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Can a *Wuxia* Star Act? Martial Arts, Acting, and Critical Responses to Jet Li's *Once Upon A Time In China*

Introduction

It has been commonplace in western critical discourse to state that action stars can't act. This seems particularly true when it comes to trans-bordering Chinese action stars like Jet Li. Criticism of his acting skills in his English-language films can be easily picked up from the press:

> Without the fight scenes, though, this film (*Romeo Must Die*) would be a bust… 'Jet is our special effect,' says Silver, summing up his star's appeal neatly.[1]
>
> Li's martial arts skills are as brilliant as his acting skills aren't.[2]
>
> The action is fun and ultra-violent, the story is satisfactorily ridiculous and the acting is non-existent.[3]

"Good martial artist with limited acting ability" seems to represent a popular view of Chinese martial arts stars and indeed this is how they are often used in Hollywood films. Nevertheless, such a view also reveals a deep-rooted bias, i.e. the martial arts star is someone who knows less about acting than s/he does about fighting. On the other hand, it reflects a dominant idea about film performance, by privileging facial

expression/psychology over body movement/physicality. Can't a martial arts star act? Are fighting and acting always two split, conflicting elements within a Chinese *wuxia* star's performance? In this paper, I would like to re-examine this stereotypical western critical consensus in the light of the contrasting Hong Kong critical response to Jet Li's Chinese work *Once Upon A Time In China* (Tsui Hark, Hong Kong, 1991) (*OUATIC* hereinafter). Before addressing this specific case, it is worth offering a brief overview of the history of Chinese martial arts (*wuxia*) stars.

A Brief History of Wuxia Stars

As a longstanding film genre, Chinese *wuxia* (martial arts chivalry) film has existed since the birth of Chinese cinema at the beginning of the twentieth century. Mostly set in the ancient dynasties, the early *wuxia* films emerging in 1920s' and 1930s' Shanghai embraced a mythical, superhuman *wuxia* tradition and often featured "flying swords," "palm power" and "weightless flight." The heroes with supernatural skills could fly or leap aided by a range of cinematic tricks such as wirework, reverse and animation. While Stephen Teo claims that these films draw on a northern fighting style which is more ancient and historical than the southern style,[4] Sek Kei argues that in eschewing "real" martial arts in favour of fantastic effects they represent a move towards the incredible and the escapist.[5] However, martial arts in *wuxia* films have never consisted purely of fighting, given the fact that action sequences inherited and developed from the stylised combat of Peking opera, and that early *wuxia* films, often inspired by or adapted from *wuxia* literature, were eager to reproduce those magical martial arts depicted in literature rather than adhere to "real" fighting techniques. High-expressivity and high-imagination characterise Chinese cinematic martial arts from the very beginning. In some sense, the martial arts within *wuxia* traditions are

often exaggerated, preternatural and escapist, though later trends would adhere to more realistic martial arts. Generally speaking, in the twenties and thirties, it was the story, rather than the martial arts or the performer, that was central to the genre. Martial arts at the time might be seen more as the product of the cultural (and cinematic) imagination than a form of film performance. It is noticeable, however, that the early *wuxia* films required their actors to have some capability in displaying martial arts on screen, so *wuxia* performers of the day usually came from an opera background.[6] This tradition has been carried on in the following years and produced a lot of talented *wuxia* stars. More importantly, it indicates that martial arts and acting are not necessarily two separate, conflicting elements for *wuxia* stars, even though it is not always easy for them to be combined harmoniously, as demonstrated throughout the *wuxia* film history.

With the genre's relocation to Hong Kong in the late 1940s, and later its trans-border crossing to the west, martial arts itself, as well as the *wuxia* star's performing body was highlighted and became the main attraction of the genre by the 1970s. Cantonese *wuxia* films in the 1950s and 1960s, represented by long-running Wong Fei-hung (pinyin: Huang Feihong) series, usually opted for a more realistic exhibition of martial arts, distinguishing themselves from previous swordplay *wuxia* films that featured superhuman feats. The Wong Fei-hung films are commonly regarded as recording precious martial arts traditions,[7] thereby exemplifying what Leon Hunt calls "archival authenticity."[8] However, although the Wong Fei-hung movies are memorable for their depiction of "authentic Chinese martial arts for the first time,"[9] according to Loon Sheng (a Hong Kong martial arts choreographer), they did not really care about martial arts and its aesthetics: "What was important at that time was the Wong Fei-hung character, his personality, the way he behaved and the Confucian

morality."[10] Kwan Tak-hing, the well-known actor who depicted the character of Wong Fei-hung in most of those films, cannot be regarded as a real martial artist because he was mainly trained in Peking Opera and had limited knowledge of martial arts. As Zhang Che points out, although Kwan propounded the Shaolin name, he did not actually express the movements of the school.[11] Kwan brought Wong to life mostly by his unique interpretation of the historical figure, such as his fierce eyes and distinct utterances, "which emit the dignity of the character," as Lau Kar-leung observes.[12]

From the mid-1960s, Shaw Brothers' Mandarin *wuxia* films began to dominate the local box office "with their enhanced spectacular production values; colour and widescreen, and editing and cinematography influenced by Japan and Hollywood cinema."[13] Martial arts, in the hands of two prestigious *wuxia* directors King Hu and Zhang Che, also started to transcend the limitations of opera-derived combat and developed a new visual look. King Hu, who is celebrated for his stylised and montage-based *wuxia* movies, frankly claimed that he regarded combat scenes as ballets, not as plausible fights.[14] His heroes and heroines display fantastic skills, such as effortlessly flying and leaping on top of branches or roofs, thereby creating poetic airborne fight scenes. Zhang Che, who was keen to showcase the male body and promote a tough Chinese masculinity in his "*yanggan" wuxia* films, insisted that "it is not enough to have action in a scene—the action must be powerful and contain aesthetic beauty."[15] Despite starting to pay more attention to the aesthetics of the fighting, Hu and Zhang only used trained martial artists as choreographers, stuntmen and supporting players, while the leading players like Wang Yu, David Chiang and Zheng Pei-pei did not come from a strict martial arts background.[16] It might be safe to

conclude that *wuxia* stars before the 1970s mainly built their screen images upon their acting rather than on displays of martial arts.

