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## Introduction

For a genre that could be seen, not unreasonably, to be living on borrowed time, Chinese Martial Arts narratives have enjoyed a remarkable amount of critical attention and global visibility in recent years. It is hard to separate this phenomenon from the international impact of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, China/US/Taiwan/Hong Kong, 2000) and the subsequent cycle of Pan-Chinese (and Pan-Asian) “Martial Arthouse” films that have followed it—*Hero* (Zhang Yimou, China/Hong Kong, 2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (Zhang Yimou, China/Hong Kong, 2004), *The Promise* (Chen Kaige, China/Hong Kong/Japan/South Korea, 2005), *Seven Swords* (Tsui Hark, Hong Kong/China/South Korea, 2005) and *Huo Yuanjia/Fearless* (Ronny Yu, Hong Kong/China, 2006). While this cycle might be located within what Dean Chan here calls a “fashionably nostalgic imaginary” in an East Asian context, in Western film criticism it popularised a previously unfamiliar generic label, the *wuxia pian*, which amongst other things served to differentiate the films from the more lowbrow “kung fu films” that met with considerable international success (if rather less critical recognition) in the 1970s. “Martial Arthouse” cinema was greeted by many Western critics as an apparently new trend in transnational action cinema, but as also indicative of a larger generic heritage that lent it cultural “authenticity.” This has often posed problems when, for example, reading the gender politics of *wuxia* heroines—is the “feminism” of *Crouching Tiger* evidence of the genre’s “Westernisation” or simply a more self-conscious elaboration on

a tradition of women warriors that stretches back to the origins of the genre (and, indeed, its historical-mythical basis)?

Significantly, the title of this issue is not “Kung Fu (or *gongfu*) Fictions,” the (Cantonese) term that entered Western discourse in the 1970s and acted as a catch-all label for the Chinese Martial Arts “craze” (including its pedagogic industries). However, the aim here is not to elevate the genre culturally above the popular, but rather to take it in its most expansive sense. The relationship between the terms “kung fu” and “*wuxia*” is both complex and context-specific—Sinkwan Cheng here uses the term “*gongfu* narrative” in a very different sense from what it might mean to a fan of Hong Kong Martial Arts films. The papers herein may sometimes interpret the terms in different ways and at different levels of depth (etymology is particularly central to Cheng’s essay). For some, mainly Western, critics, *wuxia* is synonymous with the swordplay genre, and distinct from the emphatic investment in the authentic and the real that characterised the kung fu films of Bruce Lee and others. Others, on the other hand, use the *wuxia* label to encompass all Chinese Martial Arts narratives.<sup>1</sup> Given that the *wuxia/gongfu* distinction is specific to filmic sub-cycles (and to export of Chinese action films in the 1970s as “kung fu films”) and seems to have less currency in literary studies, there is good reason to adopt the “larger” category here.

The “Martial Chivalry”<sup>2</sup> genre is taken here to be transnational and trans-media, and best approached from a trans-disciplinary position. Its global reach scarcely needs arguing, and its contested cultural status clearly plays a key role in its continuing fascination for scholars—as one example, compare the nationalist claims made for Bruce Lee<sup>3</sup> with the “multicultural” and “interdisciplinary” figure discussed here by Paul Bowman. The *wuxia* label emerged in relation to popular literature—the *wuxia xiaoshuo* (martial arts novels) that emerged during the early Republican period,<sup>4</sup> although the term is also used retroactively to encompass a pre-modern corpus where canonical history, myth and literature converge in tales of noble heroes and heroines fighting for justice. Martial Arts cinema from Hong Kong and Taiwan has adapted both canonical (*The Water Margin*) and modern *wuxia* literature (Shaw Brothers’ Gu Long adaptations, directed by Chor Yuen), but as Dean Chan’s essay demonstrates, film is not the only visual medium to remediate the genre. Not only has *jianghu*, the abstract underworld of the *wuxia* genre,

gone virtual, but popular novelists such as Jin Yong (a.k.a. Louis Cha) and Gu Long have provided the inspiration (or at least the licensing trademarks) for successful online games. Gaming is arguably the most significant “beyond” alluded to in this issue’s subtitle, but one could easily identify other media forms where the genre has manifested itself, including comics and animation. It is telling, however, that film dominates the issue, and remains the most globally visible embodiment of the genre. The Martial Arts film remains a comparatively neglected genre, and the current wave of analytical writing is to be welcomed, but the genre overall enjoys uneven levels of circulation and critical attention. While *wuxia* games constitute a new area of study within the relatively new discipline of games studies, there is still a paucity of English-language work on *wuxia* literature. Given that translating a novel across huge cultural as well as linguistic differences is a rather more substantial undertaking than subtitling or dubbing a film (a film that might already have one eye on a global audience), it should probably not come as a surprise that a limited range of *wuxia* literature is available to non-Chinese readers.

