China Drama Academy- Training of the Past and Future

It is not hard to understand why Hong Kong martial artists' popularity has grown exponentially in the U.S. since they emerged on to scene 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 fierce and fluid movement. These martial arts cinema super-stars have a common background stemming from their training at a Peking Opera school in Hong Kong. The purpose of this paper is to explore the early trainings these legends endured and the Peking Opera school foundation that enabled them to become household names and launch martial arts into a global cinema revolution. This ultimate goal of the research conducted for this paper is to explore past martial arts training methods and its applicability to the modern-day world.

Peking Opera schools were popular boarding schools throughout the 1950s that taught school children the fabled art of the Chinese Peking Opera. These schools were located in mainland China, Macau, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, the latest 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, Yuen Biao and others trained, under the watchful eye of Master Jim Yuen Yu.

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 congee, 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 was the first time all day that the children were allowed to use the bathroom. If they needed to use the bathroom before this point, they were not sweating enough, and would be given a harder workout. After 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. Screaming and crying were common, but failure was not.

After flexibility training, the children broke into groups to do chores like cleaning

[1]Lott, M. Ray, *The American Martial Arts Film* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2004) 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.

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, the most frustrating part of the day started- the classroom lessons.

Lesson topics included history, literature, reading and writing, presented by retired teachers droning on and on while students fought food-coma and the urge to throw things. After the lessons, the children had more 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.

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.[2]

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.

Tolerating this last clause might seem a cruel and inhumane agreement for parents to make, but parents usually did not have another option for raising their children. The boarding school would raise the children and pay for the children's medical, food, and housing expenses. Sending the children to the China Drama Academy was a very practical solution for families without financial resources or the time to raise a child. It was also a useful option for parents whose children were full of energy and 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, etc. 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?" (Chan, 28)

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,

[2]Jackie Chan and Jef Yang, *I am Jackie Chan* (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1998)

followed by his wife, Madame, and the students ranked by seniority, with Biggest Brother at the top, and Littlest at the bottom. "If Master gave a command, *everybody* jumped," said Jackie Chan, the Academy's best-known graduate. "The order was never to be challenged." (Chan, 47). 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- a completely inconceivable feat that surely spelled out suicide. Seniors were free to abuse their juniors, though, just as the seniors above them had done.

Hard work was enforced at the Academy by a strict daily routine and severe punishes dolled out to sick, disrespectful, weak, and injured students who couldn't perform the exercises up to the highest standards. Unless a student was in a coma, ill or injured students were considered lazy and would be beaten and whipped until they completed their exercises without mistakes.

Lessons in order and hard work were reinforced with an iron rod or cane. Yu-So Chau, Master Yu's daughter and an Academy student, described her father as "very strict; every time there was a mistake, he would hit fiercely, but no talent comes without a beating."[3]

"It was a nightmare," Chan said about the discipline system at the Academy. "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." (Chan, 42).

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 swollen nose), which meant no revenue for the Academy, and tarnished the school's and master's reputation. 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?" (Chan, 56).

Although Master Yu loved his students, he did not take injuries seriously, unless the student was unconscious or passed out from the pain (but not passed out from exhaustion). 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

[3]Kung Fu Cinema, "An Appreciation of the Screen Fighting of Yu So-Chau" 2008. http://www.kungfucinema.com/?p=1304#more-1304

school, when the Biggest Brother, Yuan Lung, broke his ankle while doing flips and, hours later, passed out from the pain.

Generally, enrollment in the China Drama Academy was not a decision made just 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. One dissenter, one maverick would be all it took to spill into chaos.

Children accepted into the Academy were given a new family name that took after the Master. For Chan and his peers, Master Yu gave them family names of Yuan. Jackie Chan was known as Yuen Lo, Sammo Hung was known as Yuan Lung, etc. New students were told "welcome to our family" by Master Yu, and were instructed to call other students "brother" and "sister."