A new trend within *wuxia* films, which placed an emphasis on authentic martial abilities of *wuxia* stars, was launched by Bruce Lee at the beginning of the 1970s. Applying special effects at a minimal level and insisting on longer takes and full-body framing to guarantee the authenticity of his skills, Lee expressed his tough, competitive male body through his superb martial arts and gave *wuxia* films an unprecedented level of realism. According to Lau Tai-muk, "the worship of body and the praise of good physique culminated in the peculiar temperament of Bruce Lee."[17] Arguably, by highlighting physical skills, Lee brought Chinese *wuxia* film and the masculine kung fu body into global culture, and started the first "kung fu craze"[18] on the Western screen in the early 1970s. Through Lee, whose body is often seen as a symbol of nationalism and masculinity, martial arts has become "a fetishized object that represents the identity of the modern Chinese to the West," as Lo Kwai-cheung puts it.[19] On the other hand, by largely relying on martial arts to express his emotions, such as anger or determination, Lee began to use martial arts as a powerful form of cinematic performance.

Influenced by Lee's huge success, *wuxia* films featuring realistic martial arts came into fashion during the 1970s. Apart from Zhang Che, who shifted his focus to *wuxia* films set in the later years of the Qing Dynasty in which the martial arts from the southern school such as Hung Gar and Wing Chun were frequently displayed, Lau Kar-leung (pinyin: Liu Jialiang), the first martial arts choreographer to become a *wuxia* director, might be the most important figure in terms of the showcasing of authentic martial arts in *wuxia* films. Accordingly, *wuxia* films stars with martial abilities became the centre of the genre in the 1970s and 1980s. On the one hand,

traditional *wuxia* stars like Di Long and David Chiang acquired some martial arts skills from the training school at Shaw Brothers, as martial arts choreographers continued to train stars to do their own moves. On the other hand, some performers who were previously trained in the opera school and had some real skills, such as Sammo Hung and Yuen Biao, grew up to be a new generation of *wuxia* stars.

Jackie Chan, another martial arts superstar, also came out of this tradition. Following Lee, Chan further accentuates the significance and irreplaceability of authentic martial arts by doing all the stunts himself in his films. He once expressed his discontent with new *wuxia* films pioneered by Tsui Hark in the late eighties and early nineties:

> I don't like the wuxia pian (film), the flying, the exaggerated kung fu skills. It's not real. You can make anyone fly like Superman or Batman, but only we special people can do my style of fighting. [20]

In Chan's view, a star with physical skills guarantees the "uniqueness" and "authenticity" of the *wuxia* film. Chan created a humorous variant of the martial arts that was distinct from Lee's earnest style of kung fu, encompassing comical acrobatics that derived from his training in the opera school and developing his trademark kung fu comedy. The transnational popularity of Jackie Chan films further foregrounds a spectacular manifestation of martial arts as the main appeal of the genre, and at the same time emphasises "authenticity" as an important standard by which to judge a *wuxia* film. "Authenticity," according to Hunt, is a term "that sometimes refers to the martial arts themselves, to the 'invisibility' of cinematic representation (wide framing, unobtrusive editing) or to the body itself as guarantee of the real (athletic virtuosity, physical risk)."[21] However, we should notice that an overemphasis on physical capabilities can easily result in the neglect of acting. Indeed, except for

the stars mentioned above, most *wuxia* performers in the 1970s and 1980s turned into fighting machines and could not keep their names in the pantheon of *wuxia* stars.

When Jet Li came to play Wong Fei-hung in *OUATIC* in 1991, he faced two traditions of *wuxia* stars, one emphasising acting and performance, the other focusing on martial arts and the body. Li unquestionably falls into the category of "special people" that Chan refers to. He learned martial arts from seven years old; he was five times national martial arts champion; he made his name due to his excellent martial virtuosity showcased in his early films (*Shaolin Temple*, China/Hong Kong, 1982; *Kids from Shaolin*, China/Hong Kong, 1984). Audiences have good reason to believe that Li could display real martial arts as well as any other *wuxia* star. However, surprisingly, Li is strongly criticised for subordinating his real skills to cinematic technology in his films. The common complaint is that too many special effects and wirework stunts have been applied in the fight scenes. Based on his observation of a gradual disappearance of muscular bodies in Hong Kong popular culture from the realistic films inaugurated by Bruce Lee to Tsui Hark's new *wuxia* films starring Jet Li, Lo Kwai-cheung claims that "no body" exists in *OUATIC*, and that Jet Li is simply a support prop for the intensive effects work. [22] Similarly, Ackbar Abbas argues that it is special effects instead of Li that are the real heroes in the film. He writes, "Tsui Hark's star Jet Li knows his kung fu, but there are no more authentic stars/heroes of the order of Bruce Lee, as the real is more and more being 'coproduced' through special effects."[23] The anecdote that Li used stunt doubles during some fighting sequences after breaking his ankle has aggravated the charge of "inauthenticity." For example, Leon Hunt confesses that he would like to see Li be

more authentic by performing each move by himself, and concludes that "martial arts films simply do not need their stars to be trained martial artists anymore."[24]