If one were to imagine a hypothetical field called “*Wuxia* Studies” (a pleasing thought), it would be, by its very nature, transgressive of disciplinary (as well as cultural) boundaries. It would include literary and film studies, historiography, philosophy, games and new media studies, the study of national and transnational imaginaries and culture industries, the theory and practice of Chinese Martial Arts and of Chinese performance traditions, as well as excursions into gender and other politics of identity. This issue encompasses all of the above, and more. It is the perfect subject for the interdisciplinary *EnterText* and the contributors each make original and exciting contributions to the field.

It is entirely appropriate that an issue devoted to “*Wuxia* Fictions” should begin with an essay that asks: what constitutes “Martial Arts”? Rather than take the art itself as the “real” in relation to its generic counterpart, Bowman traces its own fictive status—constituted by myth as much as the practicalities of combat, conspicuously *instituted*. He cites Stephen Chan’s UNESCO survey of the Martial Arts, which ran aground precisely over the question of definition and whether the mythic and the fantastic should be included as constitutive of the subject. Bowman’s “mythic” focal point is Bruce Lee, who embodies a “multiculturally promiscuous interdisciplinarity” that he suggests, intriguingly, is analogous to the hybridised discipline of Cultural Studies. Lee remains

both “mythic and real,” generating a publishing industry that is as concerned with philosophical questions (the phantasmatic “something *more*” of Eastern fighting arts) as the no-nonsense efficacy of Jeet Kune Do, and Bowman provides an original and provocative reading of his legacy.

The mythic—in this case, the existential identity of the pre-modern Martial Arts hero(ine)—also figures in Sinkwan Cheng’s essay. Both a comparative study and a welcome response to the lack of literary *wuxia* studies, Cheng’s study provides a vivid and persuasive account of the historical basis for the heroism and social protest of the genre. There are two important issues of translation at stake. Firstly, Cheng argues, *xia* tends to be mistranslated as “knight” or “knight-errant,” a seemingly innocent analogy that inadvertently obscures some significant cultural and philosophical differences. The knight inhabits a rank bestowed by the nobility and is inextricably linked to the preservation of social order, while the *xia* is defined by his or her predisposition to “justice” and antipathy towards institutions and hierarchies. Seemingly united as heroic archetypes, the knight and the *xia* demonstrate that such attributes as honour, loyalty and chivalry cannot transcend their cultural and historical contexts. Secondly, what constitutes “history” may encounter problems of translation, too—as Cheng explains, pre-modern Chinese culture did not make rigid distinctions between literature, history and philosophy, as evidenced by the seeming introjections made by writers such as Sima Qian into the subjectivities of heroes of antiquity. The relationship between “history” and “myth” might in itself make for a particularly interesting cross-cultural debate, but the historical *xia* clearly cast a lasting spell over the popular (fictional) genre that would emerge later.

If “Martial Arthouse” has provided a significant impetus for the blossoming of writing about the *wuxia pian*, another factor has been the greater availability of classic films in remastered prints. The release of Shaw Brothers’ studio’s back catalogue on DVD has generated a new interest in that studio, and Gina Marchetti’s essay examines the work of one of the studio’s most prolific filmmakers, Liu Jialiang (Lau Kar-leung in Cantonese), a director for whom the “kung fu film” was very much a distinct generic entity. As committed to “authenticity” as Bruce Lee—Marchetti observes the meticulous training sequences that sometimes upstage climactic combat scenes—Liu articulated a

distinctly southern cultural legacy within the Mandarin-dialect cinema of Shaw Brothers. But while Marchetti's is the most detailed and illuminating account of Liu's oeuvre to emerge, it is more than an auteur study. She also traces the representation of a distinct style (or school) of kung fu from the Southern Shaolin tradition, Hung Gar, a style that tells a story encompassing the turbulence of the late Qing Dynasty, several celebrated *xia* including Hong Xiguan (Hung Gar's putative "father") and Huang Feihong (Wong Feihung), the Chinese diaspora and Liu's own father. In Liu's films, narratives of the Hung Fist speak of "dynastic changes, cataclysmic political forces, resistance to authority, radical reorganisations of hierarchies based on class, region and gender." Gender is perhaps the most frequently recurring theme in this issue (see Cheng, Felicia Chan, and Steenberg for different takes on the *nuxia*, or woman-warrior), and Marchetti identifies how shifting sexualities speak to the clash between tradition and modernity in her analysis of the neglected *The Lady is the Boss*.