One of the reasons every child in the school was given the Master's family name was to emphasize the oneness they should feel with their father-figure master. Another reason was as a marker of fame for the school. The China Drama Academy and Master Yu's success were judged based on the reputation and fame of his students and their performances. "These days, if you look carefully, you will find a 'Yuen' nearly everywhere in Hong Kong cinema," said Chan. "And so it could be said that Master Yu wasn't just my godfather, but one of the godfathers of the Cantonese movie industry." (Chan, 122).

A few months after Chan had been at the school, Master Yu took his students on a field trip, and outside the bus window, Chan saw his childhood home. "My life had truly changed forever," Chan said. "I'd never be able to go back to those days [of my youth]. I couldn't ever go home again, because the Academy was my home now, and my opera brothers and sisters, more than anyone else, were my family." (Chan, 57).

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 be enrolled in the school often realized that this was their one ticket to 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," Yuan Lung told Chan when he first visited the China Drama Academy. "But this is what we eat, drink, and dream. This is our lives." (Chan, 25).

Some children at the Academy, like Chan, not only realized the school was a good opportunity for children to have a future, but realized the Peking Opera

was *the* future they craved for. 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.

"There wasn't a day I was there when I didn't think of... escape," said Chan. "But I had nowhere to run. My mother couldn't have taken care of me on her own, and anyway, if I'd gone back to the mansion on the Peak, I wouldn't have anything to do. 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." (Chan, 57). 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 undisputedly excellent in performance.

To generate a craving and excitement in the children for the Peking Opera, after months of hard work and training, Master Yu took the kids to the Lai Yuen Amusement Park, where they watched their very first Peking Opera. When Chan watched his first Peking Opera, he was left in complete awe by their grace, composure, and beauty. Furthermore, he was struck by how close he could be to becoming a performer himself, one day:

> "*It's all worth it,* I thought, looking at the rapt faces of the other audience members. I realized that, more than anything else, I wanted that to be *me* up there on that stage; I wanted to hear a crowd clapping and cheering and screaming for *me*... The performance left all of us, eve the big brothers and sisters, in a state of excitement. We'd seen our future, so close, so loud, so *real* for the very fist time. This is what we lived for. And it had finally arrived." (Chan, 60)

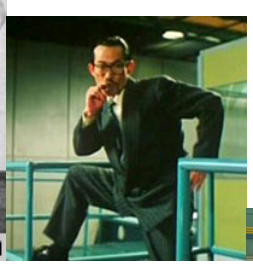
Out of the Academy's fifty-plus peers, only seven were considered the elite of the school, and chosen to represent their master, their school, and their fellow brothers and sisters in performing Peking Opera. These star performers, and main money-generators were known as the Seven Little Fortunes. Those 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 play extras during fight or crowd scenes. Chan recalled the dramatic tension and yearning he felt when he discovered only seven could be Fortunes:

> "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." (Chan, 83)

The first troop members of the Seven Little Fortunes were Yuen Lung, Yuen Tai,

Yuen Wah, Yuen Wu, Yuen Kwai, Yuen Biao, and Yuen Lo. [4]

Yuen Lung, also known as Sammo Hung, was the Academy's Biggest Brother at the time. After graduating from the school at age 16, Sammo Hung put his education to good use, taking on the role of stuntman, actor, director, and producer in various martial arts films that showcased his immense multi-faceted talents, including *Enter the Dragon*, *the Iron Fisted Monk, Mr. Nice Guy,* and *Enter the Fat Dragon.* He spent 21 years working for Golden Harvest, the first of Hong Kong's premier film production, distribution, and exhibition companies to successfully break into the western cinema market,[5] but decided to leave Golden Harvest after disagreements with its management and a string of unsuccessful martial art films.


Yuen Wah was declared "the king of martial arts stances," by Chan (Chan, 85). As Chan recalls, during one "freeze" practice, a devilish activity where the children had to hold poses for thirty-minute intervals, Yuen Wah actually fell asleep while posing on his hands and head, and stayed in his upside-down pose even after Master Yu told the class they could stop. (Chan, 79). 