Despite the above criticism (noticeably seen in English-language writing), *OUATIC* was a big hit at the local box office. It not only held a place in the Box Office Top 10 in Hong Kong in 1991, but was lauded by Hong Kong film critics as one of ten best Chinese-language movies of the year. As a ground-breaking *wuxia* film, *OUATIC* revived the declining *wuxia* genre and initiated a new cycle in the early 1990s. At the same time, it resurrected Li's fading fame since his *Shaolin Temple* days and made him a new kung fu superstar to follow in the footsteps of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. Why was the film such a huge success while Li is often criticised for not exhibiting martial arts authentically? If the "authenticity" of martial arts is mostly a western concern, how do local critics respond to Li's kung fu body mediated by cinematic technology? How does Li negotiate his dual identities as a martial artist and an actor? What kind of masculine image does Li construct in this film?

In the following discussion, I will explore these questions by looking at some articles in City Entertainment, which is a highly reputed and key film magazine in Hong Kong. Two of the most important Hong Kong film awards are closely related to the magazine: it set up the annual Hong Kong Film Awards in 1982, while the Golden Bauhina Awards (held by the Hong Kong Film Critics Association) derived from the previous City Entertainment Awards. After the release of OUATIC, several reviews of the film were published in three consecutive issues, in August and September, of City Entertainment. Given the journal's influence, I believe these reviews, to some extent, can be taken to represent mainstream critical opinion of the day on the film.

From Kid to Master

Wong Fei-hung is one of the most revered folk heroes in Chinese culture. Born in 1847, in the Canton province, south of China, Wong is celebrated as a dazzling martial artist and a proficient healer. According to Hector Rodriguez, Wong is simultaneously "a paternalistic protector of the underdog against corrupt landlords and criminals, and a conservative champion of Confucian morality and a progressive fighter against feudal superstitions."[25] After his death in 1924, a series of novels appeared in several newspapers, fictionalising Wong's exploits, although not much is actually known about his real life. The first Wong Fei-hung movie *The Story of Wong Fei-hung* was released in 1949, directed by Hu Peng, and Wong became a major figure in Cantonese cinema between 1949 and 1970. During this period, more than seventy feature movies about this legendary martial artist were made, most of them starring the prolific actor, Kwan Tak-hing. Kwan portrayed a peace-loving, omnipotent and traditional Confucian hero so successfully that he became synonymous with Wong Fei-hung for Hong Kong audiences. Both Wong Fei-hung and Wong Fei-hung movies have become legendary in Hong Kong popular culture. Not only does Wong Fei-hung symbolise the quintessential *wuxia* hero, but the films made about him have "served as a training ground for many of the leaders of kung fu filmmaking in the decades to follow."[26] After Kwan Tak-hing's classic portrayal, many subsequent endeavours to remake Wong Fei-hung were generally unsuccessful because there was just no substitute for the venerated Kwan. One exception is Jackie Chan's reinvention of Wong in *Drunken Master* (Yuen Wo-ping, Hong Kong, 1978), which tactfully changed the serious traditional hero to a mischievous adolescent and established Chan as a kung fu comedy superstar.[27] In this sense, Wade Major

concludes, "any actor seeking the part would face comparisons not only to the real Wong, but also a pair of Hong Kong film legends."[28]

When director Tsui Hark endeavoured to rework the Wong Fei-hung legend in 1991, he approached the subject in a totally different way. While the earlier Wong Fei-hung movies were confined to domestic drama and stories that revolved around local communities, Tsui deliberately placed the hero within a wider historical context, foregrounding "the Chinese coming to terms with foreign things."[29] The film is set at the end of the nineteenth century, when western powers are carving up China and forcing the weak Manchu government to sign a series of unequal treaties. Featured as a national hero, Wong has to defeat various enemies, including deceptive Americans who recruit Chinese labour with the promise of the "mountain of gold" in the USA, wicked local gangsters who help Americans kidnap Chinese women, corrupt and incompetent Chinese officials who always compromise with the foreigners, and stubborn northern master Yim (Yee Kwan-yan) who desperately tries to defeat Wong in order to become the most superior kung fu master. In addition to fighting his foes, Wong is also intellectually confronted by the challenge of Western technology and culture. Interestingly, this challenge is often presented by his romantic interest, Aunt 13 (Rosamund Kwan), a woman educated in England, with a Western mindset.

Tsui's bold decision to reinvent Wong using Jet Li was regarded suspiciously in the beginning. It was nearly ten years since *Shaolin Temple* (1982) made nineteen year-old Li a household name within the Chinese world. In that film, Li plays a young monk Jue Yuan who struggles to avenge his father' death. Li's deft physical skills and unaffected performance contributed to the film's unexpected popularity, and made the "Shaolin kid" his trademark role. Chinese audiences were so familiar with Li's boyish, vigorous kung fu teenager image that few could imagine him as a prestigious national

hero. In addition, some purists complained that Jet Li's northern martial arts style hardly prepared him to portray a real Cantonese kung fu hero.[30] Li also admitted that he was under big pressure to play a master because audiences had got used to his "kung fu kid" image.[31] However, the success of the film banished those doubts to a large extent.

