China Drama Academy – Training of the Past and Future

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Introduction

It is not hard to understand why Hong Kong martial artists' popularity has increased dramatically in the U.S. since emerging to American notice in the 1970s. With *Enter the Dragon*, Bruce Lee showed Americans an explosive, powerful form of martial arts that had never been showcased before.[1] The American public continues to be surprised and delighted by Jackie Chan's unprecedented acrobatic stunts and Sammo Hung's fluid techniques. These two martial arts cinema super-stars have a common background stemming from their training at the Peking Opera School in Hong Kong. The purpose of this paper is to explore the early trainings (both mental and physical) these legends endured and the Peking Opera School that not only enabled them to become household names, but also launched martial arts into a global cinema revolution.

Background

As one critic notes, "it is a rare Hong Kong movie from the fifties, sixties, seventies, or eighties that does not have at least one current or former opera player in its cast."[2] Initially, the idea that the Hong Kong cinema super-stars spent their youth practicing opera might

seem a bit strange. Peking Opera was an elaborate story-telling that combined singing, mime, acrobatics, dancing, stage combat, and music. The operas were characterized by large, elaborate costumes that flowed gracefully as performers moved about the stage. The costumes were so elaborate, performers usually took hours to put on their attire and make-up, and could not eat, slouch, or sit-down once the outfit was complete. This meant that the children had to have lasting patience and self-restraint, or be brave (and stupid) enough to face the consequences.

Peking Opera schools were popular boarding schools throughout the 1950's that taught children the fabled art of Chinese Peking Opera. These schools were located in mainland China, Macau, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, the last being the most renowned of the four locations. For the scope of this paper, descriptions of the Peking Opera School pertain to the branch located in Hong Kong, called the China Drama Academy. This is the studio where Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung, Corey Yuen and others trained, under the severe tutelage of Master Jim Yuen Yu.

Admissions

The Academy began training boys and girls at age 6, and typically hosted around 50 children at any given time. When parents decided to enroll their children in the China Drama Academy, the children were essentially signed over as property of the school. The children ate, slept, worked, trained, and earned their keep at the Academy for a period of five to ten years, depending on the parents' choice of contract.[3]

To enroll a child in the boarding school, the parents were forced to sign a contract that stipulated two unusual conditions. First, the school would take full responsibility for the children and pay all expenses incurred in raising, teaching, and training the children. In exchange, the school would keep any money the children earned. The second condition was the students may be disciplined, even to death.

This last clause may be a cruel concession for parents to make, but parents who considered the China Drama Academy usually did not have another option for raising their children. The boarding school would raise the children and pay for their medical, food, and housing expenses. Sending the children to the China Drama Academy was a very practical solution for families without the financial resources or time to raise a child. It was also a useful option for parents whose children lacked the patience or interest in academic pursuits. The master of the Academy would instill obedience and discipline in the students, and prepare them for a strenuous career as an opera performer, acrobat, cinema movie star, mime, stuntman, or other theatrical job. With training, the children would have the possibility of a future career, and that was worth the draconian lessons in discipline. "Discipline is the soul of [Chinese opera]," Master Yu would say. "It is said that '*discipline is at the root of manhood*,' is it not so?"[4]

Generally, enrollment in the China Drama Academy was not a decision made solely by parents. The Master of the school would meet with the children and their parents and determine the child's work ethic, physical condition, and general suitability for the school's strict

lifestyle. In admitting a student to the Academy, the Master was extending an invitation to join his family. Every student at the Academy was a brother or a sister to each other. This was not a charge the Master could take lightly, and he chose his students very carefully. They had to be able to follow his strict militaristic order, and had to obey him and his "older brothers" unquestioningly.

Additionally, the children themselves were also often directly involved in the decision to enroll in the Academy. This would be, after all, the child's life for the next decade. The children who agreed to enroll in the school often realized that this was their only means of obtaining their eventual independence. The Academy was one of the few ways a child with poorer parents could hope to earn a living, especially if the child was not academically-adept. The Academy gave the children the training and the connections necessary to secure a future, if the children worked desperately hard. "You may think this is all fun and games," Sammo Hung told Jackie Chan when he first visited the China Drama Academy. "But this is what we eat, drink, and dream. This is our lives."[5]

Training

The typical day at the China Drama Academy began at 5:00am with a yell from the "Biggest Brother." The sleepy children then ran laps on the rooftop to sweat out the body's toxins. After a quick bowl of rice porridge, the children would start their six-hours of non-stop warm-up exercises, footwork training, martial arts, and acrobatics practice.

