their scripts were partly in Mandarin and English. His other films have taken him as far from China as eighteenth-century England (*Sense and Sensibility*, 1995), 1970s suburban Connecticut (*The Ice Storm*, 1997), the American Civil War (*Ride with the Devil*, 1999), Marvel comics (*Hulk*, 2003), a Wyoming ranch (*Brokeback Mountain*, 2005), and a lifeboat on the Pacific Ocean (*Life of Pi*, 2012). *Crouching Tiger* was a kind of homecoming. As a member of the Chinese diaspora – the 30 million ethnic Chinese who have spread out over every continent since the fifteenth century – Lee sought to recreate a collective image of the homeland on film. "In some ways," he has said, "we're all looking for that old cultural, historical, abstract China – the big dream of China that probably never existed."[3]

For *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Lee selected his actors from different parts of the Chinese-speaking world (see Figure 1.20). Zhang Ziyi is from the mainland, Chang Chen from Taiwan, Chow Yun-Fat from Hong Kong, and Michelle Yeoh originally from Malaysia. The casting choices link Lee's characters with a global catalog of genres and roles. Cheng Pei Pei, who plays the cunningly venomous Jade Fox, was born in Shanghai and became a popular figure in Hong Kong martial arts films during the 1960s. Michelle Yeoh, another veteran of martial arts and widely known as Jackie Chan's co-star, had an active part in the James Bond

picture *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997). Chow Yun-Fat appeared in several Hollywood films after a long, successful career in Hong Kong. These casting choices provide rich intertextual connections for Chinese movie fans.

The film's production crew was even more international in perspective and work experience. Yuen Woping (sometimes spelled Yuen Woo-ping or Yuan Heping) served as martial arts choreographer. Born in southern China in 1945, Yuen studied the martial arts with his father as a child and came to Hong Kong in the 1960s, directing Jackie Chan's first big kung fu film, *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow / Se ying diu sau*, in 1978 and becoming one of the most influential masters of the genre. His work on *The Matrix* in 1999 brought him international acclaim. Cinematographer Peter Pau, born in Hong Kong and educated in Guangzhou, China, and San Francisco, has worked on both sides of the Pacific. His contributions to *Crouching Tiger* won an Academy Award. Hong Kong born Tim Yup, who also earned an Oscar for his production designs, has worked on co-productions involving Hong Kong, Japan, and France. The film's inclusive reach is echoed in its musical score, which combines the talents of composer Tan Dun (who studied in Beijing and New York), cellist Yo-Yo Ma (born in Paris and a resident of New York since the age of four), pop singer Coco Lee (born in Hong Kong, raised in San Francisco, and well known throughout Asia), and Ma Xiao Hui (a native of the mainland). Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this multicultural collaboration is the script itself. Based on a 70-year-old novel by a Manchurian Chinese writer, Wang Dulu, the story passed through many hands, including story editor Jean Castelli and three principal writers, Tsai Kuo Jung, Wang Hui-lin (both Tawianese), and James Schamus (an American), who developed the script in English and Chinese as it evolved.

The production itself involved five companies in five different countries: Taiwan, Britain, the PRC, Hong Kong, and the United States. The principal shooting lasted five months and took Lee to places on the mainland like the bamboo forests of Anji in the south, the imperial city of Chengde in the north, the city of Urumqi in the far west, the Gobi Desert, and the Taklamakan Plateau north of Tibet. This was his first lengthy visit to the PRC, the first opportunity to compare the actual countryside to the China in his mind.

With all these international arrangements, Lee and his collaborators were clearly courting a worldwide audience. Not only was the film aimed at two sides of the Pacific, but it targeted two kinds of viewers: the commercial market in China and art house audiences in the United States. By all measures, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was both a critical and financial success. It garnered festival awards in Hong Kong, Taiwan, New York, and Hollywood, where it was nominated for a record ten Academy Awards. It won Oscars for the best foreign-language film, cinematography, art direction, and original score. Critics at the Cannes Film Festival gave it a standing ovation. Made for only $15 million, the film earned well over $200 million, becoming the highest-grossing Chinese-language film in Asian history. In the United States, it earned $128 million at the box office and another $112 million in video and DVD rentals and sales by 2004,

proving that a Chinese-language art film could appeal to a mainstream audience.[4] Yet, despite this unprecedented reception, *Crouching Tiger* was not uniformly appreciated by Chinese speakers and English speakers alike. The reasons, though still in dispute, reveal some important facts about global filmmaking today.

One of the common complaints among Chinese viewers is the film's dialogue. The actors speak chiefly in Mandarin, in keeping with the story's source and setting. But of the principal actors, only Zhang Ziyi speaks flawless Mandarin. The others use dialects or accents reflective of their origins. This proved to be distracting to native speakers and gave the dialogue an inauthentic ring. Another complaint is that the script itself does not seem authentically Chinese. This is not surprising given the way it was composed. As Schamus describes the process, he took the plot summary made by Lee and Jean Castelli from Wang's sprawling novel and turned it into "an action-packed, tightly plotted, swashbuckling, rousingly romantic adventure." By his own admission, though, Schamus's version was "culturally tone-deaf." He had "failed to absorb any of the nuance and inflection that not only inform the style of the great *wuxia* masterpieces, but that embody its very essence."[5] What followed were six months of bilingual composition, writing a scene in English, translating it into Chinese, revising the Chinese, and translating it back into English. The result is a hybrid script merging the strands of two languages and two cultural traditions. Many native Chinese viewers disliked what they saw as foreign elements. Die-hard wuxia fans bemoaned the story's deviations from the genre. From a transnational perspective, however, what is interesting is the common denominator, what transcends the barriers of language and culture and speaks to all audiences alike. To understand this, to appreciate what *Crouching Tiger* contributes to the evolution of global cinema and how it works as cinema, we need a close look at the film text. We'll see how a detailed analysis of this or any film can answer basic questions about the film's heroes, stories, visual styles, and themes.

Characters and relationships: Who are the heroes?

At the center of the story are three women and two men. Jen Yu (Zhang Ziyi) is the daughter of a wealthy provincial governor who has arranged for her marriage to a man she does not love. Strong-willed and independent-minded, Jen dreams of being powerful and free, attributes not normally accorded to women in eighteenth-century China. Her parents are unaware that she has been secretly learning the martial arts from a notorious female criminal known as Jade Fox. Jade Fox (Cheng Pei-Pei) honed her ferocious fighting skills with the aid of a secret manual that she stole from her former master after murdering him. Meanwhile Li Mu Bai (Chow Yun-Fat), the master's ablest student, is nearing the end of his career. He is ready to retire his signature weapon, the Green Destiny Sword, with only one mission to complete: avenging his master's death. He gives the sword to Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh), an accomplished fighter and a woman he can trust, asking her to bring it to an old friend, Sir Te (Lung Sihung), for safekeeping. It is clear that Li and

FIGURE 1.21 "Calligraphy is so similar to fencing." Jen and Shu Lien compare the writing brush to a sword in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Shu Lien have been in love for many years, but they have not married out of respect for Yu's former fiancé, now deceased. Midway through the film, we learn that Jen has a secret lover, Lo (Chang Chen), a highwayman who once attacked the Yu family's caravan when it was crossing through the western desert. Early in the film, Jen meets Shu Lien and is enraptured by her lifestyle. Here is a woman who seems to have the freedom and respect that she desires for herself. She wants Shu Lien to be her older sister. Thus, the five main characters are linked by four bonds: two couples romantically (Li and Shu Lien, Jen and Lo), two by strong female affinities (Jen and Jade Fox, Jen and Shu Lien). Later on, Li and Jen are linked by the expectations of a master and his (would be) disciple.

The female relationships are developed dramatically in two intimate scenes. In one of these, we learn about Jen's upcoming marriage to a man she does not love. Jen is sitting in her room practicing calligraphy when Shu Lien pays a visit. Jen offers to write Shu Lien's name "just for fun," wielding the brush with a graceful hand. Shu Lien is impressed. "I never realized that my name looks like 'sword,'" she says, adding, "Calligraphy is so similar to fencing" (Figure 1.21). The connection between writing and swordplay is an important one in Chinese culture, a link that Zhang Yimou explores more elaborately in *Hero*, as we noted in Chapter 1. Here, it serves to underscore the privileged nature of two arts traditionally reserved for men: the art of calligraphy and the martial arts. Jen has been practicing the martial arts clandestinely, and Shu Lien is hinting that she knows this. The maid arrives with tea, and the topic turns to Jen's arranged wedding. It is a good career move for Jen's father, but not for Jen. "I wish I were like the heroes in the books I read," she says. "Like you and Li Mu Bai. … to be free to live my own life, to choose whom I love. That is true happiness." This is when Shu Lien reveals the secret of her previous engagement. She is not as free as she appears. In the exchange of secrets and desires, the two women agree to be like sisters.

This moment contrasts sharply with a later scene when Jade Fox, disguised as the Yu family governess, confronts Jen in her room at night. In contrast with the

FIGURE 1.22 "Kill or be killed. Exciting, isn't it?" Jen weighs the dangerous allure of Jade Fox's dark powers in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Low-key lighting underscores their shady business.

lightness and refinement of the day, it is now a dark place of chiaroscuro shadows (Figure 1.22). The relationship here is of a demanding master and her defiant disciple. Jen is upset that Fox has killed a policeman earlier that night. "You'll bring ruin on my whole family," Jen cries. Jade retorts that Jen herself is partly responsible for the death because she stole the Green Destiny Sword. "Like a little girl, you thought stealing would be fun?" asks the old woman, pointing out that actions have consequences. "It's the Giang Hu fighter lifestyle … kill or be killed. Exciting, isn't it?" When the two women break into a fight, Jen has the upper hand. Her upper-class education has enabled her to read the stolen manual, learning techniques unknown to her illiterate teacher. But Fox has the final words: "Believe me, I still have a lesson or two to teach you!"

In her search for power and freedom, Jen has turned to two older women as her heroes. Jade Fox is a creature of dark forces. What power she has comes from treachery and anger. She stole the Wudan manual when the male teacher she had trusted showed more interest in seducing his female students than in teaching them. Although this provides a motive for her murderous revenge, the murder of her master brands her as an outlaw, a permanent outsider in need of a companion. Shu Lien is a wiser, nobler mentor. She has learned the martial arts through honest effort and a life of dedicated practice. Yet she has more to offer Jen than fencing technique; there are lessons to be learned about discipline, trust, integrity, and love.

Narrative traditions: Where does the story come from?