Yuen Kwai, also known as Corey Yuen, was one of Chan's best friends throughout life at the Academy. Corey Yuen was not interested in being a movie star himself, but later became one of the world's top martial arts directors, choreographing all martial arts sequences in Jet Li's American movies.[6] He also trained Michelle Yeoh in cinema martial arts, and directed her first major action film, *Yes Madam.*[7] Furthermore, he directed Jean-Claude Van Damme's *No Retreat, No*

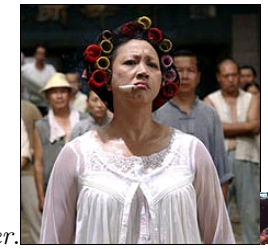
[4] Jackie Chan and Jef Yang, *I am Jackie Chan* (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1998), Love Asian Film: "Seven Little Fortunes" http://www.loveasianfilm.com/features/sevenlittlefortunes.html

[5] Golden Harvest: "About Us" 2008. http://www.goldenharvest.com/

[6] Chute, David. "Cory Yuen and *So Close"* http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Island/3102/cory-yuen.htm

[7] Michelle Yeoh Web Theatre: "Michelle Yeoh Q&A" 2000. http://www.michelleyeoh.info/Bio/qa.html#kungfu

Surrender and other films around the globe.  

Yuen Biao was the youngest Fortune selected. Even from his first trip to the Academy, he was declared a natural born acrobat, "capable of twisting his small body into positions [the students] could only dream of, as comfortable in the air or upside down as [the students] were on [their] feet," claims Chan (Chan, 85). He was Chan's first little brother at the Academy, and the two were best friends throughout their lives there. After graduating from the school, Yuen Biao's talents did not go unnoticed, and he was given prominent roles in martial arts films, including Bruce Lee's stuntman and body-double, and co-starring alongside Chan and Sammo Hung in *Project A*, *Wheels on Meals*, and *Dragons Forever*. 

Yuen Lo, also known as Jackie Chan, is a household name, and international super-star. He pioneered the comedic martial arts movies in the 1980's to the present day. Chan is also the star in a cartoon series and a pop singer on the side. Chan is known for his hilarity on screen, sunshine personality, and unwaivering work ethic. He worked on his craft even while lying in the hospitals, waiting for one of his many injuries to heal. To date, Chan has suffered injuries to every imaginable part of his body, including his nose, cheeks, teeth, head, eyes, shoulders, hands, arms, chest, back, pelvis, legs, knees, and feet. He has reportedly almost died several times on set while performing his stunts, but says "it only hurts when I'm not laughing," and continues to delight people around the world with his stunt work, comedic angles, and irresistible charm.

Yuen Tai and Yuen Wu are lesser-known Fortunes, but still just as talented and dedicated as their brethren. Yuen Tai was Biggest Brother after Yuen Lung, and

later became a director and choreographer. Yuen Wu was a very accomplished singer and later became a director, stuntman, and choreographer.[8]

Over the years, as the original Fortunes grew up and left the Academy, they were replaced with the understudy Fortunes. Later Fortunes include Yuen Qiu, who acted in the James Bond movie *The Man with the Golden Gun,* and was nominated for Best Actress in the Hong Kong Film Awards for playing a disgruntled landlady who was a secret martial arts master in Kung Fu Hustle[9].

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 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. Yuen Biao 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 Biao was terrified of the consequences of his actions.

The Peking Opera itself 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.

If the children thought punishments for mistakes at the Academy were bad, 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.

[8]Love Asian Film: "Seven Little Fortunes" http://www.loveasianfilm.com/features/sevenlittlefortunes.html

[9]USA Today, People: "Martial Arts Star Yuen Qiu Arrested" 2005. http://www.usatoday.com/life/people/2005-04-14-martial-arts-star_x.htm?POE=LIFISVA

Children who made too many mistakes (or perhaps one large one) were thrown out of the Fortunes, and their spot was given to the understudy who would not be so careless.

Initially, the idea that the Hong Kong cinema super-stars spent their youth practicing opera performances might seem a bit strange. On reflection, however, the Peking Opera skills they gained at the Academy undoubtedly served them well in their careers. 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."[10]

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 performances, 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 sloppy performances. This dedication to excellence in performance and life is what characterizes the generation of Hong Kong martial arts cinema legends that graduated from the Academy.

