Cultural Impact of American Martial Arts Films on Martial Arts

Since their inception, martial arts films in America have sparked controversial debates from the media, traditionalists, Easterners and Westerners alike. The core of the debates has centered around the question- have American martial arts films ultimately helped or hurt martial arts in the new century? Through this paper, I will follow M. Ray Lott's *The American Martial Arts Film*, which documents of the birth and continued growth of martial arts in the American cinema in order to answer this central question.

Lott cites the 1945 James Cagney film *Blood on the Sun* as one of the first popular martial arts films to emerge in America. Prior to this movie, evidence of martial arts in the cinema was limited to the occasional karate chop, punch or flip during soldier training sessions in wartime movies. Naturally, this movie incited arguments over its utility to pure martial arts. On the one hand, this movie was one of the first to have actual martial arts techniques demonstrated and a climatic judo battle between the lead protagonist and antagonist. The leading actor was filmed practicing judo moves in a traditional gi. The movie reintroduce judo into mainstream American's attention, and helped reinvigorate interest in the martial art. This was an important step in bringing judo back to America; judo dojos around the U.S. had shut down because of World War II and rampant anti-Japanese sentiment fueled by the war, Pearl Harbor, and Japanese internment camps. On the other hand, the anti-Japanese mood pervasive throughout the movie was hard to ignore. Cagney portrayed a loyal and clever reporter who struggled against the Japanese secret police to bring freedom to the press. The movie showed the Japanese as blindly obedient, socially repressed, and information-censored. It furthermore used offensive terms (common for that era) to refer to the Japanese, namely "Jap" and "monkey."(Lott, 24). Given the prevalent role culture plays in a martial art, later critics questioned if *Blood in the Sun* did all it claimed to in helping promote martial arts. The diminishing role of culture and tradition in martial arts as a result of the spread of martial art cinema is a topic that will be addressed later in this paper.

As highlighted in *Blood on the Sun*, the initial blossoming of martial arts in the cinema promoted awareness of and sparked interest in martial arts, but simultaneously diminished the emphasis in martial arts to build bridges and world peace. In the time of World War II, the Korean War, and the Cold War, American nationalism was at its peak, and the last thing that would draw an audience to theaters would be a martial arts film about a foreigner triumphing over an American. In the early years of the American martial arts films, the protagonist was usually a dashing American man who might use a few martial arts techniques (kicking, punching, etc) in conjunction with all-American boxing moves and good old-fashioned gun fighting. For the most part, martial art techniques were used as an accent to fight scenes or to the story; rarely were they ever a focal point in movies. Central themes included fighting for love, fighting for one's country, and fighting a science-fiction or fantastical monster. Themes tied with American nationalism brought a steady stream of moviegoers.

Unfortunately, this also meant more and more Americans had prejudice and racist ideas about the East reinforced. Orientals didn't have the heart, the self-confidence, the self-righteousness to do what American soldiers and men could do. Easterners lacked Western individualism and couldn't think for themselves.

The 1960s brought about the most revolutionary change in the context of the American martial arts cinema. Martial arts began to appear more prevalently in mainstream television, and thematic elements in martial art movies began to increase in complexity. Even some of the generation's most popular shows, including *Batman* and *Star Trek* included martial art techniques. *Batman* regularly featured judo flips and karate strikes. The show's spin-off, *The Green Hornet* even showed the dynamic Batman and Robin team fight the Green Hornet and side-kick Kato, played by Bruce Lee. More on Bruce Lee's contribution to the American martial art cinema will be discussed later in this paper. *Star Trek*'s Captain Kirk (played by William Shatner) employed boxing, judo, karate, and his infamous over-the-head sacrifice throw on a regular basis to defeat his foe.

In the 1960s, martial arts films revolved less around one epic martial arts battle, or a side-serving of martial arts blended with Western boxing and gun-fighting. Martial arts started to become highlighted as its own fighting style, not just an accumulation of techniques. In 1960, *Hell to Eternity* was released. Although not most popular movie, *Hell to Eternity* was significant because it was one of the first American movies to "not only address, if even indirectly, the bigotry involved in sending Japanese-Americans to the internment camps, but to distinguish martial arts as a form of combat that provides discipline and self-restraint to its practitioners." (Lott, 29) *Hell to Eternity* established a plotline that has been popular since. It finally emphasized the control and discipline taught in martial arts. The movie features Jeffrey Hunter learning martial arts as a boy, but forgets his lessons in control, discipline, and humility during boot camp combat in the marines, and Hunter becomes a ruthless killer. Only after soul-searching does he regain his dedication to martial discipline and inner peace. *Karate- the Hand of Death* (1964) likewise included martial arts as a central theme rather than just as an accent to the movie, and was praised by critics as relatively free of the racial and gender prejudices that plagued the earlier martial arts movies. *Karate- the Hand of Death* was a low-budgeted film and lacked formal fight choreography and the authenticity and believability of martial arts as a self-defense weapon, but it was one of the first movies to show-off karate. Until this point, most of the showcased cinema moves were judo or a hybrid of American boxing and karate. It also worked in conjunction with the Japanese Karate Association, further legitimizing the martial art.

