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Kung Fu films as method: Viewing the dilemma of Chinese Wuxia culture in the Western context

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Abstract

This essay critically examines the phenomenon of cultural appropriation in Kung Fu films within the Western context, analyzing how the cultural and philosophical core of Chinese Wuxia traditions has been transformed and commodified for global audiences. Beginning with Bruce Lee's international breakthrough in the 1970s, Kung Fu films have served as a bridge between Chinese and Western cultures, yet this cross-cultural translation has often resulted in the reduction of Kung Fu from a complex cultural tradition to a visual spectacle divorced from its spiritual foundations. The study explores three key dimensions: what has been appropriated (the transformation of Wuxia culture into 'oriental spectacle'), why this appropriation occurs (commercial imperatives and cultural-economic mediation), and how it manifests (through identity passing and cultural hybridization). Drawing on examples from *Kung Fu Panda* to *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, the analysis reveals how Western cinema has both exploited and potentially preserved Chinese cultural elements. The essay concludes by advocating for a non-Western-centric perspective that recognizes the agency of Chinese cultural producers and the possibility for more equitable cross-cultural dialogue in global cinema.

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1 Introduction

The first breakthrough of Chinese cinema worldwide should be attributed to Kung Fu films. Beginning with the first worldwide popularity of Bruce Lee's films in the 1970s, while breaking the one-way importation of the Western cinema industry into China, it has also taken the first step to compete with Western blockbusters for the international market and cultural share, reshaping the Western imagination of Chinese society and artistic expressions (Shu 2003). The image of 'Kung fu' has since been a striking symbol of Chinese identity to attach the local Chinese culture to the global audience, offering the public an entry point into the rich traditions of Chinese philosophy and storytelling (Li 2001).

Unlike its independently disseminated image in the international arena, the local manifestations of Kung Fu are demonstrated as an attached product of Chinese Wuxia texts. As the source of the cultural and spiritual core of Kung fu, Wuxia, or Chinese martial arts, is a literary and cinematic tradition centred on the expression of chivalry, honour and collective morality rooted in Chinese traditional philosophy and folklore. Thus, Kung fu, or *Wushu* as its local name, is one of the concrete presentations of Wuxia culture embedded with Chinese social-cultural values such as positive personal growth, justice and national loyalty (Hill 2018). However, with the expansion of international influence, the 'Westernized version' of Kung Fu culture in the global cinema market has gradually dissolved its core of Wuxia culture and switched into an 'oriental spectacle' (Chen 2021). This phenomenon involves cultural appropriation, which means the unauthorised use of Kung Fu culture for consumption and profit without a complete understanding of its Wuxia cultural core (Baker 2018; W. C. Wang 2008). Therefore, while recognising the positive role of Kung Fu films in the translation of Chinese culture, the problem of cultural appropriation in Kung Fu films and the dilemma of disseminating Wuxia culture in the Western context need to be further examined. This essay will critically review the phenomenon of cultural appropriation in Kung Fu films in the Western context and attempt to analyse the reasons and approaches behind this appropriation. Through this analysis, this essay also aims to provide an insight into the broader implications of using Kung Fu as a medium for cross-cultural dialogue and its role in the evolving narrative of Chinese cultural identity.

2 What's been appropriated: the core of Kung Fu

From Chinese Wushu to the hybridised version of Kung Fu for the Western film market, appropriation in Kung Fu cinema emerges and deepens with the spreading and evaluating process of Kung Fu culture, starting from drawing on the aesthetic and physical aspects of martial elements and further extending to misunderstand or strip away the philosophical and narrative core of Chinese Wuxia culture (Chang 2007). One of the most prominent appropriations in Kung Fu films is the transformation of Kung Fu into a visual spectacle, where both the Chinese and Western film industries should be blamed. As exporters, the Hong Kong film industry produced the earliest batch of internationally orientated Kung Fu films represented by Bruce Lee's films (Li 2001), which have actively borrowed Western cinema's narrative conventions and focused on adding visually striking shots, such as close-ups of martial arts actions and the actor's body (Wong and Rinehart 2013). It shifts the focus of the Kung Fu film's narrative away from the cultural dimension into the visual dimension, drawing the Western public attention to the martial arts body movements rather than the cultural connotation. In addition, when absorbed into Western cinema, Kung Fu narratives have not escaped the conventions of Western film patterns with the emphasis on the intricate combat choreography and physicality of martial arts, where the philosophical core and cultural significance of Kung Fu still face the neglect (W. C. Wang 2008). A typical example is *Kung Fu Panda*, whose focus is humour

and action sequences, while the underlying values of personal growth and discipline, as rooted in Chinese Wuxia culture, are presented in a diluted form (C. Wang 2017). The consequence of this overemphasis on Kung Fu's artistic and physical elements is that expressions of Kung Fu about martial arts action are initially shaped and appropriated as an independent 'visual spectacle' from its initial introduction to Western society.