Peking Opera was exemplified by its subtleties and attention to detail; performers had to master the subtle movements of a general versus a lieutenant versus a soldier. They had to know how to play the demure female with her maiden modesty and the powerful emperor with legions at his beck and call. This training gave the children their chameleon-like ability to transform their face, voice, and entire mindset to suit the character and context they played. One day a child could b a god, and the next he/she was a peasant. But the children would always remain in character and embody the hopes, dreams, and motivations of their role.

When Chan thought he would not be able to perform as a Fortune, a passion awoke inside him and drove him to work even harder to get his chance to showcase. He was determined to fully-embody everything it meant to be a performer in a Peking Opera, to earn his right to shine. "I hated the school, the training, the beatings, and even some of the other students," said Chan, "but I'd worked so

[10]The Illuminated Lantern, "A Short History of Chinese Opera." 2000. http://www.illuminatedlantern.com/cinema/archives/a_short_history_of_chinese_opera.php

hard, and hadn't even had the chance to perform! I wasn't ready to leave. I wasn't going to give up my future on the stage." (Chan, 64)

Additional lessons Mater Yu taught his children were the highly-emphasized, central philosophical values in martial arts- humility and respect for others. When Chan first debuted on stage as a leading role, he performed beautifully, but was taken back stage and beaten on his hand five times by Master Yu. When Chan asked what he had done wrong, Master Yu simply said "Nothing. You were very good. But I want you always to remember this: no matter how well you perform, you must never become too proud. There are others on the stage with you, and you are as dependent on their abilities as you are on your own." (Chan 91)

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

The Japanese occupation in China contributed significantly to the downfall of the Peking Opera in many ways. One way was 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 the Peking Opera because Taiwan's population, although a mere tenth of China's, comprised a large percentage of the avid opera-goers.

The Peking Opera, once world-renowned and internationally-celebrated was rapidly being pushed aside for the cinema and television craze. "The movies, that's the deal," Sammo Hung once told his Academy brothers. "The age of the opera is over. Look at the crowds [the Academy has] been getting recently-barely half the theater, and all old guys, too. What happens when they kick the bucket, eh? Got to go where the excitement is; that's where I'll make my fortune." (Chan, 116). Hung decided at age 16 to leave his world at the Academy to try his hand in the cinema.

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.”

With the children only making HK5 for every HK75 they brought in, it is not surprising many of the Academy students took off right after their contracts expired. HK5 was enough to buy a handful of candy, but for a 16-year old boy that craved the spotlight and glamorous Hollywood lifestyle (or at least a room to call his own), it was simply not enough.

In addition to the lure of the silver-screen, many graduates left because they simply had had enough of the China Drama Academy. They had had enough of the late-night practices, the five-hours of sleep per day, the scanty meals, the abusive elder brothers, and the bamboo stick. The discipline they received at the China Drama Academy, while traditionally accepted and even praised, also chased talented graduates away.

When Chan, Hung and the aforementioned others attended the China Drama Academy, surviving the militant rigidity of the school was considered a badge of honor. Their parents’ generation had survived the Japanese war and occupation in China and surviving hardships and suffering became touted as one of the shining characteristics of the Chinese. “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.” (Chan, 24). This ardor and commandment to pain was one reason the China Drama Academy was both a success and a diminished failure.

Master Yu’s tough-as-nails, school-of-hard-knocks was increasingly seen as barbaric and antiquated. Master Yu emphasized technique, discipline, self-restraint, and perfection in performances. The rest of the world, however, began appreciating ingenuity, individualism, and cooperative team work. The hero-trend in America at the time was the lone maverick who fought the established, corrupt government and authority figures[11].

Furthermore, the students were given little education that was considered “practical” in the business world. Few of the graduates knew how to read and write fluently, for it had never been emphasized for the athletes. Flexibility and vocal training had taken precedence even over the most basic of skills- writing and arithmetic. The China Drama Academy was standing still in the time of tradition, while the world around it kept on turning.