The James Bond movies also emerged in the 1960s to further fuel the martial arts media craze. Bond's fight scenes generally included boxing and judo, and the third Bond movie, *Goldfinger* (1964), even featured the Japanese-descent, Olympic weightlifting medalist and professional wrestler Harold Sakata. *You Only Live Twice* (1967) took martial arts movies and stereotypes back a few

notches with its portrayal of Japanese women as sexual play-things that would throw themselves upon Western men. It did, however, set the example as a much-referenced source of martial arts training camp recreation. Whether future training grounds taught ninjas or terrorists, the icon of non-modern facilities with intense training grounds was copied by generations of martial arts films.

Tom Laughlin made his debut as Billy Jack in *Born Losers* in 1967. This movie claimed a number of "first-evers" in the martial arts cinema arena. Billy Jack was the first to draw the American public attention to hapkido, a self-defense oriented martial art. Billy Jack was the icon of the counter-culture, misunderstood hero. He demonstrated self-control and patience when necessary, and the ability to channel his anger into crushing strikes when he wanted. This cross-culture hero maverick was a box-office smash hit. He was the blend between the Eastern martial artist and the Western cowboy. Martial arts heroes were made more relatable; martial artists were not ninjas, per se, but rather individuals who were armed with enough control and technique to change the rules, laws, prejudices, and fight "big brother." Billy Jack's iconic stardom spanned the 1960's and 70's, and laid the foundation for other martial arts legends to follow.

The 1970's was characterized by martial arts super-stars in the media. Television blazed the trails for martial art movies to emerge, and primed the hungry audience members for more action-packed, kihap-filled martial arts combat scenes. The fight scenes between martial artists were more deliberately planned and grew increasingly complex during this decade. Martial artists, not just actors, began to play the role of these action-heroes. As with Tom Laughlin and Bruce Lee, race and cultural background became less significant to audience members. The television series *Kung Fu* (debuted in 1973) that launched David Carradine's career featured Carradine fighting for the rights of different ethnic groups, including the Chinese, Brazilians and Indians. In wake of Nixon, the Vietnam War, and Watergate, it was no surprise to see martial arts movies' themes focused on the individual bringing down large corrupt organizations during this era.

No book on American martial art films would be complete without a chapter on the martial arts legend himself- Bruce Lee. Indeed, Lott argues without Bruce Lee martial art movies might have remained fringes on the cinema screens, with the overwhelming majority of martial art productions coming from overseas. Bruce Lee introduced a new brand of Americanized martial art movies, and later martial art super-stars like Chuck Norris, Jackie Chan, Jim Kelly, and Sammo Hung. The scene was set, tragically a bit too late for Bruce Lee's career to really take off. After Lee passed, however, martial arts and his reputation grew exponentially.

> "An entire cottage industry of Bruce Lee look-and-sound-alikes was formed almost overnight... The entertainment arena wasn't the only area affected. Enrollment at karate studios, like those established by Chuck Norris, went through the roof. The elite Hollywood clients that Lee had taught, including Steve McQueen and James Coburn,

> were now being joined en masse by the middle class as well as the middle-aged. Karate, kung fu, or any of the other martial arts forms were being sold as a panacea to parents who wanted to find a painless way to provide their children with discipline and respect for authority." (Lott, 40).

The martial arts hero changed persona again in the 1980s. He was no longer the maverick fighting bigots, gangs, and terrorists. Instead, he was the Chuck Norris cowboy- the reluctant hero who took the law into his own hand when he had to, but had the patience and self-control not to initiate fights with hot-headed morons. He was there to protect those who couldn't defend themselves. The hero was either an identifiable loner, usually unattached, or had a sidekick whose role developed as comedic relief in the 1980s. In this generation of martial arts films, individualism was emphasized and prided by Americans, namely because of the Regan years and the continued escalation of the Cold War. To the Eastern martial arts whose cultures promoted a collectivist attitude, however, this individualistic loner-hero was a controversial slap in the face from the American martial arts cinema. It was seen by some as a confusion of the core values of martial arts- respect for others, and self-control. Add to the mix the fact that striking back with force and vengeance was always an option (no martial arts movie is complete without a fight scene), and it is no surprise Easterners grew even more wary of martial arts' exposure/ portrayal in the mainstream American media.

