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**A ‘narrow world, strewn with prohibitions’: Chang Cheh’s  
*The Assassin* and the 1967 Hong Kong riots**

Luke White

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## **Introduction**

Chang Cheh was a crucial figure in the development of Hong Kong's martial arts cinema, and *Da cike/The Assassin* (1967b), a pivotal film in his early career, is one of his most forceful authorial statements. A lavish production, it combined a visual richness with a formal austerity rare within the martial arts genre, achieving an epic quality that Chang's films often only strive for. Already within it, and handled with great adeptness, are Chang's signature visions of tragic, doomed heroism, tough masculinity and the poetics and erotics of violence (Assayas 1984). It was also prominent amongst Chang's films as one of those that most clearly engaged with its own historical moment – Stephen Teo (2009: 100) has termed it Chang's 'most consciously political' film. It was made and released during Hong Kong's Leftist Riots of 1967, a 'watershed' event within both the sociopolitical upheavals of the 1960s and the colony's modern history (Cheung 2009), and this article argues for the significance of these events in reading *The Assassin*, for their importance for the evolution of Chang's *oeuvre*, and also, by extension, Hong Kong's martial arts cinema, within which he was such a key pioneer. *The Assassin* was a prominent early example of the 'New *Wuxia*' genre, which departed from older examples of the *wuxia* (swordplay) film in the extent of its graphic, blood-drenched violence and so paved the way for the arrival of 'kungfu' in the 1970s. The conjunction between the eruption of real-world, political bloodshed and Chang's cinematic violence will here be understood in postcolonial terms, drawing on Frantz Fanon's accounts of the psychological effects of colonial rule.

## **Chang Cheh, cinematic violence and the development of Hong Kong's martial arts cinema**

I shall start, however, by placing *The Assassin* within the film-historical context of changing Hong Kong action genres. The immediate context for Chang's film is the epochally ambitious announcement, by Hong Kong's dominant studio, Shaw Brothers, in a 1965 issue of their promotional magazine *Southern Screen*, of a 'New *Wuxia* Century' (Anon. 1965: 30). This marked the start of the concerted production and promotion of martial arts films that Shaw Brothers ambitiously branded as a 'New Action Era'. Critics have often used these terms ('New Action'/'New Wuxia') or close variants to name the explosion of swordplay films subsequently produced by both Shaw and their competitors throughout the late 1960s and the early 1970s, and to mark out their difference from older variants of the genre. Shaw's announcement of its reinvestment in the *wuxia* movie was significant in that the films dominating the Hong Kong box office during the early 1960s – and around which Shaw had consequently oriented production – were primarily romantic and musical, with lavish operas in the popular, folk-song-inflected Huangmei style proving especially successful across their East and South East Asian market. By his own account, Chang was instrumental in persuading Shaw's executives to turn instead to action, arguing for this as a modernization of Chinese cinema, placing it in-line with the globally successful formulae of Japanese *Chanbara* and Hollywood Westerns (Chang 2004: 82–83). As we shall see, for Chang this modernization also meant a 'masculinization' of Hong Kong cinema.

Shaw's renewed interest in *wuxia* involved a transformation of the genre, and of representations of violence within it. *Wuxia* already had a tradition stretching back

into Shanghai's silent-cinema era, and roots before this in long-standing literary and operatic traditions (Teo 2009: 17–33). However, this was a very different martial arts cinema to the kungfu films that became successful globally in the 1970s, at the other end of Shaw's Action Era project. The primarily black-and-white *wuxia* of the early 1960s, like their forebears, tended to be heavily mixed with elements of the supernatural *shenguai* ('spirits and monsters') genre, were largely posited around the fantastical powers of its martial-artist protagonists, and were liberal in their use of special effects to represent these (Teo 2009: 11).

Typical of the early 1960s *wuxia* is the five-part serial *Rulai shen zhang/Buddha's Palm* (Lin Yun, 1964–1965), which Teo (2009: 88) has named 'the epitomic work demonstrating the characteristics of the genre'. In this, reverse-motion effects allow heroes to leap onto tall buildings. Wires hoist them into flight and allow weapons or other objects to be raised magically from the ground. Animated drawing onto the negatives visualizes beams of *qi* energy that combatants emit from their palms and 'flying swords' that they send through the air towards each other, or that clash aerially above their heads. Much of the diegetic martial artistry in these films is in fact treated through such effects, with the battling actors taking up static postures facing each other, as a swirl of animated effects around and between them depicts the progress of the fight (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** Animated effects in *Buddha's Palm* (Part 3), 1964.

This is not to say that physical martial performance was left out altogether. It remained a vital element connecting the films to the culture of martial arts that remained a key referent. However, the conventions of their depiction were borrowed

primarily from Beijing opera, with sequences choreographed by the ‘Dragon Tiger Martial Masters’ who trained operatic performers (Teo 2009: 91). The viewing experience would have been familiar to audiences from this popular theatrical form: the set was presented to the viewer in a static wide shot, very much as a stage on which performers would execute extended sequences of stylized acrobatic movements (Gravestock 2006: 106). However, as New Action Era director Hsu Tseng-hung described it, spectators ‘never see blood, even in a swordfight, and people rarely get killed, even after an interminable combat’ (Lau 1981: 204). With little obvious physical contact, the overall effect tended to be acrobatic elegance rather than corporeal confrontation (Figure 2).

**Figure 2:** Acrobatic performance in *Buddha’s Palm* (Part 3).

This was all to change in the ‘New *Wuxia* Century’ the Shaw studios set out to inaugurate. In its October 1965 issue *Southern Screen* proclaimed: ‘The fake, fantastical and theatrical fighting and the so-called special effects of the past will be replaced by realistic action and fighting that immediately decides life and death’ (cited in Gravestock 2006: 106). It fell to directors such as King Hu, Lo Wei and Chang Cheh to fulfil this promise. Their films soon proved enormous financial successes.