After the release of *OUATIC* in Hong Kong in 1991, several film critics in *City Entertainment* used the same words to describe their feeling about the film: that is, that it came as a "pleasant surprise." Kang Xue-ying wrote, "it is a bit strange to cast Li with boyish features as a revered master, but unexpectedly he makes it."[32] She said that before watching this film, she thought that Li would transform Wong's image from a serious master to a mischievous teenager, but in fact Li's performance was no less dignified than Kwan Tak-hing's. Kang also saw Li's brilliant martial arts skills as a guarantee of the film's success. Zhang Zhi-cheng also noted that "Li's previous image of a vigorous kid has been absolutely got rid of."[33] Zhang mentioned the rumour that Li used stunt doubles in some fight sequences but he did not think that it mattered. "With his dignified and graceful physical expression, Li still convincingly impersonates a serious, prestigious martial arts master."[34] In another article, Yang Xiao-wen suggested that "the previous kid has grown up. Li's wonderful martial arts performance exactly delivers a renowned master's steadiness and demeanour."[35]

From the above comments, it is not difficult to detect a common opinion—Li's martial arts performance was crucial to his success in bringing a prestigious *wuxia* master to life. None of the *City Entertainment* critics seems to be concerned that film technology might compromise Li's martial capabilities or make them unreal, as heard in the criticisms discussed earlier. Instead, they speak highly of the combination of film techniques and Li's martial arts skills. As Kang Xue-ying put it,

"it is exhilarating when Tsui's visual style[36] meets Li's solid martial skills."[37] Zhang Zhi-cheng further pointed out that "this film again attests to the fact that fight scenes with only fists are limited, but with the help of film techniques, a fight scene full of imagination can be created."[38] Clearly, the *City Entertainment* reviewers tended to ignore the "unreal" part of Li's physical performance. For them, the important thing was not how much wirework Li applied in his fighting or whether or not he used stunt doubles, but whether or not he successfully delivered Wong's dignity and adeptness as a prestigious master by exhibiting his martial skills. In other words, it was the *performativity* of martial arts instead of its authenticity that was accentuated by Hong Kong critics as a key appeal of Li's remaking of Wong Fei-hung.

These comments on the one hand evince a holistic attitude towards martial arts performance amongst Hong Kong critics rather than a rigid distinction between "fighting" and "acting," as often seen in Western critical discourses, and on the other hand indicate a performative tendency within *wuxia* stars in the early 1990s. By that time, due to the introduction of Western cinematic technology and a gradually maturing system of martial arts choreography, stars with little or no prior martial-arts experience like Brigitte Lin and Leslie Cheung could look like expert martial artists on screen. It was obviously difficult to become a new generation *wuxia* star by solely relying on martial arts ability. How could Li convincingly impersonate a revered kung fu master in *OUATIC*, in spite of his boyish face and previous "kung fu kid" image? It might be worth observing how Li articulates his own opinions on martial arts in the film before taking a close look at how he actually practises it.

"Performing" Martial Arts

Li once admitted that in the movies he made in the 1980s, he knew nothing about how martial arts would work on screen, and just took all the things he had learned in the past ten years of martial arts training and threw them together.[39] This might to some extent explain why Li did not develop as a *wuxia* star prior to the 1990s, despite his influential debut. Li obviously had a new understanding of cinematic martial arts when he came to play Wong Fei-hung at the beginning of the 1990s.

Here, I would like to draw attention to two *City Entertainment* interviews with Li, respectively taken in 1991 and 1993. Showing the same enthusiasm for martial arts as Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, Li insisted that the key thing for a *wuxia* film was to create some new fighting methods, rather than display authentic martial arts. "Film itself is in a fast development. Martial arts should change in response to audiences' taste. Outdated fighting styles will be discarded."[40] When asked how he managed to adjust to the southern martial arts with a northern background, Li answered, "it is hard to define my fighting style in the film as northern or southern. In fact I do not think audiences really care about it. They just want to see you fighting like a master."[41] In terms of the relationship between cinema and martial arts, Li declared, "certainly I use martial arts as a means to enhance the character. Despite the chaotic situation, Wong Fei-hung remains undisturbed by it. It is better to incorporate his martial arts with his personality, using the former to cater to or enrich the latter."[42] In Li's view, "martial arts are always limited. Each *wuxia* film only requires a little bit of breakthrough in its action scenes. It is more important to have a good script and an attractive character."[43]

Li's words convey at least two points. Firstly, it was the originality and expressivity of martial arts instead of its authenticity that were pursued in *OUATIC*. Secondly, when audiences were constantly evolving and growing familiar with

various martial arts styles and when the rapid development of cinematic technology is able to make "unreal" fighting "real," Li realised that acting was becoming increasingly important to a successful *wuxia* star. In another words, instead of displaying martial arts impassively and mechanically, *wuxia* stars could act/perform when they were doing fighting. Based precisely on this understanding, Li changed his straightforward martial arts skills, seen in his 1980s films, to a new fighting style which was graceful and dignified, as *City Entertainment* critics commented, and could better deliver Wong's 'master' image. Li did this by infusing theatrical elements into his displays of martial arts on the one hand, and by allowing his skills to be negotiated by cinematic technology on the other hand.