If Jade Fox and Shu Lien sometimes seem like figures in a fable, the two main male characters also play roles commonly found in the *wuxia* literature and wuxia movies described earlier in Chapter 1. More specifically, Lee's film is loosely based on Part IV of Wang Dulu's epic *wuxia* romance series *Crane-Iron Pentalogy* (1938–1942), a set of five related novels that have never been translated into English. Viewed broadly, the characters perform many of the mythic functions explored by Joseph

FIGURE 1.23 Lo swoops down on Jen's caravan, a trickster figure of freedom and romance in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.[6] Lo, the young desert bandit known as Dark Cloud, swoops down on Jen's caravan and steals her comb (Figure 1.23). Jen leaps from her coach to pursue him, and the two ride off in a rollicking chase scene reminiscent of a dozen Hollywood romantic films. Like a Turkish Johnny Depp, Lo teases her with a rough game of "come and get it," alternately cocky and crude or tender and passionate. He plays the part of trickster, an elusive agent of change, a figure of comic relief. Shifting shapes from alien provocateur to exotic lover, he shifts the narrative from high adventure to comedy and romance. Like other archetypal shapeshifters described by Joseph Campbell, Lo represents unconscious drives within the hero. He releases the sexual energy, the *animus*, within Jen, reminding her that such forces can have dire consequences. Later, pointing to a cliff, Lo tells her an old legend: "Anyone who jumps from that mountain, God will grant his wish. If you believe, it will happen," adding, "a faithful heart makes wishes come true."

In contrast to Lo, Li Mu Bai is an older, serious man, a respected master of the Wudan fighting code. His inflexible adherence to the code has also made him obdurate, insensitive to his deepest feelings for Shu Lien. Recalling his master's teaching, he tells her "The things we touch have no permanence. Nothing we can hold onto in this world lasts." Her response is to touch his hand. "Isn't my hand real?" she asks. Later, Li wants to take on Jen as his disciple. He explains to a skeptical Shu Lien that his motive is to help the young woman find a righteous path for her talents: "She needs direction … and training." Jen herself resists this offer (Figure 1.24), perhaps remembering Jade Fox's experience with male teachers, perhaps thinking of Lo or of her freedom. If Li is a mentor figure, the superego's envoy, representing an ideal standard of morality, the hero's conscience, he is an ambiguous one.

There is nothing ambiguous about the Green Destiny Sword. Dating back before the Qin era, it could easily have sprung from the pages of a Western chivalric romance. In *Crouching Tiger*, the sword becomes a fetish, a symbol of male

FIGURE 1.24 Li is a mentor figure, the superego's envoy, representing an ideal standard of morality in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

power. Li, its owner, relinquishes the sword together with his life of fighting. Throughout the story, it keeps changing hands. When Shu Lien presents it to Sir Te, the good man is reluctant to accept the gift: "It is a great hero's weapon! He is the only one in the world worthy of carrying it," says Te. Later Jen steals the weapon, fondling the gleaming blade and dreaming of the power it will give her. Shu Lien tries to take it back, calling out to Jen: "Without the Green Destiny, you are nothing." At one point, Shu Lien comes across Li dancing with the sword alone, like a boy with his toy. Near the film's conclusion, in a sexually charged duel among the swaying tops of bamboo trees, Li wrenches the sword from Jen and throws it into the rushing waters below. It is only after Li dies in her arms that the sword returns to Shu Lien, who sends it back to Sir Te for safekeeping.

Aesthetics: How is the story told?

Phallic swords and magic manuals are the standard props of many narrative traditions, Eastern and Western alike. With *Crouching Tiger*, Ang Lee returns to the mainland aesthetics of earlier wuxia fiction and operatic melodrama. His decision to use the Mandarin language and to center his story on women is both a step back and a step forward, blending elements of ancient Chinese tradition with elements of modern globalism. We can trace some of his intentions by comparing the film script to Wang Dulu's original novel. Lee and his writers simplified a long and intricate series of adventures, romances, intrigues, and escapes, focusing the narrative on Jen and her relationships to two women and two men. By relegating Bo (the novel's chief male hero) to a minor role, removing a vengeful monk, eliminating Jade Fox's husband, and killing off Li (in the novel, he lives and Shu Lien dies), the script of *Crouching Tiger* becomes the story of a young woman's fight for freedom, pleasure, and power in a man's world, a story for a modern audience. The film's ambiguous ending (it is not clear whether Jen survives her leap) and Jen's ambivalence throughout the story (she makes an alliance with a criminal but

doesn't want to see her family disgraced; she seeks the story-book excitement of a *jianghu* life but cherishes her class privileges) transform the wuxia plot into something richer both thematically and emotionally.

More than most martial arts films, *Crouching Tiger* draws on skillful acting and understated cinematography to tell its story. Ang Lee creates richly textured theatrical moments like the two scenes described earlier involving Len, Shu Lien, and Jade Fox. The relationships between these women are conveyed less through what they say than by how they look and act. The women's embroidered garments and elaborate coiffures speak subtly of their traditional roles in Qing dynasty China. The décor of Jen's room, with its elaborate writing desk, ornamental vases, scroll hangings, latticed garden window, and bonsai tree, speak of rank and privilege (Figure 1.21). Jen's handwriting, elegant and sure, bespeaks her youthful confidence, but when Shu Lien makes the analogy to swordplay, the younger woman's smile betrays the slightest hesitancy. Later, as they sit down to tea, close-ups reveal traces of Shu Lien's life-long disappointment when Jen talks naively of true happiness, and they share secrets. The duel taking place beneath their polite conversation gives way to intimacy and trust. In contrast, as we've noticed (Figure 1.22), the scene with Jade Fox takes place during the dark of night. The women's faces, lit by a single candle, reflect the progress of a deadly contest of wills. A raised eyebrow, a curled lip, a glint in the eye, or a raised thumb communicates a daughter's anger and defiance, a mother's pain and power.

Peter Pau's cinematography contributes to the film's restrained aesthetics by favoring a middle-tone, low-contrast palette. He mimics the negative space and desaturated colors of Chinese paintings. Lee and Pau choose red for the desert scenes, associated with the tiger, and green for the forest, representing the hidden dragon. The Green Destiny sword and Jade Fox are linked by color to this scheme.

Yet the film's most cinematic and creative features are arguably the fight scenes. While typical wuxia and kung fu moments offer lots of stylized aggression, Yuen Woping's martial choreography in *Crouching Tiger* breaks the mold. More than one critic has compared martial arts movies to musicals, and *Crouching Tiger* explicitly invites the comparison. The *qingqong* (literally "light skill") fighting technique gives practitioners the ability to defy gravity. Yuen's brilliant wirework, so striking in *The Matrix*, lifts the actors off their feet into dazzling displays of aerial acrobatics when Shu Lien chases Jen over the rooftops of Beijing or when Li Mu Bai spars with Jen above the bamboo forest (Figure 1.24). Pau's camera catches the action at revealing angles, sometimes from below, sometimes in an overhead shot recalling the aerial camerawork of Busby Berkeley. Yuen Woping's fluid imagination, aided by Tim Squyres's editing, stitches the shots into the seamless flow of dance.

When Jen steals the Green Destiny Sword, Shu Lien chases her from roof to roof. They go bounding from wall to wall, hurdling over red tiles, soaring high above the neighborhood. At one point, they confront each other in a frenetic kung fu ballet, a whirl of flying feet and fists, two matched dancers spinning, springing, and leaping in sync. But the two women have different movements, different fighting styles. Younger and lighter, Jen is ever striving toward the sky. Shu Lien's

motions are aligned with gravity. She throws a bundle at the thief, then a piece of masonry to bring her down. "Get down here," she cries, striving to pin her opponent to the pavement with her feet. Compare this interaction to the scene in Jen's room, where the younger woman shows off her deft calligraphy and expresses her desire to be free. The gravity in Shu Lien's face, the face of experience, shows how little about freedom or desire Jen really knows. Here, with no need for subtitles, the fight on the rooftops enacts Jen's flightiness and Shu Lien's efforts to ground her in the discipline of life.

Later, in a tavern, Jen is seated alone with her sword and a cup of tea. A mean-looking group of men arrives with weapons on display as the regular clientele scramble to make room. They all have impressively bad names: Iron Arm, Flying Saber, Shining Phoenix Mountain Gou. It is the *jianghu* gang (Giang Hu in the script), the underground brotherhood of misfits who practice martial arts in the mountains. They provoke Jen to battle and she rises to the task, dispatching Iron Arm with a few casual strokes, smashing others through the railings to the ground floor below. She leaps over her opponents, fighting four at once with one hand behind her back. Her body is a blur, somersaulting down a staircase full of armed men, then twirling upward to the second floor again. When Monk Jing demands to know her identity, she proclaims in measured lines, "I am the Invincible Sword Goddess. Armed with the Incredible … Green Destiny. Be you Li or Southern Crane, lower your head and ask for mercy. I am the desert dragon. I leave no trace. Today I fly over Eu-Mei. Tomorrow … I'll kick over Wudan Mountain!" (Figure 1.7). Her boasts sound like something out of Marvel comics. The brawl itself, played as comedy, could have taken place in a Western saloon or a Jedi bar. We might recognize the tavern as a staple of Hong Kong action films like *Come Drink with Me* (*Da zui xia*, 1966), a place where the laws of physics and male physical superiority are suspended (Figure 1.6). The scene winks at these kindred genres and tells us something about Jen's internal world, the fantasy of the self-styled superhero.

Near the film's conclusion, Jen meets her match in Mu Bai when the Green Destiny's thief and owner confront each other in the bamboo forest. Visually, this is Ang Lee's most inspired scene, a lofty homage to King Hu's *A Touch of Zen* (*Xia nu*, 1971). The two duelists float and glide among the treetops in an ecstasy of green, the color of the hidden dragon. Mu Bai is superbly in control. Cool and centered, he manages to stay slightly above her as the branches bend or snap, catapulting them to different heights. Their swords clash lightly as they pass in long, slow-motion arcs. They glide above the canopy in graceful long shots. Only when Mu Bai looks into Jen's beautiful face, framed in close-up by the bamboo stalks, does he falter and fall. Jen takes flight, skipping over the surface of a jade-like pool until they land together on a rock and speak face to face. Again there is no need for dialogue. Even before he tells her that he wants to be her teacher, her master, we know his feelings and intentions. We see them in his haughty posture, one hand behind him as they fence. We feel them in the sensual play of bodies swaying in the wind. His story is narrated in the universal language of action films.

Thematics: What is the story telling us?