As Peter Gravestock (2006: 106) has pointed out, however, *Southern Screen’s* claim to realism is oxymoronic in a genre still posited around fantastical martial arts abilities. We would thus do well to ask what the notion of ‘reality’ here actually means. One thing it certainly signalled was the heightened and increasingly central spectacle of violence. Technically, this new ‘realism’ entailed a shift to the

presentation of fight sequences through constructive editing rather than performance. Rapid cuts and close-ups of details of action allowed the representation of newly brutal actions through implied cause and effect (Gravestock 2006: 108). Filmed in colour, the hyperreal red of blood became a 'signature' motif, soaking a hero's clothing or spurting out in jets from concealed blood sacks (Assayas 1984: 51). Fight scenes included disembowelings, amputations and beheadings. Rapid zooms, which threw the spectator into the heart of the action became ubiquitous in the work of Chang and his contemporaries. Chang hired as his fight choreographer not an opera expert but martial arts teacher Lau Kar-leung, who set out to make the impact and force of strikes more convincing – an effect heightened by sound effects of clashing swords and thudding flesh. Sek Kei has thus written of Chang's and Lau's influence being the 'physicalisation of violence' (2004: 15).

The 'reality' at stake here, then, is the viscerality of the body. Viscera were often a literal concern in Chang's films, where heroes often fight on even after disembowelment – a motif used to dramatic effect in *The Assassin*. In the hands of Chang and his colleagues, the *wuxia* became a 'body genre' in the sense defined by Linda Williams (1991), with viewing pleasures sunk increasingly into the bodies of stars and audiences alike. With the body so central, Chang promoted a string of new male stars whose on-screen presence was defined by their physique and athleticism – first champion swimmer Wang Yu, and then stuntmen and martial artists such as Ti Lung and Chen Kuan-tai. Recognizing this focus on the body, Chang's early enthusiasts amongst Western film critics praised the poetic, sado-masochistic eroticism of his films (Assayas 1984: 51).

Chang's, then, was a deliberate project of the 'masculinization' of Chinese cinema. He understood the Hong Kong industry as out of step with global trends in its

strong emphasis on female stars, and on themes of romance rather than action (Sek 2004: 12). His resultant programme of *yanggang* ('hard masculinity') sought instead to redefine Chinese masculinities, eschewing the *wen* (scholarly) roles often prominent in the early 1960s for more *wu* (martial) ones (Teo 2009: 94–95). Chang's explicit interest in positioning his film in relation to Hollywood models such as the Western makes his work comprehensible as imitating globalized American codes of masculinity, within which the scholarly ideal appears 'effeminate' in a way that it did not in traditional Chinese culture (Louie 2009: 7–11). This can be interpreted within longer histories of the modern revision of Chinese masculinities (and of the image of the martial arts within this process) in the face of 'feminizing' orientalist stereotypes and the increasing domination of Western political and cultural power, and as paving the way for the success of the reasserted *wu* masculinity of Bruce Lee (Louie 2009: 148–49). Chang's association of on-screen violence with the male body in particular, however, was far from universal in the New *Wuxia* genre. Teo (2010) has noted, for example, that the two other most prolific and financially successful martial arts directors at Shaw alongside Chang during this period, King Hu and Lo Wei, both repeatedly placed women warriors at the centre of their films, and that the popular affirmation of these films perplexed studio executives wed to Chang's *yanggang* ideology. However, Chang's emphasis on the male body – often on display in a way that the female body could not be within the norms of propriety of the time – allowed him to develop *wuxia* as a body genre to a degree that directors favouring female stars could not, and it was ultimately this recipe that made Hong Kong martial arts cinema successful in the West with the kungfu craze of the 1970s.

This, then, is the film-historical context of *The Assassin. Du bi dao/The One-Armed Swordsman* (1967a) marked Chang's breakthrough, becoming the first million-

dollar grossing film at the Hong Kong box office. Technically innovative within the Hong Kong industry, its handheld camerawork added a new visual mobility and dynamism (Chang 2004: 83–84). Chang followed this success immediately with *The Assassin*, in which he sought to ‘elevate the artistic values’ of his work, drawing on classic literature and – by his own account (2004: 85) – deliberately imitating the slow-paced, static camerawork of Fei Mu’s epic work of high cinematic art, *Kong Fuzi/Confucius* (1940). Chang worried the film was ‘pretentious’ and would not attract audiences, but it rivalled *One-Armed Swordsman* at the box office, cementing his reputation as the ‘million-dollar director’ (Chang 2004: 86).

Despite *The Assassin*’s success on the domestic market, however, it remained marginal within the reception of Chang’s early *oeuvre* in the Europe and America. This reception only occurred after the kungfu craze of 1972, when a market emerged for a back catalogue of Hong Kong martial arts films, especially those of directors such as Chang who had gone on to direct kungfu hits. However, the initial reputation of Chang’s early period rested primarily on other films, with no mention of *The Assassin* in reviews of the time, suggesting that it may not even have had a cinematic release in the West. (Though reviews of a number of Chang’s films are listed in the FIAF database, *The Assassin* is not amongst these. It is also passed over in Assayas’s [1984] article on Chang.) Ironically, this lack of attention may be due in part to the film’s artistic ambition, which may have sat uncomfortably in a market that valued Hong Kong action as cheap, undemanding entertainment. However, another aspect lost in the process of translation across time and space would have been the legibility of the film’s relevance to its political context, which may well have been a factor in its original success in Hong Kong. This would be congruent with a reading that the ‘return of the Real’ in swordplays of this era might involve not only the reality of the

body but also the Real of the political and social violence at this moment emerging on the streets of Hong Kong in the form of rioting and terrorist acts. It is, then, to an outline of this context that I will now turn. It will be examined with regard to the settlement's colonial history – even though, as Abbas (1997: 1–2) has noted, the notion of ‘colonialism’ here throws up as many questions as answers.