In addition, the differences in social ideologies between China and the West may lead to barriers to cross-cultural translation (Himood 2009), and thus, the dissemination of the spiritual core of Kung Fu culture about traditional Chinese Wuxia culture and philosophy would also encounter the obstacles. With the ideological barrier, the Western narrative tends to ignore those cultural and philosophical elements rather than seeking for a complete understanding when using or discussing Kung Fu culture (Chen 2021). As a result, the core of Kung Fu has not been negatively interrupted and affected by Western appropriation. However, this neglect is also the direct cause for simplifying Kung Fu as a cultural symbol representing an 'exotic' and 'mystical' East. For instance, incomplete knowledge of Kung Fu's cultural base may give rise to a consensus among West films to frequently depict Kung Fu masters as wise and disciplined figures, reinforcing stereotypes that essentialize Chinese identity (Cao 2016). While such portrayals can foster admiration, they also confine Chinese culture to a narrow set of characteristics, overlooking the diversity and complexity of Chinese Wuxia traditions. This westernised image of Kung Fu has been removed from its local context and reinvented in the Western imagination as a stereotypical 'oriental spectacle', detached from its original cultural meaning under the appropriation process.

3 Why appropriated: a commercial success

The appropriation of Kung Fu can be attributed to its market and cultural adaptation as a cultural product, where Kung Fu elements share the potential to be reshaped to align with commercial and cultural imperatives to fit in the globalization process. This process can be seen as a cultural-economic mediation process, where cultural elements are commodified and adapted to meet the demands of global audiences (Tse, Shin, and Tsang 2020). During this reconciliation, the 'fashionability' of Kung Fu in the worldwide context has gradually been established through a combination of cultural values and economic dynamics (Tse, Shin, and Tsang 2020), while this pursuit of commercial popularity is still accompanied by the dissolution of the cultural and philosophical core of Kung Fu films under cultural appropriation.

As briefly mentioned in the previous analysis, with its attractive visuals and universal themes such as resilience and self-discipline, Kung Fu can offer an easily translatable framework that aligns with Western cinematic preferences. Therefore, compared with the background Wuxia philosophy and traditions, Kung Fu is better suited to be directly absorbed into Western market and capture audience attention while transcending linguistic and cultural barriers with the visual effects from martial arts. However, simplifying its cultural roots may result in a product prioritizing accessibility over authenticity. Further, when participating in the Western cinema market, Kung Fu with its commercial appeal would be appropriated during cultural hybridisation. While this blending can present a dynamic interaction and recreation between Kung Fu culture and Western narratives, during entering the Western system, Kung Fu elements tend to undergo the process of 'Western validation', specifically resulting in a reconfiguration of its narrative themes, shifting the focus from collective values and moral dilemmas found in Wuxia traditions to the Western or universal norm (Tse, Shin, and Tsang 2020; Ryoo 2009).

A typical example to further describe the cultural appropriation during hybridisation is *Kung Fu Panda* (Figure 1). It presents as a blend of humour and Kung Fu actions that resonates with global viewers, reflecting a series of universal values such as braveness, valuable friendships and family links. The cultural connotations presented by these values comes from Western

traditional values and narrative habits which usually focus on individual heroism, which are apart from the original cultural roots of Kung Fu. This commodification reshapes Kung Fu into a universally consumable spectacle, detaching it from its deeper cultural and philosophical foundations.



Figure 1: Kung Fu Panda, 2019

3.1 How appropriated: the ambiguous identity

The appropriating approach of Kung Fu culture in Western cinema is mainly reflected in adaptation and transplantation. During this process, the elements of Kung Fu are reshaped to fit commercial and narrative needs, making it more accessible to a global audience. As a result, the identity of Kung Fu has generally become ambiguous when crossing cultural boundaries, providing a linkage for the fusion and interaction between Chinese cultural genes and Western cultural implantation.