Lee uses many of the conventions of the wuxia genre: the secret handbook, the magic sword, the relationship of master and student. He also develops some of the genre's traditional themes: the motivation of revenge, the need for discipline, the perilous distractions of romance, and the centrality of physically powerful women. We've already seen how this last feature is quite common in Chinese martial arts genres in contrast to traditional Westerns or samurai films. In this respect, the women warriors in *Crouching Tiger* and their female ancestors anticipate more recent trends in the global representation of women. Think of *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), *Whale Rider* (2002), or *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (2003) and *Vol. 2* (2004).

Lee's film also reflects a current worldwide focus on ethnicity. The desert episodes take place in the west of China, where ethnic minorities have lived on the fringes of Han society for centuries. Lo belongs to one of these minorities. The tribal song he sings to Jen while she is bathing sounds like Turkish. She calls him a barbarian, and he is surprised to learn that she is Manchurian, not a member of the Han majority. These references to disenfranchised groups make a political statement, however veiled, about the marginalized people of China including, perhaps, the Taiwanese. The *jianghu* underworld, with its ragtag assortment of social outcasts, may suggest another fact of modern China, the growing gap between wealthy capitalists and an impoverished underclass. Seen from this perspective, *Crouching Tiger* offers a challenge to China's patriarchal and ethnocentric traditions.

Where does the film fit into ongoing debates over global and national cinemas? Executive producer and screenwriter James Schamus acknowledged the desire to make "an Eastern movie for Western audiences and in some ways a more Western movie for Eastern audiences."[7] Lee himself has responded to the accusation that his films are "too Hollywood." In the preface to the illustrated book of the film, Lee describes *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* as "a kind of dream of China, a China that probably never existed, except in my boyhood fantasies in Taiwan. … fired by the martial arts movies I grew up with and by the novels of romance and derring-do I read instead of doing my homework."[8]

It might be accurate to say that *Crouching Tiger* is located somewhere between history and myth, embedding certain cultural particularities of China in an eclectic matrix of world culture, arising from personal motives and aspiring to universal truths. *New York Times* film critic Elvis Mitchell wrote that the film combined "girl-power cool and the soap-opera bloodshed of 'Buffy, the Vampire Slayer.'" He found elements of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, *Zorro*, *The Bostonians*, screwball comedy ("Hit Me Kate"), and comedy of manners ("'Sense and Sensibility' with a body count"). Ultimately, he commended Lee for bringing a "new perspective" to the genre, introducing "spirituality not normally found in these pictures."[9]

Jen's struggle for freedom within traditional Qing society can be read in many ways. Historically, it dramatizes an age-old conflict between individual happiness and social responsibility, between the Daoist pursuit of one's nature ("the way") and the communal obligations of Confucianism. The Confucian concepts of propriety and

filial piety, honoring one's parents, have been pillars of Chinese life for more than two millennia. Daoism, which teaches harmony with nature and oneself, may be even older. More recently, Jen's inner conflict echoes a younger generation's aspirations to break free from conventional constraints, a conflict dramatized in Ang Lee's first three films, in which Chinese-American children resist the old-fashioned ways of their Chinese parents but suffer the guilt of betrayal. *Crouching Tiger* reminds us that this struggle is not a simple conflict between East and West; it has deep roots in Chinese ethical and religious history. And, as Campbell and Vogler might point out, it has been a staple of myths throughout the world. The journey of the hero is an inner journey, a narrative of passage from childhood to adulthood. The mentors and monsters met along the way represent aspects of the self as it matures. In fashioning his film from elements of worldwide genres, in accommodating his characters and story to the eyes of Eastern and Western audiences, Ang Lee has advanced the art of global cinema along the road of universal humanism.

Notes

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2. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu and Emilie Yeh, eds., *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 2.
3. Christina Klein, "*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*: A Diasporic Reading," *Cinema Journal* 43(4) (Summer 2004): 18–42.
4. Klein.
5. James Schamus, "The Polyglot Task of Writing the Global Film," *The New York Times*, November 5, 2005: 2A25.
6. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd edition (New World Library, 2008). See also Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey* (Michael Wiese Productions, 1998) and Stuart Voytilla, *Myth and the Movies* (Michael Wiese Productions, 1999).
7. The Guardian/BFI Interview, Ang Lee and James Schamus, November 7, 2000. Available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2000/nov/07/guardianinterviewsatbfisouthbank (accessed June 8, 2013).
8. Ang Lee, James Schamus, Huiling Wang, *et al.*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: A Portrait of the Ang Lee Film* (Newmarket Press, 2000), 7.
9. Elvis Mitchell, "Action Fans, Be Prepared For Heart And Feminism," *The New York Times*, October 9, 2000. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/09/movies/film-festival-review-action-fans-be-prepared-for-heart-and-feminism.html?n=Top%2fReference%2fTimes%20Topics%2fPeople%2fL%2fLee%2c%20Ang (accessed June 8, 2013).

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CLOSE-UP

THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

FIGURE 1.25 *The Magnificent Seven* (Dir. John Sturges, 1960).

Directed by John Sturges.
Written by William Roberts (uncredited: Walter Bernstein, Walter Newman, Akira Kurosawa, Shinobu Hashimoto, and Hideo Oguni).
Cinematography by Charles Lang.
Editing by Ferris Webster.
Music by Elmer Bernstein.
Art Direction by Edward Fitzgerald.
Produced by Walter Mirisch, Lou Morheim, and John Sturges.
Distributed by United Artists in 1960.
Running Time: 128 minutes.

Chris Larabee Adams	Yul Brynner
Vin Tanner	Steve McQueen
Calvera	Eli Wallach
Bernardo O'Reilly	Charles Bronson
Lee	Robert Vaughn
Harry Luck	Brad Dexter
Britt	James Coburn
Chico	Horst Buchholz
Old Man	Vladimir Sokoloff

World Cinema through Global Genres, First Edition. William V. Costanzo.

Aside from the sheer pleasure of watching a well-made action film, *The Magnificent Seven* merits special attention for its contributions to the genre and its relationship to global cinema. Based on Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) and directed by John Sturges in 1960, *The Magnificent Seven* is credited with introducing Hollywood to a new type of Western hero, the hard-bitten professional killer, and a new type of Western, a postmodern genre in which villains can be likeable and the good guys wear black hats. It also popularized the idea of misfits on a mission, a plot device that crosses genres and includes *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *Stand by Me* (1986), and *The A-Team* (2010).

Sturges shifts the location of Kurosawa's film from feudal Japan to the American Wild West, where a Mexican village of defenceless farmers is prey to periodic raids by bandits. Poor, hungry, and tired of watching the fruits of their hard labor stolen every season by Calvera and his well-armed band, the farmers decide to fight back. They send an envoy to buy guns at an American border town, where they are persuaded that gunfighters are cheaper than guns. The seven gunmen whom they hire sign up for the job for different reasons, but they become a fighting unit and train the villagers to fight with them. After several skirmishes and a major battle, the Calvera gang is defeated and all but one of the surviving gunmen ride off into the hills.

Like *Seven Samurai*, *The Magnificent Seven* can be roughly divided into three sections: recruiting the Seven, preparing for battle, and fighting the bandits. Like Kurosawa, Sturges varies the pacing of his film, alternating lengthy lulls with moments of explosive action. The opening credits appear over a widescreen view of the Mexican town, with its brick church and tepees of stacked corn drying in the sun: a vision of peace. Suddenly, a cloud of dust appears, announcing Calvera and his gang. He has come to charm and bully the village to get what he wants, food and money for his hungry men. When we cut to the border town, it looks like a typical one-street Western set, but this town is run by racists; they won't let Old Sam be buried in Boot Hill because he was an Indian. A stranger in a black hat volunteers to drive the hearse. This is Chris Adams (Yul Brynner), who is joined by another stranger, Vin (Steve McQueen). Together they take on snipers and the bigoted "reception committee" to finish the job. Watching this show of bravery, skill, adventure, and principle, the Mexican envoys enlist Chris's help.

It's clear that Chris is motivated largely by a personal code of honor. He steps onto the driver's seat of Old Sam's hearse because it is the right thing to do. But the others join his team for different reasons. Bernardo (Charles Bronson) is an Irish-Mexican American who happens to be broke. Lee (Robert Vaughn) is a gunman on the run from the law and from his enemies. Vin, a gambler down on his luck, also needs the money. Harry Luck (Brad Dexter) believes there is a secret stash of gold. Chico (Horst Buchholz), the youngest, wants to prove he is a man. The prime interest of Britt (James Coburn) is in sharpening his knife-throwing skills. Like a Zen master, he's competing with himself.

Surprisingly, what motivates Calvera is more complex than what drives most Western villains. Like the renegade *ronin* in *Seven Samurai*, his men are hungry, and

their best means of employment are their weapons. But that does not explain why Calvera sets the Seven free once he has captured them. For the farmers, he has nothing but contempt. "If God didn't want them sheared, He wouldn't have made them sheep," he scoffs. But he admires the Americans, not only for their shooting skills but because he sees himself in them. "We're in the same business," he tells them, and later asks Chris uncomprehendingly, "Why did you come back, a man like you?"

Why, indeed? Feeling frustrated and betrayed after their capture, the gunfighters are ready to leave the village to its own devices. But they are not the same men they used to be. Bernardo, who has Mexican blood in him, has made friends with the farmers' children, who see him as a hero. Chico has found a pretty village girl who loves him. Harry still thinks there is hidden treasure, but he now believes in something else as well. What's more, the seven men have formed a special bond. They have become a team. When Chris makes his decision to head south again, he is not alone.

The first confrontation between Chris and Calvera reveals much about each man as well as Sturges's directing style. Calvera rides in from one side of the frame, followed by his 40 men on horseback. Chris walks out from the other side, backed by Vin, also on foot. For more than three minutes of screen time, Sturges observes the 180 degree rule, keeping Calvera on the left and Chris on the right. The bandit is filmed against the sky from a low angle, with two men at his rear. His mood swings from ironic pleasantries to haughty anger as his tactics shift from bribes to threats. Chris appears mostly in close-ups, his face immobile and determined. For much of this time, the two sides test each other with words. "New wall?" Calvera asks, surveying the town. "There are lots of new walls," Chris answers, "… all around." Calvera's retort is cocky, self-assured: "They won't keep me out." "They were meant to keep you in," is Chris's reply. The progress of this verbal banter is echoed in the music soundtrack, which alternates between an ominous bandit motif and the heroic melody of the title theme. "How many of you did they hire?" probes Calvera. "Enough," comes the curt response. One by one, the magnificent seven appear, stepping out from doorways, perched on roofs. When the shooting starts, the words give way to gunfire. Sturges's camera picks up the pace with shorter takes and more varied shots. Pistols blaze, horses rear, men fall or duck for cover. The air is filled with dust and smoke. Calvera and the remaining members of his gang escape, but we know that they'll be back.