The next two papers offer star studies, focusing on two of the most significant performers in 1990s Hong Kong cinema. Felicia Chan examines the cross-dressing persona of Brigitte Lin, whose starring roles in nineties' *wuxia pian* range from the androgynous to the trans-gendered (the figure of Asia the Invincible in Tsui Hark's *Swordsman* series). Chan considers cross-dressing as a performative act, a "site on which acts of (trans)gender identity (and) social expectation... may converge." *Swordsman II*, one of the most remarkable cross-dressing films in popular cinema, is marked by a lack of closure that preserves its gender ambivalence, while *New Dragon Inn*'s "double-take" ultimately discerns "just another woman" beneath the surface of drag. However, Chan argues that all four of the films she discusses are tantalised by the "What if?" of cross-dressing. The "space of possibility" facilitated by *wuxia* fantasy is contextualised within the guerrilla film-making of Hong Kong genre cinema: rarely "progressive" but slipping free of the verisimilitude (and closure) associated with Hollywood.

In her case study of Jet Li, Sabrina Yu takes on the denigration of the *wuxia* star as actor and questions the perceived tensions between different types of performative labour that construct "acting" and "combat" as separate, if not actually opposed, performance skills. The multi-skilling of Chinese performance traditions might make these distinctions harder to maintain in the *wuxia pian*, although that is not to say (as Yu

acknowledges) that all *wuxia* stars are “good” actors. Li raises particularly interesting issues around the reception of the *wuxia* star, often seen as “wooden” by English-language reviewers and criticised by some fans for subordinating his kung fu skills to technological spectacle. The latter complaint appears to be a culturally specific one, and Yu demonstrates that Hong Kong film reviewers evaluated Li’s performance as Huang Feihong in *Once Upon a Time in China* using rather different criteria from the cult discourses of Western Hong Kong fandom. She offers a more holistic approach to Martial Arts film performance, one in which the physical, the “actorly” and the technologically mediated complement one another in creating the “elegant *wuxia* hero.” Modifying the distinction between “impersonation” (character acting) and “personification” (the star persona), Yu sees Li as an “impersonator,” subordinating not only his persona but his martial arts to the different characters he plays.

Lindsay Steenberg approaches *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*—arguably, the most written-about *wuxia pian* since its release—through its “excess of surface,” an excess that “contests and fractures nostalgic images of China, *wuxia* and the Western action film form.” Ang Lee’s *wuxia* pastiche may flirt with Orientalism, but the “seduction” is incomplete, marked by a series of disruptions and revisions. The “revision” that has arguably attracted most critical attention is that pertaining to gender. In a footnote to her essay in this issue, Sinkwan Cheng sees the film’s “feminism” as both inauthentic and inaccurate (both as a literary adaptation and “historical” film). Steenberg evaluates the film more positively, but also attributes its self-consciousness about gender to its ambiguous cultural positioning. The film also needs to be seen in the larger context of action-women in global cinema, most of whom, Steenberg argues, “are martial artists to some extent.” *Crouching Tiger*’s heroine, Jen, departs from both Hollywood tropes and some of the conventions of *wuxia* fiction, a *nuxia* who both “wills herself into being” and is a conspicuously desiring heroine.

In the final essay, Dean Chan provides a much-needed history and exegesis of *wuxia* narratives in East Asian online games networks, from the first Role-Playing Game in Taiwan to the development of massive online RPGs. From the earliest Shanghai *wuxia pian* onwards, the genre has responded to technological change (from wirework to CGI) and here New Media remediates the “aura of antiquity” that gives the genre cultural and

economic currency in the games market as a marker of authenticity and cultural difference. *Wuxia* games comprise one third of China's online market, a relatively recent success story that Chan attributes to an economic nationalism that circulates Chineseness-as-difference within transnational interchanges. The nostalgic imaginary these games draw on may constitute a self-Orientalising strategy, but it successfully contested the dominance of South Korean and Japanese games as well as offering culturally proximate narratives that paved the way for Chinese RPGs to succeed where American online games failed in the Chinese market. It will be interesting to see whether games like *Journey to the West* and *The Annals of the Three Kingdoms* follow their cinematic counterparts by moving from regional to global markets.

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<sup>1</sup> Another term, the *wu da pian* (fighting film), can be found in some critical accounts.

<sup>2</sup> The most popularly used translation, capturing the Martial (*wu*) and heroic/chivalrous (*xia*) aspects of the genre. Notwithstanding Sinkwan Cheng's questioning of 'chivalry' as an appropriate word to characterise the ethos of the *xia*, the translation does at least underline that this is a genre not only concerned with Martial Arts but the moral predisposition of its heroes.

<sup>3</sup> By, for example, Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimension* (London: BFI 1997) 110-21.

<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically, the *wuxia* label was coined by 19<sup>th</sup> century Japanese novelists and then adopted by Chinese scholars. See Sam Ho, 'From Page to Screen: A Brief History of *Wuxia* Fiction' in David Chute and Cheng-sim Lim (eds.) *Heroic Grace: The Chinese Martial Arts Film* (Los Angeles: UCLA Film and Television Archive 2003), 14.