
Hong Kong’s film industry was dubbed the ‘Hollywood of the East’ in the 1980s. Between the 1960s and 1980s, the martial arts cinema, also widely known as kung fu movies, was considered as the most representative genre produced in the city, which has had a significant cultural influence on the Chinese population in the world and beyond. In particular, focusing on the years from the mid-1960s to the end of the 1970s, Man-Fung Yip, the author of this book, tries to investigate the sophisticated relationships between martial arts cinema and Hong Kong modernity during this special period.

Yip is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Film and Media Studies at the University of Oklahoma, and also a renowned scholar in studying cinemas in the Asian context. His previous book publications include *American and Chinese-Language Cinemas: Examining Cultural Flows* (co-edited with Lisa Funnell) and *The Cold War and Asian Cinemas* (co-edited with Poshek Fu). In this book, the key argument is that the new aesthetic strategies, thematic concerns, and transnational formations of Hong Kong martial arts cinema, which have appeared since the 1960s, are best conceptualised as a mass cultural expression of Hong Kong’s colonial, urban-industrial modernity (p. 2). While writers in the past often considered martial arts cinema as being a product of Chinese cultural nationalism and a necessitate legacy of the Chinese tradition, Yip believes that this understanding fails to address some of the most important elements of the institutional, aesthetic, and ideological aspects of Hong Kong martial arts cinema, and undervalues the social and historical contexts of which the films were made during this particular period of time.

Developed from Miriam Hansen’s (1999) concept of vernacular modernism, he aims to dismiss the idea of seeing martial arts cinema merely as a frivolous entertainment, and bring together martial arts cinema and Hong Kong’s modernity for rigorous examinations.

This book can be divided into three parts and five chapters. The first two chapters discuss how the martial arts cinema reflects modernity in relation to the presentation of bodies in movies. In Chapter
1, the author discusses how the bodies of martial arts heroes were posed between mastery and vulnerability in the films, and served as a site/sight through the aspirations and anxieties of Hong Kong people living in the increasingly industrialised society since the 1960s. He identifies three types of male heroic body: the narcissistic body, the sacrificial body, and the ascetic body, and then discusses how each represent particular ideological pressures arising from the society brought by society’s rapid modernisation. In Chapter 2, the author explores the issue of the body from a perspective of seeing it as a perceiving vehicle (i.e. the body of the spectator) and acted on by a film’s stimuli. As a genre, martial arts films are specially known for offering a wealth of immediate and powerful sensations to trigger visceral responses from the audience. These sensations, the author argues, bring a modernist style to Hong Kong cinema which are characterised by speed, impact and new forms of cinematic materiality and hapticity.

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 belong to the second part of the book, which focuses on questions related to gender representation in martial arts cinema. Chapter 3 examines the emergence of the staunch masculinity (so-called ‘yanggang’) martial arts films since the 1960s. The author argues that this marks a fundamental change of Hong Kong’s filmmaking tradition from being primarily dominated by female stars and women’s genres to male stars with a ‘hypermasculinity’. On the other hand, Chapter 4 discusses the representations of the female heroes (‘nuxia’) in a series of martial arts films from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. These female characters appeared in light of the rising social position and economic independence of women in Hong Kong during this period. The author believes that such prominent female characters, with their outstanding martial skills and a high degree of physical power and social autonomy, can be seen as a symbol of female empowerment reflective of larger social trends in society.

Chapter 5 is the last part of the book and focuses on processes of transnational circulation and exchange of martial art cinema, what the author refers to as the ‘minor transnationalism’ from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s. The ‘minor’ represents two meanings here: these movies have a marginal status of the films in terms of their mode of production (e.g. poverty-row budgets; meagre production values) and aesthetic strategies (e.g. a visceral style emphasising force over fineness); also because the transnational model of these films is relatively minor when compared with today’s Hollywood production in terms of market sharing and ideological values imposed on the audience. By presenting the cosmopolitan film culture of Hong Kong in that period, the author argues that martial arts cinema is a symbolic space of exchange in which films from diverse national or regional origins with different textual, cultural and ideological attributes can meet and act upon each other to create new hybrid texts and identities.

In this book, the author has successfully demonstrated his in-depth knowledge on Hong Kong cinema in the past by discussing not only the blockbusters, but also making a lot of references to movies that are less-known by the local audience, as well as providing the background information or personal stories of particular actors in the supplementary notes. However, this book is more than a look back of Hong Kong’s colourful martial arts cinema. In many sections, the author tries to relate martial arts cinema in the past with the development of the film industry in Hong Kong in the post-1970s period. This includes the discussions of a series of the so-called ‘gun fu’ movies directed by John Woo, which are modern gunfight movies stylised by martial arts’ actions, and also the emergence of action-comedy in Hong Kong cinema, such as Stephen Chow’s Kung Fu Hustle (2004).

Another point that I appreciate in this book is that instead of studying a particular director or action star, this book contains a lot of examples, such as plot or character analyses (e.g. the presentation of Bruce Lee’s body in Way of the Dragon [1972] and the emphasis of ‘bodybuilding’
in *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* [1978]), which are very illustrative for supporting the author’s arguments, and making this book a more interesting read. Also, this book manages to balance the text between theoretical discussion and analysis, which makes it an excellent starting point for both people who want to engage in critical genre study, and those interested in Hong Kong’s film industry in the past or the history of martial arts cinema in general.

This book, however, is not without its criticism. For instance, the discussions in this book mainly focus on the industrial experience of Hong Kong people. Yet, the local economy was gradually transformed to the service and financial economy in the 1970s. In tandem with this change is the rise of middle-class in Hong Kong. The analysis will be more complete if the author can further explain how the more-educated and wealthy population perceive the martial art cinema, and whether or not they foster the decline of the genre. Meanwhile, in this period of time, Hong Kong became more internationalised especially under the heavy influence of American popular culture. It would be very interesting to see how the author thinks about whether such changes have any impacts on the way the martial art cinema is produced and perceived.

In conclusion, this book has made a significant contribution to the field of film studies and media industry studies by examining how Hong Kong’s martial arts cinema can be conceptualised as a cultural counterpart and response to the processes of modernisation and modernity during the 1960s–1970s. I would highly recommend this book to academics or film industry practitioners who want to know more about the glorious past of Hong Kong’s film industry, and by reading this book, it provides insights into understanding the influence of the martial arts element in today’s globalised screen culture in Hollywood and other Asian film production.

Hong Yu Liu

Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

**ORCID iD**

Hong Yu Liu [https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1754-0145](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1754-0145)

**References**