The final battle takes place in broad daylight, another melee of leaping men, galloping horses, gun smoke, swung shovels, and death on all sides. Only three of the Seven survive. The Old Man sums up the score for them. "Only the farmers have won. They remain forever. They are like the land itself. You helped rid them of Calvera, the way a strong wind helps rid them of locusts. You're like the wind – blowing over the land and passing on." Only one, Chico, decides to stay, removing his gun belt, rolling up his sleeve to join his girl. As the music rises, Chris and Vin ride off with the wind.

In this broad outline, *The Magnificent Seven* recycles many of the scenes and themes of Kurosawa's film. What makes the Seven so magnificent is not only

their fighting skills, but also, and primarily, their allegiance to the group effort. Rugged individualists to start with, they learn to subordinate their personal interests to the greater good. There are, of course, important cultural differences between the American frontier and feudal Japan. Samurai did not define themselves as individuals. Their pride came from membership in an elite social class. They were professional warriors attached to a warlord or *daimyo*. Nor did they fight with guns. There is a big difference between firing a pistol or a shotgun at a distance and confronting the enemy in close combat. Kurosawa's samurai fight by the sword but die by gunfire, marking them as both valiant and obsolete. It seems clear from the ending of Sturges's film that the days of men like Chris and Vin are numbered. The future belongs to the farmers and their way of life. But the class conflicts explored in *Seven Samurai* are cast in *The Magnificent Seven* as racial issues, reflecting tension within American society in 1960. Film historians point to the bigotry against Indians at Boot Hill and the superiority of the American gunfighters over the Mexican farmers, who are incapable of fighting their own battles. In fact, the DVD commentary explains how the script was changed in deference to Mexican sensibilities. Instead of coming to the border town in search of Americans to solve their problems, as they did in an earlier version of the script, the Mexicans are only looking to buy guns for self-defense. Hiring seven gunfighters seems more like an afterthought. All through the shooting of the film, local censors were on the scene making sure that the Mexican actors did not succumb to stereotyping. This may explain why their white clothing never seems to get dirty or unkempt.

Richard Slotkin explores another topical connection to the 1960s.[1] During the American involvement in Vietnam, filmmakers sometimes used Westerns to comment on the war. Movies like *The Wild Bunch*, *Little Big Man* (1970), and *Ulzana's Raid* (1972) thus indirectly reenacted the Tet Offensive or the My Lai massacre of 1968, drawing on incidents and imagery from television coverage of these conflicts. Slotkin considers *The Magnificent Seven* to be the first "Vietnam Western." When American gunfighters cross the border into Mexico, they get to make commando raids on a predatory enemy and save the local inhabitants.

When comparing *Seven Samurai* to *The Magnificent Seven*, we should bear in mind important differences between an auteurist filmmaker like Kurosawa, who has nearly complete control of his production from script to final cut, and a Hollywood genre director like John Sturges, whose work is more collaborative. Sturges (1910–1992) began his career in the art and editing departments of RKO Studio, working his way up. He made documentaries for the Air Force during World War II, and worked with major talents like David O. Selznick and William Wyler. At the peak of his career, Sturges specialized in male-oriented action films like *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955), *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* (1957), *The Great Escape* (1963), and *Ice Station Zebra* (1968), all successful box office hits. He was a master of the multiple story film and knew how to make the best of CinemaScope's widescreen format. His mantra was to focus on the "gut" of the picture, not the head.

According to the documentary film *Guns for Hire*, the idea of remaking *Seven Samurai* as a Western came from associate producer Lou Morheim, who optioned the rights and interested Anthony Quinn in the project.[2] Through a succession of exchanges, not entirely friendly, the rights ended up with Walter Mirisch, who became executive producer, assembled a team of freelance writers, and hired Sturges, who had just made the successful Western *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*, to direct. They watched Kurosawa's film together many times and began casting the main parts. Yul Brynner, who had played the title role in *The King and I* (1956), brought a regal bearing to the part of Chris Adams. Steve McQueen and Charles Bronson had worked with Sturges before, and James Coburn learned about the film from his college roommate, Robert Vaughn. Horst Buchholz became Chico, a German playing a Mexican. Recruiting the seven actors was almost like building the gunfighter team; making them work like a team posed other challenges. Throughout the shooting, Brynner and McQueen kept trying to upstage each other, a rivalry that Sturges reportedly encouraged because he liked the effect on their performance. Meanwhile, the Mexican actors in Eli Wallach's bandit gang adopted him, a Jewish actor from New York, teaching him how to ride a horse and wield a gun. All this contributed to the spirit of the film.

United Artists did not expect much from the movie's general release, but it was a hit in Europe and box office sales climbed after its return to the United States. *The Magnificent Seven* became a classic, inspiring a television series and three sequels: *Return of the Seven* (1966), *Guns of the Magnificent Seven* (1969), and *The Magnificent Seven Ride Again* (1972). The unforgettable score by Elmer Bernstein took on a life of its own. Even those who never saw the film can recognize it in the theme for Marlboro cigarette commercials, Euro Disneyland, rock groups, and other popular media. Meanwhile, many of the young actors went on to successful screen careers. But perhaps the best tribute came from Kurosawa himself, who said he loved the film and presented Sturges with a ceremonial sword.[3]

Questions

1. Which groups or characters do you find most interesting or sympathetic? Explain what draws you to them and whether your view changes in the course of the film.
2. Violence is a staple of frontier life and its representation on film. In Westerns, the hero is often a gunfighter who faces the wilderness outside and the savagery within. What role do violent actions play in *The Magnificent Seven*?
3. Explore the motives of the film's main characters. What are they seeking and what do they find? Does *The Magnificent Seven* promote individualism or collaboration as an ideology?
4. After negative reactions to the way Mexicans were portrayed in another film, *Vera Cruz* (1954), United Artists employed local censors to monitor shooting on location. What do you think of the way Mexicans, their village, and their way of life are represented in *The Magnificent Seven*?
5. John Sturges is noted for his direction of male actors, his use of widescreen photography, and the pacing of his action films. Assess the director's cinematic accomplishments in this film.
6. Aficionados of the genre are fond of quoting lines from the script. When the Mexicans go scouting for hired guns, one says, "There's one – look at the

scars on his face!" but another replies, "The man for us is the one who gave him that face." When Calvera boasts "those walls won't keep me out," Chris tells him, "They were meant to keep you in." Then there is the story Vin tells about the man who fell from a ten-story building. The people on each floor kept hearing him say, "So far, so good. So far, so good." What lines in the script do you find most memorable? What do they tell you about the film's characters and their attitudes toward life?

7. Make your own comparison between *Seven Samurai* and *The Magnificent Seven*. Where does the American film follow Kurosawa's film and where does it differ? What reasons can you give for these changes?
8. The Western is sometimes said to embody America's most cherished myths. What foundational beliefs do you find in *The Magnificent Seven*? Consult Christopher Vogler's book on mythic structures, *The Writer's Journey*, and see how many archetypes and of the journey narrative you can identify in Sturges's film.

Notes

1. Richard Slotkin, "Gunfighters and Green Berets: *The Magnificent Seven* and the Myth of Counter-Insurgency," *Radical History Review* (Spring 1989): 64–90.
2. Documentary directed by Louis Heaton, *Guns for Hire: The Making of "The Magnificent Seven."* 2000. See also Glen Lovell, *Escape Artist: The Life and Films of John Sturges* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 192–193.
3. Jay Robert Nash and Stanley Ralph Ross, eds., *The Motion Picture Guide* (Cinemabooks, 1988), 1809.

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CLOSE-UP
SEVEN SAMURAI

FIGURE 1.26 *Seven Samurai* (*Shichinin no samurai*, Dir. Akira Kurosawa, 1954).

Directed by Akira Kurosawa.
Written by Akira Kurosawa, Shinobu Hashimoto, and Hideo Oguni.
Cinematography by Asakazu Nakai.
Editing by Akira Kurosawa.
Music by Fumio Hayasaka.
Art Direction by So Matsuyama.
Produced by Sojiro Motoki.
Distributed by Toho (Japan) and Columbia Pictures (United States) in 1954.
In Japanese with English subtitles.
Running Time: 207 minutes.

Kikuchiyo	Toshiro Mifune
Kambei	Takashi Shimura
Shino	Keiko Tsushima
Shichiroji	Daisuke Kato
Katsushiro	Isao Kimura
Heihachi	Minonu Chiaki
Kyuzo	Seiji Miyaguchi
Gorobei	Yoshio Inaba
Wife	Yukiko Shimazaki
Farmer Manzo	Kamatari Fujiwara
Farmer Rikichi	Yoshio Tsuchiya

World Cinema through Global Genres, First Edition. William V. Costanzo.

Anyone interested in Japanese cinema and its contribution to global action films, particularly to the samurai genre, will find no better place to begin than with Akira Kurosawa (1910–1998) and his ground-breaking picture, *Seven Samurai* (1954). Internationally acclaimed as the *sensei* – the acknowledged master and mentor – Kurosawa is widely known as a director's director. In the United States, his influence is acknowledged by such filmmakers as Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, and Sam Peckinpah. A quick inventory of remakes demonstrates how readily the world of samurai warriors depicted in his films can merge with the Wild West. Martin Ritt based *The Outrage* (1964) on Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950); Sergio Leone remade *Yojimbo* (1961) as *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), and John Sturges recast *Seven Samurai* as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). George Lucas cited *The Hidden Fortress* (1958) as an important source for *Star Wars*, that science fiction series in which the Western frontier is transported to the New Frontier of outer space. Kurosawa, in turn, expressed a lively interest in American films, particularly Westerns, listing John Ford and John Huston among his inspirations. Yet in his own country, he was criticized during his lifetime by an older generation for being insufficiently Japanese and by younger filmmakers for being reactionary and irrelevant.

Akira Kurosawa was born in Tokyo to a family that traced its lineage back to a famous samurai warrior of the Genji period. His father, fiercely proud of this military heritage, taught physical education in an army school. A strict disciplinarian, the older Kurosawa instilled a strong sense of self-control in his son, who studied Kendo sword fighting while young but gravitated naturally toward the arts. Akira loved literature, especially Dostoevsky, and studied painting before applying for a job to Photo Chemical Laboratories, the movie studio that would later become Toho, one of Japan's leading film producers. As a hard-working studio apprentice, he developed a great admiration for his mentor, Kajiro Yamomoto, who recognized the young man's talent and encouraged him to make movies his life work. It was Yamomoto who taught him the importance of script writing, a skill he was to practice throughout his life. After assisting on more than two dozen films, Kurosawa began directing his first feature *Sanshiro Sugata* (*Sugata Sanshiro*), a samurai film, in 1942. It was released in the following year to popular and critical acclaim.