Once the morning practices finished, the students would eat lunch, which usually consisted of soup, vegetables, and fish over rice. After lunch the children were allowed to use the bathroom—for the first time all day. If they needed to use the bathroom before this point, they were not sweating enough, and would be given a harder workout. Immediately following lunch came hours of the renowned flexibility training that made the Peking Opera Schools famous.

Opera performers were expected to be as comfortable on their hands as they were on their feet. If the children were unable to stand on their hands for at least thirty minutes, or do leg splits horizontally, vertically, and upside-down, they were pulled, pushed, beaten, and disciplined until they could do it flawlessly.

After flexibility training, the children broke into groups to do chores like cleaning the main entrance hall, washing dishes, or tending to the ancestral shrine. Those who weren't assigned chores that day had lessons in singing or weapons. After chores and training came dinner, consisting of the same soup, vegetables, fish, and rice from lunch. Once dinner finished, classroom lessons commenced.

Lesson topics included history, literature, reading and writing. After the lessons, the children had additional training, in kung-fu, face painting, the proper use of opera props and costumes, and more. The day's training finally finished at midnight, and the children would have five hours of exhausted sleep before they heard Biggest Brother shouting them awake, once again. This was the training schedule seven-days a week at the China Drama Academy.

Discipline

For Master Yu, discipline meant two things: strict order and hard work. Order was enforced in a hierarchy within the Academy. At the top sat Master Yu, followed by his wife, Madame Yu, and the students ranked by seniority, with Biggest Brother at the top, and Littlest Brother at the bottom. "If Master gave a command, everybody jumped," said Chan. "The order was never to be challenged."[6] Seniority dictated where the children sat during mealtimes, how much food they ate, whom they could boss around, and, in turn, who could boss them around. Disobeying or hitting a senior was a crime tantamount to disobeying or hitting the Master himself, and was punished accordingly.

Later, Chan had this to say about the discipline system at the Academy:

> *It was a nightmare. This might sound terrible, but eventually you actually felt happy to see other kids crying, because it meant that someone else was being tortured, not you. Oh God, it was awful. And it would go on for hours, until walking, or sitting, or even standing was agony.*[7]

Master Yu once caught Chan and Yuen Kwai, a slightly older classmate, fighting, and throwing punches to each other's faces. This act of open defiance disrespected the hierarchy and was strictly forbidden. Furthermore, it jeopardized their ability to perform on stage (no amount of make-up can hide a split lip or black eye), which meant no revenue for the Academy, and tarnished the school's and master's reputations. Enraged, Master Yu ordered them to

continue fighting each other, since they clearly enjoyed fighting so much. He whipped them with his cane until they would exchange hard blows to each other, and eventually, after hours of collapsing on each other and begging, he let them stop. According to Chan, Master Yu once told his students "if I see that any of you have a swollen nose or bruised face again, I will kill you. … How can anyone perform with a damaged face?"[8]

Trips to the hospital were expensive, and not an inconvenience Master Yu was willing to bear unless absolutely necessary. In fact, Chan reportedly didn't see Master Yu call for a physician until his sixth year at the school, when the Biggest Brother, Yuan Lung, broke his ankle while doing flips and, hours later, passed out from the pain.

"There wasn't a day I was there when I didn't think of…escape," said Chan. "But I had nowhere to run... I was too young to work, and I wasn't suited for school. The Academy was the only place where my abilities could be developed into something worthwhile, the only place where I had a future."[9] Chan, like others, had realized there was no getting out—only climbing up—in the Academy. And the only way to climb up in the Academy was to be an undisputed master of performance.

Performance

Some children at the Academy not only realized the school was a good opportunity for them to have a future, but realized Peking Opera was the future they craved. This dawning comprehension often changed

the children's perspective on their training. It was draconian and often hellish, but it was necessary to achieve the level of excellence Peking Opera performances demanded.