### **Colonial Hong Kong: A background to the 1967 Leftist Riots**

If the notion of colonialism is central, then, to understanding Hong Kong, it nonetheless sits in complex ways with the city's histories. China did not suffer the same wholesale occupation as the African, American and Asian territories with which the term is usually associated. Although heavily defeated in the nineteenth-century Opium Wars, China was too large a power to be easily occupied *tout court*, and its domination and exploitation was imposed with a series of ‘unequal treaties’ that forced her to pay heavy war reparations, granted Western powers special trading rights and conceded territories – such as Hong Kong – as colonial bases (Hsü 1990: 168–220).

As Abbas (1997: 5) has noted, Hong Kong is furthermore an unusual colony in that there was no significant settlement before the colonizer's arrival. The city's exponential growth through the twentieth century was fuelled by people looking to escape chaos or persecution in Mainland China or seeking economic advantage within the colonial-capitalist entrepot, and who were thus subjected to British rule by choice rather than necessity of invasion. The resultant relation to the colonizer might seem infertile for anti-colonial politics. For many who had fled the People's Republic of China (PRC), the choice was not between colonialism and independence, but between

London and Beijing. For Abbas, dependency on the colonizer means politics itself often disappears in Hong Kong culture.

Whatever its peculiarities, however, Hong Kong in 1967 can be understood as a decidedly colonial place at a moment of tumultuous global decolonization. As the *Hong Kong Standard* put it in 1964, 'The Government believes that not only is there no need to change, but that change can be indefinitely avoided, that Hong Kong can remain a nineteenth-century type of colony for ever' (cited in Fu 2000: 73–74). An influx of immigrants throughout the 1950s and 1960s had fuelled the colony's industrial take-off with cheap labour, but marked it as a place of stark socio-economic division, with 45 per cent of families officially below the poverty line in 1961 (Fu 2000: 73; Hung 2010: 57). The 300,000 people living in Hong Kong's slums (Glaessner 1974: 15) were provided little in the way of welfare, education or a justice system, and no democratic rights whatsoever. Corruption was rife, with only the business elite having the ear of a systematically racist white colonial administration (Fu 2000: 74).

By 1967, however, the Cultural Revolution was at its height in neighbouring China. The previous year pro-communist unrest in nearby Macao had forced the Portuguese to bring the radical Left into coalition (Cheung 2009: 16–17). The Vietcong, waging an already long-standing campaign against colonial foes, provided further role models for Asian resistance to Western domination, and discontent in Hong Kong could articulate itself within the terms of a wider global decolonization movement that offered grounds for optimism (Fanon 2001: 55). Such political turbulence, in the wake or process of decolonization, was also echoed throughout the South East Asian market, which was always so important for Shaw as a regional rather than a strictly local cinema (Fu 2008: 2–5, 12–14).

At this moment, the Red Guards' anti-Confucian campaign against the 'Four Olds' – Old Customs, Habits, Ideas and Culture – offered one model of rebellion against traditional, paternalist authority, especially as co-opted for purposes of colonial management and economic exploitation in Hong Kong. However, this version of youthful, modernizing, anti-hierarchical rebellion also had a Western competitor in the 1960s counter-culture which was celebrated, for example, in Hong Kong's 'youth film' craze of 1966–1969 (Fu 2000: 81–87). Both the Red Guards and youth counter-cultures also offered powerful images of the women's empowerment, and Hong Kong cinema of the period took these images up in various ways. As is made clear in Fu's (2000: 82–85) account, the youth films' simultaneous enthusiasm and panic about teenage rebellion was primarily focused on that of young women rather than men. In this light, one of the most reactionary features of Chang's cinema is the extent to which violence and rebellion are recuperated or re-imagined as purely 'masculine' phenomena. Chang's films, however, can be contrasted not only with the physically exuberant female song and dance routines of musicals such as *Xiang jiang hua yue yel/Hong Kong Nocturne* (Inoue, 1967), but also to the prominence of the figure of the *nüxia* (woman warrior) in many of the top-grossing swordplays of the time (Teo 2010: 145).

In any case, the two ideologically opposed versions of rebellion from the Mainland and the West cross-fertilized (with Maoism, e.g., influencing the development of 1960s counter-cultural revolt in Europe) and the result was a heady brew of desires for freedom, enfranchisement, justice and economic equality. One of Chang's influential supporters, the critic Law Kar (2001: 31–38) describes his own formation as a writer within just this milieu, and remembers experiencing the passion

for popular culture as ‘inseparable’ from growing political consciousness and anti-colonial rebelliousness.

It is in this context that political violence broke out. In April 1966 a one-man protest over a fare rise on the ferry between Kowloon and Hong Kong Island escalated into riots in which one person was killed and 1465 arrested (Cheung 2009: 9–11). The spring of 1967 saw a spate of strikes over labour conditions in factories. These broke out into mass demonstrations, in part motivated by sympathy for the workers, in part by anti-colonial sentiment and in part by the fervour of the Cultural Revolution, with Communist-backed unions hoping to use the events to catalyse full-scale popular revolution and turn Hong Kong over to PRC rule. The initial disturbances met with a brutal government crackdown, sparking even more serious and prolonged rioting. As time went on protest degenerated into desperate terrorist acts perpetrated by an increasingly isolated extremist hardcore that had lost popular backing. The end of the disturbances did not arrive until December, by which time 4979 had been arrested and 51 were dead (twelve of whom were police, soldiers or firefighters, and a further twelve of whom were killed in bombings, with the vast majority of the remaining deaths being demonstrators and radicals) (Cheung 2009: 123).