Unlike his previous *wuxia* movies, in which Li maintained a continuous body motion most of the time to showcase his martial skills, "pauses" and "poses" were applied extensively by Li in *OUATIC* in order to foreground Wong's staidness and dignity. Each time that Li/Wong begins or finishes one bout of combat with his adversary, or lands from mid-air, either a "pause" will be highlighted or a "pose" will be presented, such as a half-squat with legs crossed and arms outstretched, one of Li/Wong's trademark poses. Both "pause" and "pose," as director Tsui Hark acknowledges, are borrowed from Chinese operatic traditions:

> [On the stage] you see somersaults and flips and fights and it's very visual and then at a high point before the climax it stops for tension or suspense and then it goes on and they do a fantastic demonstration and the people say: "Good!" and then they applaud. When we structure something by building up and then holding it back for suspense, that's the influence of Peking opera…. Now we try to make things less like Peking opera and more cinematic.[44]

Here, Tsui is talking about how the film uses the combination of pause and movement, a typical rhythm in Peking opera, to create an atmosphere in the fight sequence. The rhythm of pause/burst/pause, according to David Bordwell's definition, is deeply

characteristic of Hong Kong martial arts/action films, and is used to arouse and channel emotion in fighting scenes. Instead of an impassive, restrained realism, Bordwell points out, Hong Kong filmmakers present a fight or chase which is "given a distinct, vivid emotional profile—ferocity, panic, evasiveness, meticulousness—or some combination of such qualities."[45] Indeed, in *OUATIC*, the alternation of fight and stasis harmonises Li's/Wong's intensity and calm, fury and poise, violence and peace, thereby perfectly conveying a dignified, revered master.

While Li's glamorous poses betray his mainland *wushu* background (which attaches importance to the expressivity of martial arts), they also show the influence of another Chinese opera tradition—"liangxiang," a term, as Hunt writes, suggesting "an opening of the body to let light shine," a "key presencing moment" in Peking opera.[46] Whenever Li/Wong poses, a close-up is used to emphasise his soul-piercing eyes and magnify his luminous presence. In *OUATIC*, "pose" has been expertly fused into Li/Wong's fighting style and has become an important way to portray the character. This can be clearly observed each time that Wong fights with Master Yim. While Yim desperately initiates one attack after another while emitting furious noises, Wong is always waiting for him in a still pose with a half-smile on his face. Wong's calm and Yim's hysteria form such a strong contrast that audiences probably do not need to wait until the last minute to know who will be the winner. The different fighting styles convey the different personalities of two martial arts masters. The deployment of these poses helps Li to create a graceful and serene fighting style, thus vibrantly demonstrating what makes Wong a respected kung fu master, that is, his commitment to peace—using his fighting skills as the last recourse, instead of attacking or showing off.

"Pause" and "pose" not only give fight sequences a vigorous rhythm and tension, but also add aesthetic beauty and elegance to Li's martial arts performance. More importantly, by incorporating theatrical elements into the displays of his martial arts, Li fully expresses Wong's dominance in each combat, and his self-possession and self-confidence as a superior kung fu master. This is probably what Hunt has in mind when he argues that "there is more to kung fu stardom than authentic ability," and that "Chinese performance traditions have made their own special contribution to film stardom."[47]

As mentioned before, Li is often criticised for substituting wirework and special effects for his physical skills. While Hunt suggests that Wong Fei-hung films embody a collision of technology and the kung fu star's body,[48] Ackbar Abbas claims that the aura of kung fu stars has been erased by technology.[49] However, *City Entertainment* reviews represent another (probably no less popular) perspective, namely that cinematic technology enhances Li's martial arts performance rather than damages his physical "authenticity." As far as I am aware, the criticism of technology impairing kung fu stars' performance mainly comes from English-language critical discourses, but Chinese critics seem to have less investment in this kind of authenticity. If *wuxia* represents a kind of romantic fantasy within Chinese culture, then martial arts play a crucial role in playing out this fantasy. For example, "weightless flight," one of the common martial abilities of *wuxia* heroes, is, as Ang Lee puts it, a kind of transcendence that represents the desire to go beyond the reality of human limitations.[50] Hence, from an early period, cinematic tricks, such as hidden trampolines, double exposures, and most famously, wirework, have been widely applied to *wuxia* films to help create spectacular feats and fantastic effects. Unlike their western counterparts, who usually seek to stage "real-life" fights in the action

film, Chinese choreographers, as Craig D. Reid notices, mainly rely on imagination when designing fighting scenes.[51] Even those who persist in a more realistic display of martial arts also use some cinematic techniques to achieve effects or amplify expressivity. Tsui Hark is undoubtedly the key person in introducing western cinematic technology to Chinese *wuxia* films, with his extravaganza *Zu, Warriors from the Magic Mountain* (Hong Kong, 1983). In *OUATIC*, Tsui continued his search for imaginative, atmospheric fight sequences by deploying various cinematic techniques.[52]

Li's/Wong's fighting style is described as "graceful," "dignified" and "peaceful," which to some extent should be attributed to the negotiation of cinematic techniques. Noticeably, a lot of slow motion has been applied when Li/Wong kicks, punches, rotates or lands. Slow motion, as Bordwell observes, is a staple of the *wuxia* film; it can be highly expressive and "imbue the performer with strength and adroitness."[53] In the film, slow motion is masterfully employed to showcase the beauty of Li's/Wong's physical performance and highlight his heroic presence. One of the most memorable scenes is Li/Wong jumping from a teahouse in order to chase a local gangster. He is jumping with the umbrella gradually unfolding. This beautiful landing is aided by wirework and presented in a slow motion, leaving audiences both inside and outside the screen impressed by Li's/Wong's excellent physical skills and unmatchable magnificence. "Amazing!" "Incredible! What a jump!" the (onscreen) onlookers marvel.