The years during which Kurosawa launched his 50-year career posed challenges for any young filmmaker. Japanese cinema had been slow to evolve. Early directors made little use of creative editing or camera work, preferring to focus on presentation and performance. Tied to dramatic traditions of the stage, the industry employed male actors (*oyama*) in female roles as late as 1922 and used *benshi* narrators to give off-screen commentaries until the mid-1930s. Kurosawa's older brother was a *benshi*, a job that got Akira free admission as a child. During World War II, Japan's military leadership censored all productions to keep them in line with its nationalist agenda. After the war, the Allied Occupation enforced its own form of censorship, prohibiting films that it considered to be undemocratic, anti-foreign, or militaristic. Samurai films were banned until the mid-1950s.

Over the years, Kurosawa developed film techniques and production methods that served him well. Typically, his scripts were collaborations, written with another writer or a team in order to bring different perspectives to his vision. Often, the scripts were crafted with particular performers in mind, especially Toshiro Mifune and Takashi Shimura, his favorite actors. The cast would do readings, followed by walk-through rehearsals and dress rehearsals, with lights and cameras in position. Then the filming began. Unlike many directors, Kurosawa preferred to shoot chronologically, following the script, and editing the footage every night. This approach, he believed, maintained momentum and allowed him to "capture the flow." On the set and in post-production, he had a reputation for keeping strict control. Nothing in the final cut was accidental. Every gesture, every angle, every shadow, every breeze was a deliberate decision by "the emperor," or *tenno*, as he came to be known among his inner circle.

We see this firm command in *Seven Samurai*. Yet Kurosawa's hand is never gratuitously artful. Stop the film at nearly any point and you're likely to see a carefully composed shot. Look again, observe the shot in context, and you'll realize that Kurosawa's composition serves a larger purpose. The placement of each human form, the texture of a wall, the driving rain, the play of shadows on water is always motivated by the story. And while much of the film's genius lies in the details, it never loses sight of the broad design. Epic in length (more than 200 minutes in the original director's cut) and cultural sweep (revealing elements of feudal Japan that still resonate in contemporary life), *Seven Samurai* is a brooding commentary on loyalty and violence, on individuals and groups, on human nature under pressure, a story that is also comic, thrilling, and vastly entertaining.

Kurosawa made his film soon after the American Occupation, when he was free to revisit Japan's feudal past. The story is set during the Sengoku "Warring States" period, a time of brutal conflict and social chaos also known as the Onin War (1467–1477). Feuding warlords razed each other's forts and plundered villages, hiring samurai to fight for them. When a warlord was defeated, his samurai were left to wander through the countryside as *ronin*, "wave men," sometimes pillaging farms for food. Some samurai became teachers and doctors, like Kurosawa's ancestors, but many more became bandits, relying on their martial skills to prey on unarmed peasants. It was a time of lawlessness and sporadic violence, much like the Wild West. But it was also a time of opportunity. Without a strong, central authority, the old social order had broken down, and it was possible for a poor peasant with courage and ambition, or with foolhardy pretense, to take up a sword and rise above his class.

In *Seven Samurai*, the farmers in a mountain village hire seven samurai to help protect them from a band of marauding *ronin*. The plot unfolds in three parts, reflecting the director's interest in process, how things are done. Part One introduces the film's main characters: the villagers debate the idea of hiring mercenaries and the samurai join the band of warriors one by one. In Part Two, the samurai prepare their plan of defence and train the villagers for battle. In Part Three, the plan is put into action, culminating in a fierce battle scene and a solemn moment

at the burial ground. Kurosawa takes great pains to give this fictional world an authentic feel. His use of deep focus photography, for example, enables us to watch several planes of action at once. While men confront each other in the foreground, the villagers go about their daily chores in the background. His use of three cameras during shooting, a new practice for Kurosawa, enables us to experience the ferocious energy of a cavalry charge in detail and in full almost simultaneously. The screen may be filled with the complexities of village life or the chaos of warfare, but we never lose our bearings. At one point, Kambei, first of the seven samurai, takes his men to the four corners of the village to explain his plan, incidentally giving us the lay of the land. At another point, he paints symbols for the samurai and bandits on a flag, allowing us to keep score throughout the battle. We always know precisely where we are.

The movie opens with a shot of the horizon, dark clouds looming low, as a group of horsemen in silhouette rides from right to left, then towards us in the narrow band of morning light. The soundtrack amplifies the sound of galloping hooves and adds a drumbeat that becomes the bandits' *leitmotif*, a musical phrase announcing their presence. In this film, each group has its musical accompaniment. The villagers are associated with a folk tune played by flutes and percussion. The samurai are announced by a brooding male chorus and brassy horns. A lap dissolve signals a shift in our perspective, one shot melting into the next. Now we're on the hilltop with the riders, fully armed and armored, overlooking a village far below. The bandits decide to postpone their attack. They will return later, when the barley has ripened. Word reaches the villagers, and now the camera shifts to their huddled bodies, heads bowed in clusters of despair and self-pity. A telephoto lens flattens the perspective, accentuating their closeness and conformity. One man moans, "Farmers are born to suffer." Another stands and calls for action. It is Rikichi, a young firebrand who will figure prominently later in the picture. Gradually, several villagers emerge as individuals. There is Mosuke, whose home lies outside the village, exposed to a first attack. There is Manzo, endlessly obsessing about his daughter's virtue. There is Yohei, whose droll face and nervous temperament make him a comic foil. And there is Gisaku, the wizened village patriarch, respectfully called "Grandad" by all. When Manzo objects to the idea of hiring samurai, fearing they may rape his daughter, Gisaku tells him, "What's the use of worrying about your beard when your head's about to be taken?"

The seven samurai make their entrances one at a time. Kambei (played by Takashi Shimura) is first seen shaving his topknot, an act unthinkable for a samurai until we learn that his motive is to save a child being held hostage by a desperate *ronin*. Kambei, embodying the Bushido code of integrity and selflessness, becomes the leader of the samurai team and a kind of spokesman for Kurosawa himself. A young warrior named Katsushiro admires Kambei's courage and begs to be his disciple. Later, they are joined by Kambei's old friend, Shichiroji, and by Gorobei, a skilled archer whom Kambei recruits as his second in command. Gorobei in turn recruits Heihachi, a wood cutter who makes up for weak fighting skills with a strong fighting spirit. The sixth samurai to join, though at first reluctant, is Kyuzo,

the most skillful swordsman of the lot. In the film's only instance of one-on-one combat, we watch him dispatch a hot-headed bully with the stony-faced precision that becomes his trademark. Finally, there is Kikuchiyo (Toshiro Mifune), the most energetic and complex of them all. He first appears as a buffoon claiming noble birth. His actions are apish, his sword much too big, his dress ludicrously inapt. Kikuchiyo is the wild card, the trickster, the clown – always a risk in any fighting unit – but he brings the important ingredients of comedy, vitality, and surprise to the story. With his swagger and mocking humor, he can marshal the farmers into troops, and he can show fearless, if imprudent, courage under fire. Kikuchiyo reveals an even deeper, serious side when a stash of hidden armor is discovered in Manzo's hut. The samurai are angered by this exposure of the farmers' treachery. Kikuchiyo knows better. Farmers are cowardly and sneaky, he says, but who made them this way? Perhaps the most revealing moment for Kikuchiyo is when he runs into the burning mill and rescues a baby from its dying mother's arms. "The same thing happened to me," he cries. "I was just like this baby." Cradling the bundle in his arms, he breaks down in tears.

Kurosawa's focus is on character throughout. Some figures, like the bandits, are never fully realized, and only one woman, Manzo's daughter Shino, has a name. But in the course of the film, we learn revealing secrets about Rikichi and Manzo. We watch Katsushiro grow into a man. We come to admire Kambei's wisdom and the noble heart behind Kyuzo's stone face. Most of all, we come to understand something of Kikuchiyo's inner self, the reasons for his outlandish behaviour and his drive to be a samurai. When he is finally accepted by the other six, it is the culmination of his life.

Only three of the seven samurai are left alive. Turning to Gorobei, Kambei says simply, "Again we've survived" and the camera fixes on the fluttering flag, a mute reminder of the toll of battle. At daylight, the farmers are in the field again, moving in synch to the age-old cadence of flute and drum as they plant a new crop of rice. The rhythms of nature, of life itself go on. Across the river, the three surviving warriors turn to leave, pausing at the burial mounds of their fallen comrades. Katsushiro stands apart; he will stay with Shino and become a villager. Kambei speaks once more: "Again we're defeated. The winners are those farmers, not us." The camera tilts up to the graves as the sound of the wind and the lugubrious samurai theme grow louder.

As Joan Mellen puts it in the British Film Institute's book about the film, "the samurai have won the battle, but lost the war."[1] Kambei's days are numbered; the heroic ideals he represents are giving way to a new world of common, practical necessity. Kurosawa mourns the loss of old Japan, figured here in the noble spirit of the samurai, just as he acknowledges the superior survival value figured in the dogged persistence of the villagers. What makes the film more interesting than a simple either/or dichotomy, however, is the way it complicates the matter. Historically, as feudal Japan moves toward peace (not unlike modern Japan in 1954), the superior morality and skills of the warrior class are less important than the economic utility of farmers. Not that Kurosawa's images of battle look

especially heroic. There is little of the valiant swordplay typical of the genre. The samurai are unceremoniously killed by gunfire, not in grandly staged, face-to-face duels. Bandits are torn from their horses and savagely stabbed with sharpened bamboo poles. Combatants and horses grovel in the mud. Homes are set on fire with people in them. These are grim, realistic views of man's inhumanity to man. To be sure, we see individual acts of courage, like Heihachi's selfless effort to pull Rikichi from a burning hut or Kyuzo's wordless raid on a bandit gun post. We witness admirable examples of male friendship, like the strong, unspoken bond between Kambei and Gorobei. But we also see how reckless individuality, like Kikuchiyo's copycat mission to steal another gun, can endanger the lives of others. "In war, it is teamwork that counts," Kambei reminds the group. "He who thinks only about himself will destroy himself, too." His admonition underscores the age-old Japanese distinction between duty (*giri*) and humane personal inclination (*ninjo*).