It is in this context of mounting social conflict that Hong Kong’s martial arts genres began the sequence of transformations that ended with the kungfu film. It is in the particular shadow of the disturbances of 1966 and 1967 that Chang’s genre-defining works *The One-Armed Swordsman* and *The Assassin* were made and released.

## Chang's *Assassin* and the Leftist Riots

Chang has been explicit in linking his work to these events:

The 60s and 70s were the most energetic periods of Hong Kong – the period when young people exerted themselves. The age of love tales was the past. The masses were striving ahead in a rebellious mood and the colonial administration was receiving a shock to the system [...] Martial arts pictures represented the spirit of the times. After I made *The One-Armed Swordsman* (1967), riots broke out in Kowloon. Then, during the riots, I made *The Assassin* (1967). In a *Ming Pao Monthly* article [...] titled 'Hong Kong's Anti-Establishment Movies and the Mass Movement', Law Kar wrote: 'Zhang Che's movie characters are young swordsmen, assassins, martyrs and death-defying fanatics. His heroes are tragic men who defy authority and the establishment'. (1999: 21–22)

The extent to which the discontent of 1967 provided core material for these works is made clear through consideration of the resonance Chang engineers between the narrative of *The Assassin* and current events.

Echoing the turbulence of the 1960s, *The Assassin* is set in the Warring States period, a time of interstate warfare that preceded China's unification in 221 BC. The film's protagonist is a young peasant, Nie Zheng (played by Wang Yu), who, frustrated with his empty life and dreaming of heroism, studies swordsmanship, becoming his master's most talented pupil. An aristocratic student expelled by the swordmaster from his school decides to get revenge by reporting them as

‘revolutionaries’ and the school is wiped out in a government raid organized by the despotic and corrupt Prime Minister. Though Nie’s teacher and most of his fellow students are killed, Nie himself escapes and, for a while, puts up with an empty existence as a butcher to support his elderly mother and unmarried sister, allowing filial piety to outweigh his ambitions. After the death of the former and the marriage of the latter, however, Nie places himself in the service of a patriotic nobleman, Yen, who has been persecuted for his resistance to the Prime Minister’s scheme to sell his nation into servitude and oppression at the hands of a neighbouring state. Yen wishes Nie to train an army for him, but Nie, realizing such an attempt is futile since the army will be destroyed before it can be made ready, resolves instead on a one-man suicide mission of assassination. It is only through such a sacrifice that he can grasp a heroic (if tragic) destiny in the face of his peasant origins.

Given what Chang has said about his motivations for making the film, the on-screen events with which the film opens – political repression, dawn raids and accusations of revolutionary intent – must have been meant to carry clear resonances of the current situation. Indeed, though this is a remote past, its precise location in time and place – underlined by the very first shot, as the opening titles appear, in which the camera pans along a scroll of historical writing – marks a break from the ahistorical, escapist realm that typified *wuxia* films (both Old and New School) to this point. The return of the ‘real’ in Chang’s developing *oeuvre* also involved a return to history (however loose its depiction) in martial arts cinema, which would edge closer to the present in the kungfu genre of the 1970s. The school of swordsmanship that Nie attends is lent an additional allegorical position within Hong Kong politics by its embrace of the new and the foreign, in the form of Tartar clothes and steel blades. It is this – as Nie’s swordmaster accurately predicts in the third scene of the film – that

makes it so vulnerable to accusations of radicalism. Such an association with new technologies and practices evokes the modernizing, anti-Confucian leanings of both Red Guards and Westernizing counter-cultural youths.

Furthermore, it is hard not to read Chang's decision to make the film's hero an assassin on a suicide mission – with the self-avowed aim of rescuing the poor of his country from suffering and foreign oppression – as a reference to the unrest. This was, after all, a time when pamphlets calling for the assassination of key figures in the Hong Kong establishment were circulating on the streets. In August 1967, some months before the film's release, a leftist death squad of real-life assassins, disguised as road maintenance workers, shot to death the right-wing radio commentator Lam Bun as he drove to work. In his memoirs, citing the 'fervour, violence and rebelliousness' of the moment as an inspiration for the film, Chang (2004: 99) recounts the experience of facing the 'threat of home-made bombs' on his own commute.

The motif of class itself must have been a potent one during the Cultural Revolution, and Chang makes much of the contrast between the poverty and integrity of his protagonist and the decadence and corruption of the ruling elite. Nie – only able to escape the meaninglessness of his destiny as a peasant through political violence and the embrace of death – is just one of a series of doomed, tragic class outsiders who make up the heroes in Chang's movies of the late 1960s, such as *The One-Armed Swordsman*, and *Bao biao/Have Sword Will Travel* (1969). Such heroes pave the way for the proletarian and peasant protagonists typical of the kungfu films of the 1970s. Even the problematic gender politics of Chang's films, noted above, have a class dimension too: as Louie (2009: 78–97) has noted, during the late twentieth century the

martial (*wu*) has been strongly associated with working-class masculinities, in contradistinction to 'elite' ideals of the scholarly (*wen*).

Teo has thus proclaimed *The Assassin* 'the most consciously political of Zhang's films', marking out for comment its 'anti-establishment, anti-authoritarian anarchism' (2009: 100). However, *The Assassin* is not a univocally 'radical' film, either on the level of authorial intent or narrative content. What David Bordwell (2011: 25) terms the 'strategically ambiguous' nature of popular cinema, which might scuttle any attempt to read it as containing coherent political statements, is exacerbated in the context of a colony such as Cold-War era Hong Kong where politics was both subject to official censorship and became deeply taboo. Any unambiguous political stance would have been further complicated by the tangled and contradictory politics of Shaw's South East Asian markets.