> *The chosen ones would stand at that grand altar of communion between player and audience: center stage. For the brief space of an opera turn, they would command the attention of a mob of rapt worshipers, becoming princes and emperors and heroes—and gods...Each of us knew in our hearts that this, and only this, was what we wanted, that any other place in the repertory would be second-best and thus, nothing at all.*[10]

Out of the Academy's fifty-plus peers, only seven were considered the elite of the school, and chosen to represent their master, their school, and their fellow brothers and sisters in performing Peking Opera. These star performers, and main money-generators, were known as the Seven Little Fortunes. Those who were not selected to be a Fortune would work behind the scenes, working the curtains, organizing stage props, helping the stars with their wardrobe and makeup, and playing extras during fight or crowd scenes.

Being cast as a Fortune was a double-edged sword. One the one hand, children had the rare opportunity to secure their future by showcasing their talent on stage and bringing revenue, honor, and fame to their master, school, and fellow students. If they performed extremely well, the Master might take them out to dim sum, a Cantonese-style breakfast with sweet buns, dumplings, noodles, and meat as a reward. Compared to the daily serving of congee (rice porridge) and

vegetables, this was heaven to the hungry athletes. They were hailed as the elite of the Academy, and set the example for other children in the school. Being named a Fortune was the best validation a student could receive at the Academy; it meant the Master had confidence in one's ability to learn and progress, one's hard-work ethic and dedication, and one's basic raw talent.

On the other hand, the Fortunes were given more strenuous work-out routines, and were under constant threat of replacement by their understudies, who would kill for their chance in the spotlight. The extra food they were given was not put to waste; they were given harder work-outs to consume the extra nutrition, running double or triple-time practices. Chan recalls he asked for another bowl of rice during his first dim sum outing, and was given extra hours of practice as a result. Corey Yuen ("Yuen Biao"), a fellow Fortune, accidentally pointed (which indicates ordering) at a pastry cake at a dim sum restaurant, and cried throughout the brunch until they returned to the Academy. The cake was left uneaten because Yuen was terrified of the consequences of his actions.

Punishments for mistakes at the Academy were bad, but punishments for making mistakes on stage were infinitely worse. After the Academy children performed, the Master would chat with his friends who had seen the performance, and ask for any mistakes they caught. The child who had committed the mistake was then immediately brought before the Master and his friends and beaten. Children who made too many mistakes (or perhaps one large one) were thrown out of the Fortunes, and their spot was given to an understudy who would not be so careless.

At the Academy, they learned complete body control. They stretched until they had mastered every variation of the split, with one leg or no legs on the ground. They learned to contort their small bodies into even smaller shapes or stretch themselves to a giant's height. They mastered any stage fright they might have had, and even gained a yearning to be in the center spotlight, applauded by a full auditorium.

Perhaps most importantly, they learned how to express themselves to an audience on stage. Despite their make-up and overly-elaborate costumes, the tiny children still had to project the sentiment and emotion in song, mime, dance, and general movement of the opera. This was not Western-style performance, where children may fumble and their mistakes would be written off as "cute." This was a professional scene where the children's hopes and dreams were put on a stage for nightly review, and mistakes were seen as a disgraceful mockery of the ancient Chinese operas. This was their job and their life; there was no excuse for a single sloppy performance. This dedication to excellence in performance and life characterizes the generation of Hong Kong martial arts cinema legends that graduated from the Academy.

Decline

Despite having turned out some of the world's best martial arts cinema legends, the famed China Drama Academy closed its doors in the 1960's. The demise of the school was largely attributed to two factors: a decline in interest in the art of Peking Opera, and the militaristic nature of the China Drama Academy.

Although a celebrated tradition throughout China, the Peking Opera found its attendance dwindling through the nineteenth century, partly attributable to the Japanese occupation, and partly attributable to the rise of modern cinema.

The Japanese occupation in China contributed significantly to the downfall of the Peking Opera in many ways. A number of Peking Opera performers were blacklisted after performing for the Japanese. The Japanese soldiers could blacklist the performers because the opera had a nationalistic message, or the performers could have been blacklisted after the Japanese left because they had performed for the enemy. Another way Peking Opera was affected by the Japanese occupation was simply that many performances were banned. In Taiwan, for example, the Gozai Xi performances were banned from being performed either on the stage or on the street. This dealt a crushing blow to Peking Opera because Taiwan's population, although a mere tenth of China's, comprised a large percentage of the avid opera-goers.