Seven Samurai took some 18 months to make. Kurosawa wrote the script with his collaborators, Shinobu Hashimoto and Hideo Oguni, in 45 days. The role of Kikuchiyo, not part of the original conception, was added for comic relief, though in Mifune's hands it became much more. The production team strove for unusual authenticity and depth. Kurosawa created detailed descriptions and personal histories for each of the samurai, and he invented an entire registry for all the farmers, specifying their family connections so that the actors could live together as a real village during shooting. These relationships are underscored by Kurosawa's careful blocking and composition. At first, farmers and samurai appear as separate groups. The camera and editing stress their divided loyalties. As they move closer in a common cause, their interdependence is affirmed cinematically. A long tracking shot around Kambei during his speech before the final battle shows how the samurai and farmers are all behind him. During the melee, rapid cutting captures their confusion and their unity. All class distinctions vanish in the driving rain.

While *Seven Samurai* was a big success at the box office, it was not much appreciated by the critics at first. Purists found it too "Western." Pacifists thought it promoted militarism, and Marxists disliked the way it represented the lower class. But the film revived fresh interest in the genre, starting a new wave of samurai films that reached some 40 titles a year by the early 1960s. Eventually, it took its place in the pantheon of world cinema, one of the finest films by one of Japan's greatest filmmakers.

Questions

1. The film represents different groups and subgroups: bandits, samurai, villagers; men and women; those who take action and those who resist. To what extent does Kurosawa seem to favor any of these groups over the others? With which group do you identify most closely? Is it possible to read against the grain and appreciate any of these groups even if the film seems to demean them or give them little serious attention?
2. David Desser calls Kurosawa a "dialectical filmmaker," noting the humanist and formalist

tendencies at play in his work and pointing out how the opposing social classes, villagers and samurai, converge in *Seven Samurai*. Kurosawa also alternates scenes of immobility with moments of intense action. What evidence can you find in the film for Desser's dialectical reading?

3. Select a scene that illustrates Kurosawa's aesthetic rigor at its most effective. Notice how he uses composition, camera movement, sound, editing, and other film tools to construct the scene. What larger purpose do these cinematic choices serve?
4. Kurosawa borrows elements from high-toned *jidai-geki* and the coarser *chanbara* films, mixing the heroic with the comic. Find examples of both in *Seven Samurai*. What are the targets of his humor? How seriously do we take characters like Shino, Yohei, and Kikuchiyo?
5. Watch the film again, but this time pay special attention to the sound track. What musical instruments does Kurosawa choose to represent various characters and groups, and how does he use these identifying *leitmotifs*? What do the film's sound effects contribute? Sometimes the sound track seems completely unexpected, as when we hear birds chirping during a scene of conflict. What other examples of this deliberate counterpoint can you find?

Note

1. Joan Mellen, *Seven Samurai* (British Film Institute, 2002), 77.

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CLOSE-UP

SHOLAY

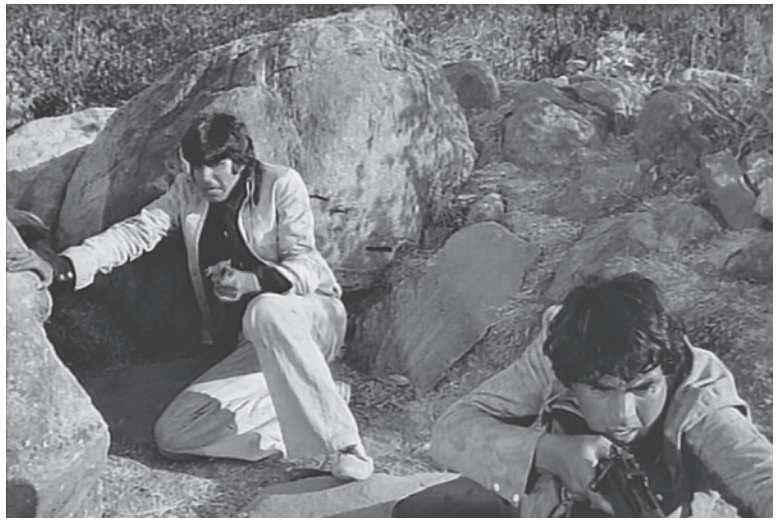

FIGURE 1.27 *Sholay* (Dir. Ramesh Sippy, 1975).

Directed by Ramesh Sippy.
Produced by G.P. Sippy.
Script by Salim-Javed.
Cinematography by Dwarka Divecha.
Edited by M.S. Shinde.
Music by R.D. Burman.
Released by United Producers and Sippy Films in 1975.
In Hindi, with English subtitles.
Running Time: 188 minutes.

Veeru	Dharmendra Deol
Jai Dev	Amitabh Bachchan
Thakur Baldev Singh	Sanjeev Kumar
Basanti	Hema Malini
Radha	Jaya Bhaduri
Gabbar Singh	Amjad Khan
Ramlaal	Satyen Kappu
Imam	A.K. Hangal
Ahmed	Sachin
Sambha	Mac Mohan
Jailor	Asrani

World Cinema through Global Genres, First Edition. William V. Costanzo.

Twenty-one years after *Seven Samurai* (1954) and 15 years after *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), Indian filmmakers G.P. Sippy and his son Ramesh released a movie that some refer to as the first "curry Western." Loosely based on the earlier two films, *Sholay* ("embers" in Hindi) became a massive hit in South Asia and a global classic. It also propelled its male leads Amitabh Bachchan, Dharmendra Deol, Amjad Khan, and Sanjeev Kumar into Bollywood stardom. The film broke all box office records, running for five consecutive years, and continues to be celebrated by millions of devoted fans. Its song and dance numbers and much of the dialogue are household memorabilia in many parts of the world. Anupama Chopra, who wrote a book about the making of *Sholay*, calls the film a textbook of Indian cinema, arguing that it "transformed action into high art" and set new standards for "the way a nation speaks to itself."[1]

Just as the release of *Seven Samurai* and *The Magnificent Seven* can be linked to local events in Japan and the United States, there are historical reasons why a film like *Sholay* would be made in India in 1975. After an era of optimistic nation-building following India's Independence in 1947, the country had fallen into a troubling malaise by the 1970s. Religious conflict, government corruption, criminal violence, and a general breakdown of law and order had taken a toll on the national spirit. The plot and overall tone of *Sholay* reflect these grim conditions at the same time that it offers comic relief.

Gabbar Singh, a cruel and charismatic bandit (played by Amjad Khan), has been terrorizing the village of Ramgarh, a remote settlement in southern India. The village patriarch, a retired policeman known as Thakur Baldev Singh (Sanjeev Kumar), wants to bring Gabbar to justice, but he is powerless to do the job himself. He decides to hire two young men, Veeru and Jai Dev, who both had demonstrated skill and courage when he arrested them as petty thieves five years before. Veeru (Dharmendra) and Jai (Bachchan) are hardly the Magnificent Seven. In one scene, they take to the open road on a motorcycle wearing jeans and denim jackets over muscle shirts. Since this is a Bollywood film, they sing exuberantly while riding, performing goofy stunts along the way and hugging each other in open displays of male friendship. But they can also be tough or valiant, amorous or tragic when the situation demands. As in most Bollywood movies, the emotions in this film run the gamut. To identify it with a single style or genre would be to miss the way that Bollywood typically blends dramatic narrative and musical spectacle, action and melodrama into a lively, near three-hour entertainment of song, dance, adventure, laughter, and tears.

Sholay opens with a train pulling into a desolate station. A single man in uniform steps out and asks for the Thakur (a title of respect for a member of the landed gentry, who trace their lineage to a feudal class of warrior-aristocrats). He rides through an arid landscape of rock formations that could be in Wyoming or New Mexico, accompanied by a busy soundtrack of whistling, strumming, and Indian percussion instruments. The Thakur, a brooding figure wrapped in a gray shawl, greets him and explains he needs two men for a mission: Veeru and Jai. When the visitor, a jailor, identifies the pair as worthless crooks, the Thakur says that they have virtues as well as vices, relating how they once saved his life when a band of *dacoits*, Indian bandits, attacked the train. The attack is dramatized in a stirring

flashback reminiscent of a dozen Westerns. The dacoits attack on horseback and from cliffs. Taking a chance, the Thakur sets his young captives free by shooting off their handcuffs. Jai and Veeru prove their mettle, fighting with fists, guns, and wits. When the Thakur is shot, they must decide whether to save him or escape. So they toss a coin, a gesture that becomes one of the film's recurring motifs.

Part of the fun of watching *Sholay* is in recognizing its allusions to other films. The "Song of the Road" on motorbike recalls Raj Kapoor's enthusiasm as a vagabond in *Awaara* (1951). The prison warden's spastic antics and Hitler mustache evoke Chaplin's performance in *The Great Dictator* (1940), though Asrani turns the role into a hilarious lampoon of British colonialism. The dacoit bandit Gabbar Singh may remind us of Calvera in *The Magnificent Seven*, but Amjad Khan's performance, despite his blatant outbursts of laughter, is chillingly humorless. He punishes his own followers with a sadistic game of Russian roulette, three bullets for six men, and he treats the Thakur's family, as Henry Fonda's Frank treats McBain's family in *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), with monstrous cruelty.

Watch the way this scene of dark revenge is shot and edited. The family's peaceful homestead is shown in a sequence of carefully composed shots. We see the grandson's uncle through the spokes of a wagon wheel, his mother preparing food on a swing, his house behind. His pretty young aunt is hanging out the wash. As they talk of this and that, we hear a round of rifle shots. At first, they think the shots are being fired by Radha's husband, who has been target shooting in the hills. But as they look up from behind the wagon wheel, they see him fall. The uncle runs, the mother runs, the aunt runs, and each one is shot dead in a freeze frame, falling in slow motion like victims in a Sam Peckinpah film, as the clothesline collapses in a heap and the rusty swing continues to creak. The guns are silent now. High on a boulder, a lone man on horseback seems to be applauding, but he is only cracking nuts in his palms. It is Gabbar, escaped from jail, a rifle hanging on his shoulder. As he surveys the fallen bodies, the swing still swaying slowly with its eerie sound, an 8-year-old boy runs out of the house. Gabbar nudges his horse slowly down the rocky slope to where the boy stands trembling. The camera frames him, then the boy, both eying each other across the swing. A harmonica whines mournfully as Gabbar reaches for his rifle and takes aim.