Chang's own personal politics, furthermore, seem particularly slippery and ambivalent. In his memoirs, he claims to have been influenced by a broadly leftist intellectual climate during his education and also that when working for the Cultural Movement Committee in the mainland in the 1940s he was on good terms with leftist artists and intellectuals rather than Guomindang (GMD) ideologues. Yet in 1949, faced with the choice between the Communists and the GMD, Chang went to Taiwan, even becoming an associate of Chiang Kai-shek's son Chiang Ching-kuo (Chang 2004: 39–46). As Fu (2008: 12–13) notes, the management of the Shaw Brothers studio, for whom Chang made *The Assassin*, was also more associated with the nationalist right than any left-wing sympathies. With these links it is hard to situate his work unequivocally as sympathetic with the Maoists who spearheaded the revolts of 1967.

The film, in any case, cannot be read clearly as an allegory. Like most popular texts, any coherent position ultimately dissolves into opaque mists of ideological contradiction. As much as one might read in it a radically anti-authoritarian, anti-colonial sentiment that privileges social justice, one might also read its narrative of a small state threatened by incorporation into the larger pan-Chinese Empire of a totalitarian neighbour in a decidedly rightist manner, as paralleling Hong Kong's relation to the PRC. The point of the readings I have been proposing, then, is not to reduce the film to either a 'left' or 'right' position. Following the insights of Cultural Studies – which chime closely with Bordwell's (2011: 24–25) observations about the deliberate ambiguity of blockbuster cinema – I take popular culture as a compromise formation between the agendas of its makers and the pleasures of its consumers, constituted at its deepest levels by contradiction (Storey 2001: 10–12). The cinema of Hong Kong seems a case in point, with a director such as Chang, as quoted above, emphasizing the extent to which he sought simply to follow the 'spirit of the times', giving his audience a product that spoke the language of their desires. Instead of offering a reading of narrative content and authorial intent, I shall therefore situate my analysis on the level of *fantasy*, in its psychoanalytical sense (Segal 2000). It is here that I propose the unstable politics of Chang's film – and of the wider Hong Kong martial arts genres of the 1960s and 1970s – resides. The preceding description of the film is thus primarily useful to draw out themes that permeate its texture, and to start to mark within these the ambivalent nature of the fantasies of violence at its heart. It is these shifts in fantasy that motivate Hong Kong cinema's developing fascination with the violent body, discussed above. My position is that these fantasies are bound to colonial experience, and so it is to Frantz Fanon's work on the nature of violence under colonial rule that I shall now turn.

## **Fanon, colonialism and violence**

Informed by his experiences as a psychiatrist in Algeria, Fanon's work charted the effects of the systemic everyday violence of colonialism on the psyche of the colonized. Increasingly radicalized by his observations, Fanon became involved in the late 1950s with the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) and its armed struggle against French rule. His work increasingly served as an apologia for the use of violence by the colonized, which he controversially understood as necessary in the expulsion of the colonizers and for the creation of liberated, postcolonial societies that could shrug off the legacy of centuries of domination. Fanon's last book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, published in 1961, became a rallying point for anti-colonial revolt across the world. Though written in the context of a different continent, Fanon's description of the effects of colonial violence on the imagination of its subjects is paralleled in striking ways by the Hong Kong martial arts cinema that, in films such as *The Assassin*, emerged at the end of that decade, and so provides a useful interpretive framework. The case of Hong Kong – as we have seen, in many ways an unusual colony – also offers a critical perspective on the usefulness of Fanon's analyses outside the North African context.

For Fanon, the colonial situation is saturated in advance with the violence through which the colonizer establishes and maintains the racialized spatial and social divisions on which his privileged position depends. Fanon argues that in the colonial situation violence presents itself nakedly in a way it does not in 'developed' countries, which are policed primarily through ideology rather than repression. The colonial policeman, bureaucrat or soldier 'does not lighten the oppression, nor seek to hide the

domination [...] He is the bringer of violence into the home and into the mind of the native' (Fanon 2001: 29). Interiorized by the colonial subject, this violence results in the psychological damage – the sense of inferiority, passivity, resentment and superstition – Fanon found himself repeatedly encountering as a psychiatrist.

With violence thus interiorized, the mental world of the colonial subject is strewn with violent bodily desires. Its fantasies start to match – to a striking degree – the scenes depicted in New Action Era swordplay and kungfu films:

The native [...] is ready for violence at all times. From birth it is clear to him that this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called in question by absolute violence. [...] This is why the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and aggression. I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, climbing; I dream that I burst out laughing, that I span a river in one stride, or that I am followed by a flood of motor-cars which never catch up with me. (Fanon 2001: 29, 40)

Posited around just such corporeal desires, the *wuxia* and kungfu genres revolved around fantasies of the body's powers increased to a superhuman degree. Their characteristic special effects served to extend this fantasy, using cutting, trampolines, reverse motion, undercranking and wirework to create the illusion of bodies with preternatural abilities to leap, fly and throw, to move with unreal speed and agility and even become invulnerable to weapons. In this regard we might understand the longer popularity of the *wuxia* genre as a symptom of more persistent desires spawned by the semi-colonial status of China. The first silent *wuxia* were produced only a quarter of a century after the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, a mass uprising against European

domination fuelled by the combination of messianic beliefs, esoteric magic and martial arts practice through which the ‘boxers’ (as they became known to Western observers) believed they could take on superhuman powers in order to expel foreign oppressors (Hsü 1990: 390–92). *Wuxia* might be understood as entailing the cinematic manifestation of the same desire. M. T. Kato goes as far as to propose the Boxers as ‘one of the most decisive instances of anti-colonial struggle waged by a colonial subject’, arguing that ‘the constitutional narrative foundation of [...] kung fu [cinema...] has been the visual folklore of the [Boxers] from the perspective of the natives, the people who fought against imperialist conquest’ (2007: 140) – though perhaps we could be a little more cautious than Kato is about reading the status of the Boxers in such neatly colonial terms. The Boxers, tragically for their cause, took Fanonian fantasies of corporeal transcendence all too literally: believing themselves invulnerable to Western firearms they were gunned down. However, it was the seditious as well as the superstitious nature of fantasies of superhuman martial artists – even shorn of any ‘revolutionary’ storyline – that caused the GMD to ban the *wuxia* genre outright in 1931 (Teo 2009: 40–41).