Cinematic technology in *OUATIC* has helped create some of the most imaginative fight sequences/methods ever made. One of Wong's trademark kung fu techniques, the "Shadowless Kick," cannot be created without the help of cinematic techniques, as it requires Li to land seven kicks in mid-air. Tsui claims that, although

it looks a little exaggerated, "you have the feeling being very romantic and very visual."[54] Indeed, the "Shadowless Kick" powerfully foregrounds Wong's dignity as an invincible kung fu master. With this technique, Wong can always defeat the strongest opponent at the last minute. The most dynamic and creative fight sequence in this film might be the final duel between Wong and Master Yim in a warehouse. With numerous ladders being thrown about and used as weapons, the two men scuttle to the top of long bamboo ladders, dodging each other's blows as they jump and leap from one ladder to the next. This fight sequence is said to have been filmed over two weeks,[55] involving a lot of wirework and special effects. Enhanced by cinematic technology, Li's/Wong's graceful martial arts style is showcased at its best in this sequence. Highly original and expressive, it has become one of the classic fight sequences in *wuxia* film history and offers a good example of how to balance "real" physical skills and "unreal" cinematic techniques.

Interestingly, while the fight sequences involving Li/Wong are usually mediated by wirework or special effects, the ones without Li/Wong are made more realistic and grounded, such as the combat between master Yim and a local master, or the scuffle between local militia and gangsters. While the latter fights are thrilling in their own right, with their bloodiness and chaos, the Li/Wong fights allow the spectator to revel in a flamboyant exhibition of martial artistry. In my view, this might suggest another function of cinematic technology in Li's martial arts performance—to tone down its violence. Rarely armed with sword or blade, Li/Wong often uses something less lethal as a weapon, such as an umbrella in the teahouse fight, a branch when chasing arsonists, a wooden beam in a nighttime combat with Yim, a bamboo stick when stopping soldiers, and the ladders in the warehouse duel. In all these fight sequences, cinematic techniques are largely employed to demonstrate how Li/Wong

plays with the "burning branch," "rotating wooden beam" or "flying ladders." What is highlighted here is not how Li/Wong beats his adversaries, but how he performs his martial arts. These fight sequences, mediated by technology, are more atmospheric, fantastic, less violent, hence subtly delivering the message of non-violence, which is certainly a key feature of the character.

In summary, technology is used in *OUATIC* as a supplement to the kung fu star's body and helps Li perform martial arts gracefully and serenely. Instead of substituting cinematic artifice for his real skills, Li combines both. Rather than losing his aura, Li gains a more charismatic presence with the help of cinematic technology. By embracing such technology, Li further places emphasis on the performativity of martial arts. As discussed above, through introducing theatricality and technology into his martial arts performance, Li foregrounds martial arts as a forceful means to portray the character, and once again proves that martial arts and acting can complement one another perfectly within a *wuxia* star's performance. In doing so, Li completes transformations both on and off screen: from a boyish kung fu kid to a prestigious master; from a mainland martial artist who knows little about film to a trans-bordering *wuxia* star who begins to build his star persona on his interpretations of the martial hero.

Elegant *Wuxia* Star

In terms of Li's star image built in the film, the views of another *City Entertainment* reviewer, Luo Wei-ming, may be instructive. He writes:

> What overcomes audiences is (the film's) dizzying fight scenes and Jet Li's poised martial arts. It is a rare, wonderful performance after the *wuxia* film genre has gone out of fashion for many years. Wong/Li emits generous elegance both in his martial arts and non-martial arts performance. Compared with tough Bruce Lee, funny Jackie Chan, and impetuous Lau Kar-hui

> (another Wong Fei-hung player), Jet Li is a scholarly and calm hero who is rarely seen in the *wuxia* film. Li will definitely become a new idol in Hong Kong.[56]

Here, Luo on the one hand confirms that Li balances martial arts and acting successfully, and on the other hand describes a new category of masculine *wuxia* hero embodied by Li in his fresh interpretation of Wong Fei-hung, one that is "elegant," "scholarly" and "calm," qualities that clearly distinguish Li from previous *wuxia* stars.

Bruce Lee was the most famous martial arts superstar prior to Li. A comparison of Lee with Li might help identify the meanings of Li's new *wuxia* star image. Both Lee and Li are superb martial artists, and both of them are famous for portraying national heroes. While Lee's hero is a pure nationalist who prepares to fight against any enemy of China, Li plays a revisionist Wong Fei-hung who would like to learn the advantages of the West. While Lee's character is adored because of his physical superiority, Li's Wong is celebrated because of his ardour in defending Chinese culture. Lee's masculinity is hard, unbending and rough, embodied in his aggressive, fiery fighting style, and by contrast, Li's male hero looks soft, flexible and scholarly, manifested in his graceful, serene fighting manner. While Lee established his star persona on his declaration of showcasing martial arts authentically, Li built his hero image from his emphasis on displaying martial arts more theatrically.

The appearance and popularity of Li's elegant *wuxia* star image signify some of the social and psychological changes in Hong Kong. When referring to the emergence of muscular male action stars in the Hollywood cinema of the eighties and nineties, Paul McDonald suggests that "these new hard-body stars show by their obvious physicality how bodies act as key signifiers of cultural beliefs."[57] As such, the significance of *wuxia* star bodies can be read in terms of the ways in which they embody culture. In the 1970s, the Hong Kong people who were faced by rigorous

colonial domination and a chaotic "fatherland" (during the Cultural Revolution) pressed for a tough and uncompromising hero image like Bruce Lee's to arouse national self-confidence and identify with an imaginary, powerful China. By the early 1990s, with a highly developed economy and impending handover to the Mainland, the Hong Kong people began to reflect on the impact of Western culture in a less biased way, and examine their identity on a more complex level. A gentle and flexible *wuxia* hero like Li was therefore more relevant to the sentiment of the day.