Some of *Sholay*'s embers are romantic. A chatty *tonga* (horsecart) driver named Basanti captures Veeru's heart. When she goes to the temple to ask the god Shiva for a good husband (as unmarried women are wont to do in India), Veeru tries to impersonate the deity, gets caught, and teases her with a song, "Anger makes a pretty girl even prettier." While their early courtship is played for laughs, their romance runs into serious trouble. Basanti is captured by the dacoits and forced to dance in the hot sun or else Veeru will die. While her lover watches helplessly, bound to two large stakes, the bandits break glass beneath her feet, but she continues dancing, singing "I will dance as long as there is breath left in my body." By contrast, the object of Jai's affection is more distant and sedate. Radha, the Thakur's daughter-in-law, wears the white sari of a widow. Since Indian widows are expected to remain unmarried, their smoldering relationship is limited to glances from afar.

The theme of bloody vengeance had special resonance for Indian audiences in the 1970s. Following India's partition into separate countries in 1947, millions of Muslims migrated north to Pakistan while millions of Hindus journeyed south to India. The two groups often clashed along the way, erupting in fierce fighting that left half a million dead and a legacy of animosity that continues to this day. Families were butchered in the streets. Survivors cried out for revenge.

For more than two decades, Indian movies generally avoided the topic of religious retribution. But in 1975, amid a growing crisis of economic instability and accusations of corruption, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of national emergency, suspending civil rights for an unprecedented 18 months. It was in this climate of crisis that the Sippys decided to make *Sholay*. G.P. Sippy (1914–2007) had experienced the disruptive violence of partition first hand. Forced to flee with his family from Karachi (now in Pakistan) to Bombay (now Mumbai, in India), he left the family property and savings behind. Though once wealthy, he had to take on odd jobs, selling carpets and working in construction. It was while building a house for the famous Indian actress Nargis Dutt that G.P. became interested in films. After trying his hand as an actor and director, the father persuaded his son to join him. Working together as producer and director, they made some of India's greatest hits, including *Andaaz* (1971) and *Seeta aur Geeta* (*Seeta and Geeta*, 1972). *Sholay* would be an even bigger film, the first Indian feature shot in 70 mm with stereophonic sound. They enlisted their favorite scriptwriting team, Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar, to develop the story from a four-line plot summary. Art director Ram Yedekar and cinematographer Dwarka Divecha constructed a whole town among the boulders and flatlands of Ramanagaram, an hour's drive from Bangalore. Amitabh Bachchan, at a low point in his early career, was cast as Jai and his fiancée, Jaya Bhaduri, was cast as the widow Radha. They were married four months before production began, and she became pregnant during the shoot. Meanwhile, Dharmendra became amorously involved with Hema Malini (cast as Basanti). They were married five years after the film's release.

Production was slow. It took 21 days to shoot the motorcycle number and 24 days to film the massacre of Thakur's family. The lyrics were prerecorded by professional singers called playback artists, as most songs are in Bollywood, and later lip-synched by the actors for the cameras. These playback singers are often as famous in India as movie stars. During post-production, the first cut was edited to four hours, then further cut to 200 minutes by the censorship board, empowered by Indira Gandhi's State of Emergency. Among other things, the censors did not approve the ending in which the Thakur gets revenge by stomping on his enemy with studded boots. Instead, they had police arrive in time to stop him.

Sholay was not a quick success. Its initial release on August 15 (Indian Independence Day) was greeted with unfavorable reviews and a lukewarm reception at the box office. Gradually its reputation improved by word of mouth. It broke all earning records for commercial cinema in India. Gabbar Singh became a national phenomenon. Amitabh Bachchan became a superstar. The music by R.D. Burnam, released on audiocassette, took on a life of its own. And the film took its place in the pantheon of global genres, a distinctly Indian contribution to the myth of the warrior hero.

Questions

1. What seems distinctly Indian about this film? Make a note of words, images, or events that require translation or appear to have meanings unfamiliar to most American audiences. Do some research to discover their significance in Indian culture and relate them to the larger meanings of the film.
2. *Sholay* is filled with references to other films, including American Westerns and Hindi classics. Find examples of this cinematic citation. Is this largely a matter of homage, a failure of imagination, or something else?
3. The film's original ending was changed by the Indian Censor Board, which did not like the idea of people taking the law into their own hands. Why would this be a problem in 1975? Find out more about the alternate ending and give reasons why you think it should or should not have been changed.
4. Select a scene, like the Holi festival of colors (when Gabbar's gang raids the village) or Gabbar's camp (when the belly dancer sings "Mehbooba Mehboob"), and analyze it in cinematic terms. Pay close attention to the use of color, sound, camerawork, and editing. What aesthetic principles do you see at work, and how effective are they?
5. Bollywood is famous for inserting song and dance routines into every film. The best known musical numbers in *Sholay* are "Yeh dosti" (during the motorcycle ride), "Holi ke din dil" (during the festival of colors), "Mehbooba" (in Gabbar's camp), "Koi hasina" (during the *tonga* ride), and "Jab tak hai" (when Basanti dances for her lover's life). Revisit one or two of these numbers and explain their function in the film. For example, do they contribute to the ongoing story or subordinate narrative movement to spectacle?
6. Compare *Sholay*'s setting, characters, and themes to those in *Seven Samurai* or *The Magnificent Seven*. What similarities and differences do you notice between the town in southern India, a rural village in feudal Japan, and a Mexican community after the American Civil War? Are the common people presented more or less sympathetically? What motivates the violence? How is heroism represented in each case?
7. Indian film scholar Wimal Dissanayake in *Melodrama and Asian Cinema* (Cambridge University Press, 1993) points out several cultural issues that may be relevant to *Sholay*. He writes that "Most Asian cultures valorize human suffering as a pervasive fact of life" (4) and that Hindi culture in particular regards evil as "inescapable and important to the social order," acting as a kind of foil, created by the gods to better define the nature of goodness by contrast (190). How do these ideas help us understand Sippy's film, especially in relation to *Seven Samurai* or *The Magnificent Seven?*

Note

1. Anupama Chopra, *Sholay: The Making of a Classic* (Penguin, 2000), 4–6.

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CLOSE-UP

WAY OF THE DRAGON

FIGURE 1.28 *Way of the Dragon* (*Meng long guo jiang*, Dir. Bruce Lee, 1972).

Directed by Bruce Lee.
Written by Bruce Lee.
Cinematography by Tadashi Nishimoto.
Editing by Yao Chung Chang.
Music by Joseph Koo.
Art Direction by Hsin Chien.
Produced by Raymond Chow and Bruce Lee.
Distributed by Golden Harvest and Asia Media in 1972. In Mandarin with English dubbing.
Running Time: 99 minutes (Hong Kong), 88 minutes (United States).

Tang Lung (aka Dragon)	Bruce Lee
Chen Ching Hua	Nora Miao
Colt	Chuck Norris
Ho	Ping-Ao Wei
"Uncle" Wang	Chung-Hsin Huang
Fred	Robert Wall
Japanese Fighter	Ing-Sik Whang
Ah Quen	Di Chin
Tony	Tony Liu
Jimmy	Unicom Chan
Tommy	Fu Ching Chen
Boss	Jon T. Benn

World Cinema through Global Genres, First Edition. William V. Costanzo.

By most accounts, Bruce Lee is the undisputed champion of Hong Kong kung fu cinema. In the span of his short lifetime (1940–1973) and only a handful of major films, he boosted the genre to international status, created his own style of martial arts, and left a lasting legacy. His screen persona inspired countless sequels, remakes, and look-alike imitations. Books about his life, philosophy, movies, and fighting methods keep coming out. He has been a role model for generations of devoted fans. But Lee's impact is more than personal. As film historian Stephen Teo concludes, "No other figure in Hong Kong cinemas has done as much to bring East and West together in a common sharing of culture as Bruce Lee."[1]

Born in San Francisco to Li Hoi Cheun and his Eurasian wife, Grace, he was given the Cantonese name of Jun-fan ("return again") because his parents, who took their son to their native Hong Kong soon after his birth, believed he would return to the United States as an adult. Later he acquired the Chinese stage name Li Xiaolong ("little dragon") and his English name, Bruce Lee.

Although Grace came from a wealthy family and Hoi Cheun was a successful actor in films and Cantonese opera, life was difficult in Hong Kong. Japan invaded the city in 1941 and occupied it until 1945, closing schools, rationing food, and deporting unemployed families to the mainland. After the war, Lee's neighborhood was choked by masses of Chinese fleeing the other way, from communist China to Hong Kong. Rival street gangs roamed the city, and he was often forced to defend himself. Lee took on the challenge with a passion, engaging in so many fights that his father, a practitioner of Chinese boxing, *tai qi chuan*, taught him what he knew of the martial arts. Hoi Cheun also tried to guide his son's attention toward a more productive outlet: child acting. From age 6 to 18, Bruce appeared in some 20 Hong Kong films. But he kept getting into fights. After one big street brawl, he was introduced to Master Yip Man, a master of the Wing Chun style of kung fu. This was a streamlined approach to the art of self-defense, more practical than the stylized movements of *tai qi*. Bruce absorbed this new style with astonishing energy and skill, devoting a year to rigorous practice. But his street fighting continued. When his father learned from the police that one of his rivals was the son of a Triad mobster, it was time to send Bruce away.

In 1959, the young man returned to San Francisco, then moved to Seattle, where he finished high school and entered the University of Washington. There he majored in philosophy, giving lessons in the martial arts to pay his way. He learned to combine these two interests, philosophy and combat training, by developing his own eclectic version of the martial arts, which he called Jeet Kune Do, "way of the intercepting fist." This personal approach stressed power, flexibility, spontaneity, and practicality. It was designed for the conditions of real street fighting.

In 1964, after building a reputation in tournaments, Bruce moved to Los Angeles with his new wife, Linda. His early efforts to enter Hollywood were not entirely successful. In 1966, ABC hired him for its television show, *The Green Hornet*, but he was assigned to the role of Kato, the hero's valet, while the title character was played by Van Williams. In 1971, after a number of minor appearances, he tried to interest Warner Bros. in a martial arts television series. But the part he wanted was

given to David Carradine, who knew little about kung fu but spoke good English and was white. There did not seem to be much of a future at the time for non-Caucasian action heroes on American screens. In Hong Kong, however, where ABC's series was popularly known as "The Kato Show," he was a big hit. Deeply disappointed in his treatment by the American entertainment industry and eager for a better role in movies, he returned to the city of his youth.