Furthermore, against the glittering background of the movie screen, the Peking Opera was no longer seen as the height of entertainment, but rather a performance watched by the grandparent generation and opera connoisseurs. "In the fast-paced, future-forward lifestyle that the new Hong Kong was inventing for itself, real numbers-and-words education was becoming a necessary trait for survival," Chan recalled. "It seemed as if the Fortunes, stars in our small and shrinking world, were doomed to fade away completely in the much larger and faster world of the cinema."

When Chan and Hung attended the China Drama Academy, surviving the militaristic rigidity of the school was considered a badge of honor. Their parents' generation had survived the Japanese war and occupation in China; surviving hardships and suffering became touted as one of the shining characteristics of the Chinese people. "From this followed a scary kind of logic," said Chan. "Pain gives you discipline. Discipline is at the root of manhood. And so, to be a real man, one must suffer as much as possible."[11] This ardor and commandment to pain was one reason the China Drama Academy was both a success and a diminished failure.

Future

"You couldn't open a school like [The China Drama Academy] now," Chan bluntly told an interviewer. "Someone would sue you."[12] Through a translator, Corey Yuen agreed. "Training is the key," said Corey, "but most people don't want to work that hard anymore."[13]

Chan has recently announced his plans to open up a cinema martial arts training studio in Beijing, China to train the next generation of acrobats, stuntmen and entertainers.

Chan has struggled to find a happy medium between his draconian upbringing under Master Yu, and his experience to date with the world's intolerance of that militaristic upbringing for modern-day children.

"To tell the truth, younger generations of performers aren't as good as we were, and the ones who went before us," said Chan disappointedly. "The schools are still good, and the students still learn, but many of

them are just doing it because their parents want them to, or because they want someday to star in movies."[14]

Chan has declined to say what type of instruction he will give at his martial arts studio in Beijing. However, Chan's immense respect for his mentor and adopted godfather, Master Yu, will undoubtedly color his training style. Although he hated the school at times, Master Yu was his inspiration and father until Chan was 16 years old. "As far as I'm concerned, Charles Chan was the father of Chan Kong Sang [Jackie Chan's birth name], but Yu Jim Yuen was the father of Jackie Chan."[15]

His training might become a slightly-watered-down version of the militant Master Yu style he grew up with, or it could develop into a softer, more tolerable training that emphasizes well-being and health above all else, giving students the professional, social, and academic skills they need to survive in a professional setting. Or, it could be a new Chan-brand style of teaching that the world has yet to see.

For my very limited view of martial arts training thus far, I agree there will always be an irremediable disagreement between the militant training of the past and the soft-style, paternal training of the modern generation. For Chan's generation, martial arts and Peking Opera studies were his livelihood, and the only chance he and his peers had at a successful future outside the China Drama Academy. For my generation, especially in America, martial arts is a hobby, an after-school pastime. We do not have the craving, yearning, and desperation that created Chan's generation of martial arts cinema legends. And perhaps we have indeed lost something precious in that transition.

Perhaps we have lost the single-minded focus that Chan and his peers donated to their studies of the arts. Perhaps we will never be as great performers as his generation because we never experienced the fear of the cane or the pressure of representing an entire school of brothers and sisters. But perhaps, just as martial arts and meditation teach us to flow smoothly with changes, and be like water inside a cup, we will be able to usher in the new generation of college-educated martial artists who excel in the arts because they have chosen to follow it as their passion.

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Endnotes

[1] Lott. Although Bruce Lee had acted in other movie and television roles that showcased his martial art skill, Enter the Dragon was Lee's starring debut in America, and his first "decently budgeted" martial art film.

[2] The Illuminated Lantern

[3] Chan and Yang.
[4] Chan and Yang, p. 28.
[5] Chan and Yang, p. 25.
[6] Chan and Yang, p. 47.
[7] Chan and Yang, p. 42.
[8] Chan and Yang, p. 56.
[9] Chan and Yang, p. 57.
[10] Chan and Yang, p. 83.
[11] Chan and Yang, p. 24.
[12] Chute, p. 3.
[13] Chute, p. 3.
[14] Chan and Yang, p. 65.
[15] Chan and Yang, p. 57.