A central aspect of this appropriation is 'identity passing', which refers to adapting cultural and identity markers to align with another identity in different cultural contexts (Oh 2020). By imitating or recreating the classic sequences, martial arts actions and characters of Kung Fu masters from Chinese Wuxia films, Western cinema has created a 'Kung Fu identity' in its cultural context. However, this Westernised identity stops at imitating these superficial performance elements of Kung Fu; the deeper connotations of Kung Fu in the context of Wuxia culture may lose among Western audiences. Thus, this identity passing reflects a power relationship raised from the cultural hybridisation of Chinese and Western culture at the intersection of Kung Fu, while in shaping new identities, Western cultures have unconsciously appropriated the Kung Fu elements by ignoring the cultural roots behind them. Kung Fu, here as an intersection, can further be interpreted as a 'third space' from Homi Bhabha, offering a dynamic space for interaction and reinvention of various cultures, which may also enable the appearance of the inequality of cultural power (Bhandari 2022). This power inequality first occurred at the beginning of the internationalisation of Chinese Kung Fu cinema, with Bruce Lee's films, such as *The Way of the Dragon*, being the most typical.



Figure 2: The Way of the Dragon

In the film *The Way of the Dragon*, Bruce Lee's martial arts moves are interpreted as dramatic 'performative violence' and his character was interpreted as an 'exotic hero' instead of the original image of a patriotic young man (Bowman 2011). This example proves that Western culture, as a strong culture, dominates the narrative in the process of interaction and re-creation in the 'third space', symbolising Kung Fu culture, a weak culture, as an element of 'entertainment' or 'performance'. Thus, cultural appropriation and exploitation continue to exist in this power imbalance during the identity reconstruction process of Kung Fu and Wuxia culture.

3.2 Beyond the west: pursuit of balance

Existing Western theories, such as cultural appropriation and hybridization utilized in this paper, often focus on power imbalance and cultural exploitation, emphasising the passivity of non-Western cultures in globalisation process. Although these theories can reveal the problems in the dissemination of Kung Fu films, the limitation of the over-reliance on the Western-dominated narrative logic remains in the use of these theories, neglecting the non-Western cultural agency and the complex binary interactions in cross-cultural cooperation rather than simply 'appropriating' and 'being appropriated'. Therefore, when stepping out of the Western theoretical framework to analyse the communication dilemma of Kung Fu films and Wuxia culture, a new perspective will help to re-examine the role of Kung Fu films in the global cross-cultural dialogue.

An example can be picked up to delve into this non-Western perspective. The China-US coproduced Wuxia film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* used to be a hit with Western audiences (Figure 3). Belonging to the Wuxia genre, it also contains many martial arts scenes. However, despite being a film for the global market like *The Way of the Dragon* or *Kung Fu Panda*, this film did not choose Kung Fu as its selling point. It retained more Wuxia elements in its plot, such as the emphasis on 'chivalry' and 'inner cultivation' (Wang and Yeh 2005). The worldwide popularity of this film can show that commercialisation does not necessarily mean sacrificing local cultural expression, while the respect for and utilisation of cultural agency can be a tool for enhancing cultural visibility during the intercultural communication. By actively preserving cultural elements and creating a narrative in the cross-cultural cooperation process with the United States, the film producers broke away from the Western-centric standpoint of overemphasising cultural exploitation on the weak culture in cultural appropriation theory.

Through retaining the agency of the Wuxia narrative, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* has refused the continuation of 'spectacle consumption' and formed a relatively equal 'cultural negotiation' when aiming at worldwide cultural translation and commercial success. Furthermore, the communication model of this film may also figure out the possibility that Kung Fu films can transcend existing Western theoretical frameworks, escape from the passive label of 'appropriation', and become active players in global cross-cultural dialogue.



Figure 3: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, 2001

4 Conclusion

In summary, this article mainly criticised the neglect of the cultural essence of Kung Fu films and the appropriation of Kung Fu culture in the Western context. The simplification and reshaping of the identity of Kung Fu culture in Western societies are also discussed in terms of the objects, reasons and appropriation modes. Finally, this paper explores the equal way for disseminating

Kung Fu films and Chinese Wuxia culture in cross-cultural exchanges from non-Western-centric perspectives. Cultural appropriation and oppression still exist in Chinese Wuxia culture and Kung Fu, and further research is needed on ways to balance commercialisation and artistic agency.

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