At that time, the Hong Kong film industry was dominated by the Shaw Brothers, but they considered Lee's demands for salary and creative freedom too high. Instead, he went to Raymond Chow of the rival studio, Golden Harvest. His first film for Chow was *The Big Boss* (*Tang shan da xiong*, 1971; also released in the United States as *Fists of Fury*). Set and shot in Thailand, *The Big Boss* bears the stamp of Lee's own life and vision. Cheng Chao-on, a country boy from southern China, arrives in Bangkok to work with his cousins in an ice factory. When Cheng's kin discover that the factory is a front for smuggling drugs, they begin to disappear mysteriously. Cheng becomes suspicious and dislikes the way his family is treated, but he has promised his mother not to get into trouble, a promise betokened by her amulet. For the first half hour of the film, he remains on the sidelines itching to take on the hired brutes and bullies who mistreat his family. But when the amulet is ripped from his neck during a melee, he jumps into the fray, whipping the boss's thugs with astonishing skill and unconcealed delight. This is not the ritual combat of a Shaw Brothers film. Cheng is no noble swordsman playing by venerable rules. He is a common man with family loyalties and a good heart facing the kind of violence, crime, and corruption that ordinary people encounter every day. Like ordinary men, he can be temporarily distracted by women and wine, but when he's focused, he can take on every petty hoodlum and gang leader all the way up to the big boss.

Lee's second film for Golden Harvest was *Fist of Fury* (*Jing wu men*, 1972; released in the United States as *The Chinese Connection*). Set in Shanghai during the early 1900s when Japan occupied much of the city, the film strikes a fiercely nationalistic tone. Lee plays Chen Zhen, a student of *Jing Wu* (a Cantonese kung fu style), who goes berserk when he learns that his teacher is dead. Chen suspects foul play, but cautioned by his fiancée and fellow students, he tries to temper his seething rage. To add fuel to the fire, a delegation of Japanese karate experts from a rival school arrive with humiliating taunts. They present Chen's class with a sign that reads "Sick Men of East Asia," implying that Chinese are weaklings. Later, at a public park, he is prevented from entering by an Indian guard who points to a sign, "No dogs or Chinese allowed." Chen is not one to let these slights pass. He challenges the insufferable foreigners, forcing them to eat their words, though it is clear they hold the ultimate power.

Fist of Fury was a big success. The theme of ethnic pride appealed to local audiences, many of whom shared Lee's abhorrence of foreign occupation and identified with his rebellious spirit. Lee's supple body and fierce fighting style were becoming iconic. Meanwhile, the Hong Kong film industry was moving from swords to fists. At the top of his game, Bruce Lee was ready to write, direct, co-produce, and star in a kung fu movie of his own.

That film is *Way of the Dragon* (*Meng long guo jiang*, 1972; retitled *Return of the Dragon* in the United States. A co-production of Golden Harvest and Lee's new company, Concord Productions, *Way of the Dragon* was filmed on location in Italy. Its plot traces a familiar formula. Tang Lung, a farm boy from the Hong Kong countryside, arrives in Rome to help with the family restaurant run by Uncle Wang. Tang Lung (his name means fierce dragon) is greeted coolly by a pretty cousin Chen, who scorns his unsophisticated habits, and he is treated skeptically by the other waiters, who regard him as an inexperienced weakling. But when a gang of ruffians terrorizes the restaurant, Lung springs into action, proving that skillful Chinese boxing can outperform all forms of foreign martial arts or weapons. Squads of thugs and hit men are sent by the mobster who wants the restaurant for his own dark purposes, but Tang rises to the occasion with each attack. He teaches the waiters how to fight, becomes their champion, and earns Chen's romantic admiration. The big showdown is a one-on-one match to the finish against America's champion Karate expert, a blond bruiser named Colt. Lung and Colt (Chuck Norris) fight to the finish in the Colosseum, evoking the gladiatorial combat of ancient Rome, but with only a stray cat as their audience.

When Lee enters the Colosseum, the camera assumes his point of view with a wide panning shot of the interior, then quickly zooms in to a closer shot of Norris standing in one of the stone openings. Norris wears a black belt and white kimono. Lee is dressed entirely in black. The camera shifts back and forth between the two rivals as Norris thrusts out his right fist in a voiceless challenge, giving a thumb down as the ancient Romans used to do. Lee accepts the challenge with a brisk wave of his left hand. In the next sequence of shots, we watch them slowly prepare for battle. A belt is loosened, a shirt unbuttoned, knuckles crack, muscles flex, until both men stand naked to the waist. At this point, the camera alternates between them, catching their warm-up jabs and kicks in medium shots against the blue-grey masonry. The only voice comes from the kitten watching them. When the opponents approach each other, the camera grows more active. It jumps to a high angle shot, framing them between two stone pillars, moves with them as they circle one another, then stops abruptly as Norris takes the first tentative steps, accompanied by drum beats. A sharp meow from the cat signals Lee's attack, angry and aggressive as an animal. We hear each cry and thrust as the camera quickens the pace with rapid cuts, now focusing on Lee, now on Norris, now on both. Lee is the first to go down, but he rises for more punishment: a series of blows to the head and chest, each blow accentuated by the sound track. The fight continues for nearly six more minutes before the tables turn and Norris staggers to the ground, the film rendering his shock with wavering music and a blurred point of view shot. When it's finally over, Lee covers his opponent with the white kimono and black belt, a solemn tribute to the only foe he truly respects.

In some ways, *Way of the Dragon* leads Lee into new territory. Its European setting is emphasized by postcard images of Rome's architectural treasures. Its tone is lighter than Lee's previous two films. Tang, whose stomach growls with hunger at the airport, can't read the menu and has trouble with the food. He keeps asking

for the toilet. Later, when Chen tells him to act friendly towards Italians on the street, he ends up going home with a prostitute. These scenes are played for easy laughs, but when Tang takes off his shirt, the clownish mannerisms disappear, replaced by Bruce Lee's taut body and combative ferocity. Lee may look ordinary, even skinny in his street clothes, but stripped for action he's a fierce fighting machine. His supple muscles ripple and expand with every breath. He moves forward and back with astonishing agility, delivering blows that startle his enemy with unexpected power and speed. This is the spectacle his fans wait for, the visual pleasure of Lee's body in motion. It is this universal language of physical prowess that transcends cultural boundaries and global markets.

Lee has been both taken to task and appreciated by critics who link his body to narcissism, nationalism, and racial politics. All that self-conscious posturing in front of mirrors, some say, is not just vanity but the mark of an undeveloped psyche, a personality stuck in an early stage of emotional development. If self-regard is a form of self-defense, Lee's physical self-assertion may look like compensation for a sense of being ignored or pushed aside. But there is a positive side to this self-absorption and aggression. Lee embodied a new form of Chinese masculinity, an image of vigor and strength that challenged notions of the passive Asian "soft body" in Western culture. In Hong Kong, Lee's hard body came to represent a certain spirit of national pride, mirroring the territory's economic competitiveness and creative self-assurance. In countries with an ethnic Chinese population, Lee's muscular figure reminded fans of their connection to a "mother culture," as Stephen Teo calls it: not the state-based nationalism of political maps but a broad cultural concept of greatness that united them as an extended family.[2] The appeal was even broader. Fighting alone or alongside his brothers, using only his bare fists, feet, or a stick snatched from the street, Lee became a singular hero for the disenfranchised, especially among American inner-city youth. The scenes in which he tears down signs of bigotry – "No Dogs or Chinese Allowed," "Sick Men of East Asia" – brought the house down in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Los Angeles. His unarmed struggles against the big bosses and their foreign lackeys – Japanese Karate experts who look down on Chinese boxing, Italian mobsters who think guns are better than fists, intimidating Russian bodyguards – resonated with young people of his day who strove to "fight the power." They continue to be read as bids for dignity, decency, and voice.

Lee began working on his fourth film for Golden Harvest, *Game of Death*, in 1972, but production was interrupted by a better offer. Warner Bros. wanted him to star in *Enter the Dragon* (*Long zheng hu dou*, 1973; also released as *The Deadly Three*). It would be his first and final movie with a major Hollywood studio, a co-production directed by Robert Clouse. The story takes place on an island where the mysterious Han has organized a boxing tournament. Lee, a Shaolin martial artist, is recruited by British intelligence to spy on Han, who is suspected of running a drug and prostitution ring. Lee's partners in this adventure include two Americans: a gambler and an activist, one white and one black, both on the run.

The three men infiltrate Han's stronghold and try to stop his operation, but only one gets out alive. Critics variously received the film as another exercise in narcissism (many mirrors reflect Lee's physique), glorified violence (more blood and higher body counts), or nationalist allegory (the island representing Hong Kong) with racial overtones (white, black, and yellow fighters competing for supremacy). Fans flocked to the theatres, making it one of the year's top grossing hits both in Hong Kong and abroad. Today, *Enter the Dragon* is widely considered to be Lee's most significant work. But he never got to enjoy its success. That summer, just weeks before the film's release, he reportedly complained of a headache, took some medicine, and fell asleep. He never recovered. The medical reports, speculations, and countless conspiracy theories have all added to his legend.

Questions

1. Whether you're a loyal Bruce Lee fan or a newcomer to his work, trace your personal responses to *Way of the Dragon*. What keeps you watching or turns you away? Consider the film's pacing, setting, characters, sound track, and the figure of Lee himself. Relate your level of engagement to specific moments in the film.
2. Analyze the evolving structure and themes of Bruce Lee's films. What are the key features of their plots? What central conflicts motivate the action? What issues are resolved? Who are the villains? What makes Lee a hero in these films?
3. In Bruce Lee's movies and the early films of Jackie Chan, the body is a central focus of the action. Real performers engage in physical feats, executing their own stunts. Compare this kind of kung fu to more recent martial arts films that use wire work (Jet Li's "wire-fu" films, for example) or Computer Generated Imagery (as in Jackie Chan's *The Myth*, 2005). What is gained or lost when the action is manipulated by technology?
4. Compare Lee's kung fu style to other screen practitioners like Chuck Norris, Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Tony Jaa. What makes Lee's fighting so distinctive? Why do you think his image continues to appeal to fans around the world? What do other actors offer that is missing in Lee's films?
5. Compare Bruce Lee more broadly to other cinematic warrior heroes. What does he share with the Western gunslinger, samurai, or wuxia sword fighter? What makes him stand apart? Consider what actors like Toshiro Mifune, John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, Sylvester Stallone, Jet Li, or Tony Jaa bring to their roles. How do these performers represent local cultures while contributing to a global myth?
6. The circumstances under which Lee died on July 20, 1973 have spawned innumerable theories. Investigate the controversies surrounding his death and report on your findings. What do these debates and speculations say about his life and legacy?
7. Select one scene from *Way of the Dragon* for closer study, like the famous showdown between Lee and Norris in the Colosseum. Analyze the scene shot by shot, noting how each cinematic decision (what the actors wear, where to place the camera, how long to hold the shot, music and sound effects) contributes to the overall effect.

Notes

1. Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* (British Film Institute, 1997), 110.
2. Teo, 111.

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