The intensification of the appeal to the violent body in the new *wuxia* of the 1960s and 1970s can be understood as symptomatic of the reflorescence of such fantasies in the period that also produced the 1967 riots. Though not new, their transformation and renewal marked – in the context of the Cultural Revolution, global decolonization and counter-cultural revolt – a moment in which such undercurrents rose to the surface of both political and cultural life. The turn to kungfu – a genre even more clearly focused around fantasies of corporeal power and rooted in the actual astonishing abilities of its performers – can also be read in these terms. In this regard, the anti-colonial content of kungfu gets one of its most explicit expressions in the

Bruce Lee vehicle *Jingwu Men/Fist of Fury* (1972), directed by Lo Wei, who, like Chang, had honed his craft making New Action Era swordplays for Shaw. *Fist of Fury* is set in Shanghai's International Settlement in 1912, one of the colonial enclaves (like Hong Kong) granted to foreign powers in the nineteenth century, a space clearly depicted in the film as organized around the violently policed ethnic and spatial segregations that Fanon describes as typical of colonialism. In one scene, Lee's character – denied entry to a park whose sign reads 'no Chinese and no dogs' – unleashes his inchoate rage on his Japanese tormentors, and the scene seems a perfect illustration of the 'dreams of muscular prowess [...] action and aggression' discussed by Fanon. Fanon's description of the resentful colonial subject – 'always on the alert' – could have been modelled on Lee: 'The native's muscles are always tensed. You can't say that he's terrorized, or even apprehensive. He is in fact ready at a moment's notice to exchange the role of the quarry for that of the hunter' (Fanon 2001: 41). The intensity of Lee's anger is expressed not only in his eyes, but in the clenching of what seems every muscle in his body, bursting into explosive energy in a flurry of punches and kicks (Figure 3). These are accompanied by Lee's idiosyncratic screams and a special-effects soundtrack of resounding thwacks and thuds that speak of intense force being unleashed from and into the human body. The rapturous applause with which such scenes from *Fist of Fury* were received by cinema audiences in Hong Kong – and across the colonial world – are documented by Kato (2007: 12–13). Such enthusiasm suggests that the experience of Fanon's 'native', at either a more or less explicit, pressing or consciously registered level, was common in Hong Kong, across Shaw's key South East Asian market, and beyond.

**Figure 3:** Bruce Lee explodes into postcolonial rage in *Fist of Fury*, 1972.

However, in spite of the contrast made by Olivier Assayas (1984: 52) between Lee as a political film-maker and Chang as supposedly apolitical, Fanonian fantasies and subjectivities are already clearly legible in *The Assassin*, even if its narrative is displaced into a deeper historical past.

I have already quoted Fanon's description of the colonized subject's existence as a 'narrow world, strewn with prohibitions', and it is this sense of constriction that fuels the fantasies of violent bodily liberation he describes. Though in many ways the colonial rule of Hong Kong at the time Chang made his film was far less repressive than that which Fanon describes in Algeria, the 'narrowness' of colonial life there had an exacerbated literal and physical dimension lacking in the North African context. The island boasted a population density of over 8000 people per square mile, still growing rapidly due to a continued influx of refugees and migrants, mostly crowded into slums, and with home for an entire family often consisting of no more than a single bed space (Fu 2000: 73). Perhaps one of the reasons that Fanon's work is so interesting in the Hong Kong context is precisely his attention to the spatialization of colonial division – something clearly at stake in the *Fist of Fury* scene described above, and throughout that film. The whole economy of movement characteristic of Hong Kong martial arts cinema – fast, agile, precise, efficient – may be understood in many ways as an adaptation to and contestation of such a cramped and constricted life.

In its broader sense such constriction is also already thematized in *The Assassin*: its hero, Nie, faces the limited existence of a peasant in feudal society. In a scene early in the film he discusses his bitterness at this strangled existence with his sweetheart, Xia Ying. Nie longs to have been born an aristocrat and is eaten by

ambitions that as a peasant he cannot fulfil. He desires to become a historical agent with a hand in his own destiny – to first win military honour and, after that, he muses:

Just think what I could do then! I could reform the country, change the system, help the poor people, be a national hero! I've got a good brain and a good body. And what do I do with it? Nothing at all! Just nothing! But I could do something. I know I could!

Nie's is a life robbed of meaning and dignity, one condemned to the passivity of the ruled and to the limited options for life offered to ancient peasants and modern colonial subjects alike. Until he takes up his suicide mission, Nie suffers from precisely the malaises that Fanon identifies as colonial. Working as a butcher, he is clearly depressed, and his sister worries about his drinking. (Xia Ying's father has drunk himself to death in a similar manner.) In one poignant scene, Nie wanders at night into the small backyard of the butcher's shop. The camera, taking on his gaze, lingers in a series of close-ups on the gross flesh of the pigs kept there, emphasizing Nie's sense of degradation and revulsion. Two pairs of snap zooms, first into the flesh of the pigs and then into Nie's despairing face further emphasize the equation. Nie leans hopelessly against one of the pens and exclaims to himself: 'What a life!' He too has been figuratively reduced to a pig in a pen. Such porcine flesh provides a powerful counter-image to the nimble, muscular, liberated body of the martial artist in action, as represented elsewhere in the film. Later, justifying his decision to take on a mission he will certainly not return from, he says: 'Nobody wants to die. But life on present terms – not good either'. In one sense, Nie is already dead from the outset, by dint of birth, as a peasant in an aristocrat's world.