The change of *wuxia* hero from Bruce Lee to Jet Li also indicates the different trends within martial arts performance. Barry King[58] and Paul McDonald[59] draw the distinction between what they call "impersonation" and "personification" in acting. According to their definitions, "impersonation" is produced by the actor who transforms his/her body and voice in ways that signify the differences between the characters s/he plays. "Personification," on the other hand, foregrounds the continuity of the star's image over and above different characters. While an actor who *impersonates* plausibly integrates her-/himself into the narrative circumstances, an actor who *personifies* always plays herself/himself. McDonald and King's distinction in terms of acting can be borrowed to address two different approaches to martial arts performance, i.e. personification and impersonation in fighting. A *wuxia* actor who maintains his particular fighting style in playing each character can be regarded as practising "personification in fighting." By contrast, "impersonation in fighting" means that a *wuxia* actor transforms his fighting style to adjust to different characters. If Lee and Chan are good examples of the former, Li's performance in *OUATIC* perfectly illustrates the latter.

As mentioned before, Lee tended to deny the performativity of his onscreen martial arts and highlight his authenticity and superiority as a martial arts master. Lee

invented his own style of martial arts, which he called Jeet Kune Do, and performed it in each of his films. Similarly, Chan rejects an exaggerated expression of martial arts and insists on the body itself as a guarantee of the real. Chan's comedic martial arts, as Yuen Wo-ping describes, full of little tricks—"somersaults, creeping down and up, nimble hands and body"[60]—can be found in nearly every Jackie Chan film. For Lee and Chan, authenticating their martial arts performance has become a useful means to fuse their film roles with their off-screen identity, thus constructing their star personae. By practising their unique martial arts in each film, Lee and Chan make all characters they play look like "angry Bruce Lee" or "funny Jackie Chan." In this sense, they could be seen as always playing (including "fighting as") themselves, thereby embodying "personification in fighting."

In his re-interpretation of Wong Fei-hung, Jet Li brings a different approach, impersonation, to the *wuxia* star's performance. Despite coming from a northern martial arts background, Li confidently portrays a southern martial artist; though entitled as martial arts national champion, Li allows cinematic techniques to mediate his fighting in order to perform some "unreal" martial arts. For Li, martial arts function as a mask to impersonate the character, instead of showing himself. While in every movie, Lee and Chan use their trademark martial arts to express their invariable selves, Li employs different fighting styles to depict different *wuxia* heroes. For example, unlike the graceful, peaceful presentation of martial arts which rightly delivers Wong's dignity and elegance in *OUATIC*, Li displays more fantastic, romantic martial skills to portray drunken, easygoing Ling Hu-cong in *Swordsman* (Ching Siu-tung, Hong Kong, 1992), and later, adopts an adroit, amusing fighting way to depict mischievous Fong Sai-yuk in *Fong Sai-yuk* and its sequel (Yuen Kwai, Hong Kong, 1993). Wade Major detects that "unlike Jackie Chan, whose most popular

characters are nearly all variations on himself, Li had built a career playing individuals whose personalities often contrasted sharply with his own, characters frequently at odds with their own nature."[61] The different approaches to martial arts performance—personification and impersonation in fighting—might to some extent explain this discrepancy. Indeed, it was the emphasis on the performativity of martial arts and acting that would make Li a more flexible *wuxia* star than Lee and Chan in the following years.

As Bey Logan puts it, *OUATIC* was one of the first *wuxia* films to receive serious critical attention.[62] While its success is usually credited to director Tsui Hark, especially in English-language scholarly accounts, Hong Kong critical responses suggest that it also benefits enormously from Li's subtle martial arts performance. As I have discussed in this essay, by smoothly combining two traditions of *wuxia* stars (respectively, foregrounding martial arts/the body and acting/performance), Li takes fighting beyond the physical dimension so that it acquires a new cinematic and cultural significance. Li's performance in *OUATIC* tellingly proves that the *wuxia* star can act, and that fighting and acting are equally important to a successful martial arts performance. However, despite receiving acclaim from both audiences and critics for his Chinese career, Li has never won, and has only recently been nominated for, a film acting award.[63] Moreover, the achievement in fighting is credited to the action choreographer rather than the *wuxia* actor.[64] There is still a long way to go in terms of the recognition of *wuxia* stars' contribution to film performance.

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[1] Sean Macaulay, "Is It a Bird, Is It a Plane? Yes, It's Jet," *Times*, section 2, London, 27 March 2000, 22-23.
[2] *Eve Voice*, 29 October 2001, 38.
[3] Rituparna Som, "Kiss of the Dragon," *Asian Age*, 12 November 2001, 17.
[4] Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: the Extra Dimension* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), 98.