Adding further insult to injury was the fact that 1980s American martial arts films were characterized by overgeneralization and overexaggeration. The 1980s heroes, including Chuck Norris, Steven Segal, Patrick Swayze, and Jean-Claude Van Damme were bulky men who could tackle multiple foe at once with their weapons, fists, and legs. The latest rage in bad-guy persona became the ninja; a once highly-respected, deadly-efficient secret society became an assassin team dressed in black that threw ninja stars. The 1980s were hailed as the golden-age for martial arts cinema, because of the sheer volume of martial arts movies that emerged during this time period. Unfortunately, a high quantity also meant a low-budget, as producers were determined to churn out as many "B-rated" martial arts movies as possible.

A theme repeated throughout American martial arts movies is that physical force can create lasting change. This significantly diminished one of the foundations of martial arts- self-control and respect for others. Especially apparent in the early years of martial arts cinema, the hero used martial arts not to find inner peace, but to crush his foe- the bully, the terrorist, the mobster. For example, in Sam Fuller's *The Crimson Kimono* (1959), two best friends (one white and one Japanese) fight for a lady's love in a ritual bout of Kendo, but the Japanese man loses his temper and self-restraint and "he beats [the white man] severely, breaking the rules of the sport and upsetting the Japanese audience by his disgraceful conduct." (Lott, 27).

Despite the diminished emphasis on self-control, martial discipline and respect

for others that martial arts philosophy preaches, it is undeniable that martial arts gained mass appeal to all ethnicities throughout its American career, and ultimately contributed to building bridges across different cultures. Billy Jack both fought and defended Asians, Native Americans, Latino Americans, and Africans at some point in his martial arts career. From Tom Laughlin (half-Indian) to Jim Kelly (African-American) to Chuck Norris (part Irish part Cherokee) to Bruce Lee (Chinese), talented martial artists emerged in a variety of ethnic groups, to the delight of some, and to the censure of others. Some hailed the blend of martial arts ethnic groups as a hallmark of the melting pot America, while others scorned it as a pollution of a culture's martial art. As captured in *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* (1993), many Chinese and Japanese martial artists disapproved of sharing their martial arts' secrets with "foreigners." The Korean, Vietnam, World War II and Japanese internment camps in America did little to change the Eastern martial artists' prejudices. However, those who appreciated the trend of brining cultures together in martial arts hailed the movies' interracial friendships as the very heart of martial arts. For example, *The Crimson Kimono* featured a white man and a Japanese man as best friends- a radical idea for the 1950s.

There is no clear-cut answer to the debates surrounding the American martial arts films. On the one hand, martial arts were undoubtedly popularized by the media and launched the career of some of the greatest martial artists the world has ever seen. Being made by Americans for Americans, however, directors and producers twisted the traditional self-respect and self-control philosophies of martial arts into gun-wielding macho men with American individualistic, anti-authoritative attitudes. Films throughout the decades introduced new and previously-obscure martial arts such as hapkido, capoeria, aikido, wushu, muay thai, and brazilian jujutsu into mainstream America, and undeniably contributed to thousands of Americans joining martial arts. Almost as an olive branch to settle the controversies, as the new century is ushered in, American martial arts films are increasingly diverse and complex. Some martial art films like Rush Hour (1998) and Beverly Hills Ninja (1997), are comedy-based and made for children's entertainment. Other films, like Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2003) and House of Flying Daggers (2004) hail back to traditional Hong Kong cinema styles. Women like Michelle Yeoh, Cynthia Rothrock, Yuen Qiu, and Zhang Ziyi could claim their place among the martial arts legends. Film and computer-editing technology has grown exponentially more refined over the past decade, and martial artists can perform stunts on screen that no human being can perform on stage. Furthermore, the dramatic increase of direct-to-video movies that became hallmark of the 1990s helped promote awareness of different martial art styles while still maintaining a lower-budget. Overall, the controversy that challenged the use of martial arts in American films has plateaued, finally leaving directors and producers able to diversify the previously defined martial arts genre, and bring audiences around the world unprecedented, uniquely-American martial arts films.