For Fanon, due to the psychological damage caused by a similar alienation from the possibilities of becoming the agent of one's own existence under colonialism, recourse to political violence is not only a matter of the pragmatics of ejecting the colonizer; it is also a healing process for the colonized. He argues that it is through violence that the passivity and self-loathing of the colonized can be reversed. Violence is in this regard a primal act of existential self-affirmation: it is not only *through* violence that freedom is to be achieved, but also *in* it (Fanon 2001: 68). As Fanon puts it: 'violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect' (2001: 74). We might read such an act of existential self-affirmation in Nie's decision in *The Assassin* to give his life for a political cause. The climax of the film is presented by Chang as a redemptive ecstasy of blood and slaughter, in which Wang Yu as Nie leaps, spins, rolls and even – suspended by wires – flies around Chang's sets in a whirl of frenetic physical energy (see Figures 4 and 5). He is matched by camerawork that leaves behind the slow, static style of the film thus far, which has served not only to express gravitas but also the constriction of Nie's world. In contrast, like Nie's body itself, the camera in this climactic battle has been liberated from gravity, rising up above and sinking down into the scene, and is free to weave around its architecture and protagonists alike. In this fury of performed and cinematographic motion, Nie rejects the meaninglessness of his destiny as a disenfranchised peasant, writes himself into history as an active subject and takes possession of his identity.

**Figure 4:** Wang Yu leaps, spins and rolls around the set in *The Assassin*, 1967, a mobility echoed in the pans, tilts, dollies and zooms of the camera.

**Figure 5:** This sequence from *The Assassin* follows on from the shots in Figure 4.

### **(Re-)assessing the politics of violence in the New Action Era**

However, relocating the meaning of *The Assassin*'s violence in the fantasmatic realm in this way, and as an existential rather than directly political self-affirmation, only highlights once again the instability of its politics. Certainly in *The Assassin*, when wise minister Yen says of Nie – a man ready to take to terrorism and die – that he is ‘the sort we need now in these troubled times’, it is clear we should read this in relation to 1967, which was nothing if not a ‘troubled time’. However, Chang leaves the particular cause that should be served by such a hero tantalizingly ambiguous, and it is a human type rather than a political position that he ultimately elevates. Though the film may conjure powerful desires for liberation, and though these might be capable, in the right circumstances, of catalysing political commitment, they are prone to co-optation equally by progressive (left anti-colonial) and regressive (right nationalist) projects. And it is also not clear that such cinematic representations lead to political commitment at all. Chang Cheh, this is to say, seems to celebrate political violence, but refuses to embrace any particular politics.

Such political ambiguity was only exacerbated as the 1970s unfolded. After the Leftist Riots, the British authorities embarked on a double-pronged policy. First, they used tight censorship and a clampdown on Leftist groups to seal off organized dissent. This – along with a crisis in the Leftists’ legitimacy caused by the horrors of the Cultural Revolution – created a mainstream culture in which politics was increasingly taboo and ended the importance of the militant left in the colony’s civil society. Simultaneously the authorities, scared by the extent of the violence, shored up their

legitimacy with far-reaching reforms (Hung 2010: 58). These programmes, though they allowed the basic relations of power and inequality to continue, ameliorated poverty, housing and welfare problems. Ultimately these reforms catapulted the colony into the more liberal, 'postcolonial' form of government that allowed it to compete so successfully within the globalized economy in the final decades of the twentieth century (Abbas 1997: 2–3). These changes in policy were, in Cheung's (2009: 152–63) view, a monumentally positive outcome of the Leftist Riots, making them the 'watershed' of Hong Kong's modern history. Perhaps although the outcome of the riots was not the thoroughgoing revolution Fanon would have applauded, they can still be seen as constituting, in their very violence, a decisive moment of existential self-affirmation for Hong Kong's people, akin to that imagined in Chang's film for Nie. And the narrative I have offered above of depoliticization in the wake of the collapse of the communist left can be ameliorated if we take note of the new forms of political consciousness that emerged, feeding the student and single-issue movements of the 1970s and 1980s, which continued anti-colonial dissent and went on to form the basis of today's democratic movement (Hung 2010; Law 2001: 32). To the extent that we can understand films such as *The Assassin* as playing a small part within this culture of rebellion, they can be understood to have performed a politically progressive function.

However, it is a paradox that the kungfu genre only hits its ultraviolent zenith once these cultures of revolt are spent and in the depoliticized milieu of the 1970s. The most spectacular fight performances and the most intense investments in the performing body, are to be found in films which rejected the historically epic ambitions of either *The Assassin* or *Fist of Fury*, with the appearance in the late 1970s

of the kungfu comedies of Sammo Hung and Jackie Chan or the nihilistic postmodern swordplays of Chor Yuen and Hua Shan.

Fanon's work, however, offers us a means of understanding this paradox, and allows us to think one final time about the valence of *The Assassin*. Discussing the ecstatic mystical dances nurtured by colonialism in Africa, Fanon makes a reading of cultural expressions of violence as potentially conservative. In dance, he writes, 'the most acute aggressivity and the most impelling violence' dwelling in the heart of the colonized are 'canalized [i.e. rechannelled], transformed and conjured away' (2001: 44).