[5] Sek Kei, "The Development of 'Martial Arts' in Hong Kong Cinema", in Lau Shing-hon, ed., *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong International Film Festival, 1980), l27.
[6] Jia Leilei, *Chinese Wuxia Film History* (Beijing: Culture and Art Publishing House, 2005), 43.
[7] Hector Rodriguez, "Hong Kong Popular Culture as An Interpretive Arena: the Huang Feihong Film Series" (*Screen* 38.1, 1997), 8.
[8] Leon Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2003), 29.
[9] Sek Kei, 28.
[10] Quoted by Mélanie Morrissette, "Choreography: The Unknown and Ignored" (*Offscreen*, August 31, 2002, *http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new_offscreen/choreography.html*)
[11] Quoted from *The Making of Martial Arts Films—As Told by Filmmakers and Stars* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong film Archive, 1999), 19.
[12] Ibid., 38.
[13] Leon Hunt, 9.
[14] Quoted by David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 91.
[15] Quoted from *The Making of Martial Arts Films*, 20.
[16] For Zhang, this practice changed as his choreographer Lau Kar-leung exerted greater creative control over his films.
[17] Ibid., 32.
[18] David Desser, "The Kung Fu Craze: Hong Kong Cinema's First American Reception" in Poshek Fu and David Desser, eds., *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 19-43.
[19] Lo Kwai-cheung, "Once Upon A Time: Technology Comes to Presence in China" (*Modern Chinese Literature*, Vol. 7, 1993), 93.
[20] Quoted from Craig D. Reid, "An Evening with Jackie Chan" (*Bright Lights* 13, January 1994), 21.
[21] Leon Hunt, 19.
[22] Kwai-Cheung Lo, "Muscles and Subjectivity: A Short History of the Masculine Body in Hong Kong Popular Culture" in Lucy Fischer and Marcia Landy, eds., *Stars: The Film Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 115-126.
[23] Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 31.
[24] Leon Hunt, 46.
[25] Hector Rodriguez, 2.
[26] David Bordwell, 204.
[27] Chan later returned to the role in Lau Kar-leung's *Drunken Master II* (Hong Kong, 1994).
[28] Wade Major, "The Afterburner" in Stefan Hammond, ed., *Hollywood East: Hong Kong Movies and the People Who Make Them* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 2000), 153.
[29] 吴彦真, "徐克改造黄飞鸿", *电影双周刊*, 317 期 , Wu Yan-chen, Tsui Hark reinvents Wong Fei-hung (*City Entertainment*, Issue 317, May 1991), 35-37.
[30] David Bordwell, 209.
[31] 引自杨孝文, "李连杰眼中的黄飞鸿", *电影双周刊*, 323 期 quoted from Yang Xiao-wen, "Wong Fei-hung in Jet Li's Eyes" (*City Entertainment*, Issue 323, 1999), 24.
[32] 康雪萤, "移花接木，张冠李戴", *电影双周刊*, 325 期, Kang Xue-ying, "The Artistry to Remake" (*City Entertainment*, Issue 325, September 1991), 67.
[33] 张志成, "《黄飞鸿》武打场面超凡入圣", *电影双周刊*, 323 期, Zhang Zhi-cheng, "Wonderful Fight Scenes in *Once Upon A Time in China*" (*City Entertainment*, Issue 323, August 1991), 62.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Yang Xiao-wen, 23.
[36] A style characterised by fast editing and lots of special effects.
[37] Kang Xue-ying, 67.
[38] Zhang Zhi-cheng, 63.
[39] Quoted from Jet Li's official website, available from http://jetli.com/jet/jet_film-07.php, accessed June, 2004.
[40] Quoted from Yang Xiao-wen, 1991, 24.
[41] Ibid.

[42] 登徒子, "十年人事再翻身：李连杰与方世玉", *电影双周刊*, 362 期, Deng Tu-zi, "Jet Li and Fong Sai-yuk" (*City Entertainment*, Issue 362, February 1993), 40.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Quoted from Ange Hwang, "The Irresistible: Hong Kong Movie *Once Upon A Time in China* Series: An Extensive Interview with Director/Producer Tsui Hark" (*Asian Cinema*, Fall 1998), 18.
[45] David Bordwell, 232.
[46] Leon Hunt, 44.
[47] Ibid, 43.
[48] Ibid., 17.
[49] Ackbar Abbas, 31.
[50] Quoted from Zhang Ke-rong, *Ang Lee* (Beijing: Xian Dai Press, 2005), 226.
[51] Craig D. Reid, "Fighting Without Fighting" (*Film Quarterly* 47.2, 1993-1994), 31. Reid is said to be the only Chinese-trained American fight choreographer working in the USA.
[52] In a *City Entertainment* interview (1991, Issue 323), 24, Li referred to the filmmaking process of this film: "The director (Tsui Hark) needs not only two persons fighting each other, but strong 'atmosphere.' He always wants to shoot something nonexistent. So we often try to go beyond our limit to do some impossible, original kung fu until the atmosphere or effect has been created."
[53] David Bordwell, 234.
[54] Quoted from Ange Hwang, 18.
[55] David Bordwell, 123.
[56] 罗维明, "待从头收拾旧山河 - 徐克《黄飞鸿》", *电影双周刊*, 第 324 期，Luo Wei-ming, "Tsui Hark's Wong Fei-hung" (*City Entertainment*, Issue 324, 1991), 38.
[57] Paul McDonald, "Star Bodies and Performance" in Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 181.
[58] Barry King, "Articulating Stardom," in Jeremy G. Butler, ed., *Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 42.
[59] Paul McDonald, 45.
[60] Quoted from *The Making of Martial Arts Films*, 64.
[61] Wade Major, 174.
[62] Bey Logan, *Hong Kong Action Cinema* (London: Titan, 1995), 178.
[63] Only one *wuxia* star has ever won a Best Actor Award, David Chiang, for *Vengeance* (Zhang Che, Hong Kong, 1970) at the Asian Film Festival. Jackie Chan was nominated twice for Best Actor in the Hong Kong Film Awards, but did not win, leading another *wuxia* star Di Long to claim that a bias existed against action/kung fu stars. Interestingly enough, in this year's Bai Hua (Hundred Flowers) Film Awards, the largest in Mainland China, Jet Li, Jackie Chan and Stephen Chow were nominated for Best Actor for their roles respectively in *Fearless*, *New Police Story and Kung Fu Hustle*, but all (predictably) failed.
[64] For example, in the Hong Kong Film Awards, there is only Best Action Choreography, no Best Fight.