“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,

[11] Lott, M. Ray, *The American Martial Arts Film* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2004)

[12] http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Island/3102/cory-yuen.htm.

Photo Credits:

Seven Little Fortunes (left): I am Jackie Chan

Seven Little Fortunes (right): http://www.loveasianfilm.com/features/sevenlittlefortunes.html

Corey Yuen agreed. “Training is the key,” said Corey, “but most people don’t want to work that hard anymore.”

For Chan’s generation, there was a certain desperation that accompanied their performances. The tiny stage, the heavy make-up; this was the only world they ever knew, and they had to be the very best if they wanted to succeed outside the Academy. “*We* did the training even if we didn’t want to,” said Chan. “Because there was always the stick. Unless we wanted to follow Yuen Ting [Biggest Brother who had fled]- and what a humiliation that was! What a waste of years of study- we didn’t have a choice. There was never a choice.” (Chan, 65).

For the hellish workouts it gave, however, the China Drama Academy was clearly effective. The China Drama Academy did produce “the very finest acrobats, singers, and fighters that the world has ever seen,” said Chan. “The kind of training [they] received just doesn’t exist anymore.” (Chan, 65) Chinese Opera background gave the Hong Kong super-stars their grace and fluidity on screen. They were the next and ready generation of martial artists that were ready for low-budget, high-risk, perfect-performance martial arts movies that inundated the 1970s and 1980s.

Sammo Hung: http://www.loveasianfilm.com/features/sevenlittlefortunes.html

Yuen Wah: www.celluloiddreams.co.uk/dragonsforever.html

Corey Yuen: http://www.hkcinemagic.com

Yuen Biao: http://hkfanatic.com/jackie/movies/df/images/dragons_forever_dvd_quality5.jpg

Yuen Lo: www.hkdvdheaven.co.uk

Yuen Tai:http://www.loveasianfilm.com/features/sevenlittlefortunes.html

Yuen Wu:http://www.loveasianfilm.com/features/sevenlittlefortunes.html

Yuen Qiu: **www.wbur.org/arts/archive/movies/4/**

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Furthermore, the Peking Opera generated a tight-knit community of thearter-lovers and performers. Everyone knew everyone. This provided the children with a solid network of performance-connections when they decided to leave the Academy. This is one of the reasons the graduates constantly performed on set with one another.

"Imagine a family with thirty siblings, ranging in age from toddlers to teenagers," said Chan. "When we were out in the real world, nothing could separate us from one another; it was all for one and one for all, like we were the Thirty Musketeers." (Chan, 73). This is the close-knit community Master Yu had struggled to create. He had successfully created a family under his militaristic rule, and they would help and defend each other outside the school and in the real, professional world.

"But when we were alone at the school," notes Chan, "all bets were off. Under Master's intense pressure to perform and compete, we formed ties that one day could be stronger than steel, and the next a half-forgotten memory."(Chan, 73). This hearkened back to the hierarchy Master Yu had established to maintain order in the Academy.

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

"As harsh as it may have seemed," Chan said, "it was a system that had worked for decades, even centuries, producing the very finest acrobats, singers, and fighters that the world has ever seen. The kind of training we received just doesn't exist anymore. There are still opera schools, but they don't allow you to punish students physically; that kind of discipline is now against the law." (Chan, 65)

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." (Chan, 65)

Chan has declined to say what type of instruction he will give at his martial arts studio in Beijing. Chan's immense respect for his mentor and adopted godfather, Master Yu, will undoubtedly affect his training style, though. 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." (Chan, 57).

His trainings might be a slightly-watered-down version of the militant Master Yu style he grew up with, or it could be a softer, more tolerable training that emphasized one's well-being and health above all else, and gave children the

professional, social, and academic skills they need to survive in a professional setting. Or, it could be a 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 is and 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 mostly an optional occupational route. 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.

Sammo Hung

Yuen Wah

Corey Yuen

Yuen Biao

Yuen Tai

Yuen Wu

Yuen Qiu

Yuen Lo

Seven Little Fortunes

Seven Little Fortunes