Similarly, in the above-cited passage in which Fanon discusses the 'dreams of the native' for violently exuberant physical motion, it is clear that these are, precisely, *dreams*, not realities. Fanon concludes this passage by wryly observing that 'during the period of colonization, the native never stops achieving his freedom from nine in the evening until six in the morning' (2001: 40). The cinema can be understood as an extension of such a delimited dream-space. We might also remember, in the light of Freud's account of the dream of the burning boy, that part of the function of dreams is to keep us from waking.<sup>1</sup> Potentially transformative fantasies remain captured within cathartic forms of culture that only bolster the ability of domination and exploitation to endure. Might we recognize in Fanon's figures of displaced, ceremonialized

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<sup>1</sup> In Freud's account of the 'dream of the burning boy', a bereaved father falls asleep after keeping a long watch over the body of his dead son. He has a dream that the boy comes to him and says 'Father, don't you see that I'm burning'. The father wakes to find that a candle has fallen over and in fact is burning his child's body. What Freud finds strange is not that the father should dream the thing that is really happening – the change in light, the smell of burning might all have alerted his sleeping mind to the fact – but rather that the father dreams at all. Why does the mind not just wake up on realizing the emergency? The dream only goes to delay this process, allowing the father to tarry in the realm of sleep with the fantasy of the presence of his son, speaking and acting as he had done when he was alive (1913: 403–04).

violence the stylized, ritualized, aestheticized, dance-like quality of kungfu choreography?

Such an argument certainly has some force, but Fanon's stark binary division between 'real', political violence and its cultural-ceremonial displacements begs deconstruction. The curious mixture of a ritualistic form and militant anti-colonial practice in the Boxer Rebellion, for example, ought to remind us that the distinction is not always so neat. Though the movement's magical beliefs in attaining superhuman powers can certainly be understood as a pathological symptom of colonial subjectivity – and even as dooming their insurgency – ritual performance was nonetheless a highly effective part of the recruitment, organization and motivation of a movement that directly countered foreign imperialism with force of arms. Culture's fantasies may play at one and the same time a ritual and a militant function.

### **Conclusion: Cinematic violence then and now**

*The Assassin*, I have argued here, was a key film in the developing martial arts genres of the 1960s. The film's and the genre's corporeally rooted fantasies of the liberation of the body in violence were nurtured within the 'narrow world, strewn with prohibitions' of colonial life, of which Fanon has given us an eloquent account. Such fantasies may be at the heart of the longer traditions of Chinese swordplay cinema, but in Chang's films, they rose more prominently to the surface during a moment of significant unrest. They could also be understood to have contributed to the rebellious culture of that moment, which can be accounted one of communal and political self-affirmation in which significant gains were made. Whilst *The Assassin* embraces and affirms political violence at an existential level, its politics nonetheless remain,

ultimately, ambiguous, with this ambiguity lying at the very heart of its aesthetic and commercial strategies. The cinematic fantasies of the 1960s left a legacy in the kungfu cinema of the 1970s that can be understood to activate similar fantasies of bodily freedom, though now further shorn of connection to any political agency through which liberation could be enacted. The politics of these films remains enigmatic: even if their fundamental wish seems emancipatory, its cultural presentation may serve to displace or rechannel this desire into spectacular entertainment rather than social change.

Although in writing about this cinema I have been reconstructing the relationship of *The Assassin* to the sociopolitical context in which it was produced and first received by audiences, my ultimate interest in it is nonetheless from my own perspective as a twenty-first-century viewer in the West, so I would like to make some final comments arising from the spatio-historical gulf between me and my subject matter. With respect to the very possibility of my own investment in such films, their ability to speak beyond their original context is significant. *The Assassin* itself seems never to have ever had much of a showing in the West. However, the kungfu and swordplay genres would become, in a handful of years after the breakthrough of Chang's films of this period, a global phenomenon. In the 1970s the broad appeal Hong Kong cinema held in particular amongst those on the wrong end of colonial history across the world (Prashad 2001: 126–27; Joseph 2002; Gateward 2009) suggests that the narratives and fantasies discussed here spoke especially strongly to these audiences.

I'm somewhat more sceptical that the integration today of 'Hong Kong-style' action into a global–imperial–spectacular cinema, whether American or Chinese, can be counted as progressive in the same way. In spite of such doubts, what remains at

the heart of martial arts cinema is the affective power of the body in violent, ecstatic motion, which I have been suggesting here can be interpreted as a matter of fantasies forged in the long discontent of colonial occupation. When American critic David Bordwell discusses the intense physical invigoration activated in viewing such films, it is interesting that his description is so close in imagery to Fanon's account of the 'dreams of the native', even down to an image setting the human body against the automobile:

As you walk out of the best Hong Kong action movies you are charged up, you feel like you can do anything [... Such films] infect even film professors, heavy with middle age and polemics [...] with the delusion that they can vault, grave and unflappable, over the cars parked outside the theater. (2001: 73–93)

Bordwell too, from nine in the evening till six in the morning, seems to be dreaming of muscular prowess.

But why should such fantasies appeal to us in the West today (and even to middle-aged, distinctly privileged film professors) if their roots lie in colonial oppression? One response would point to another of Fanon's binaries that needs deconstruction: the opposition between the colony ruled violently and the homeland ruled ideologically. Even amongst colonies, there are, of course, gradations between the most brutal domination (Fanon's Algeria) and relatively consensual rule (Abbas's Hong Kong). Furthermore, even the present-day West is ultimately characterized by the invisible, systemic violence of exploitation inherent to capitalist social organization. The colony might be the place where the wider logic of domination is simply at its barest. The violent fantasies of Hong Kong martial arts cinema were

given aesthetic form at a moment when these conditions were relatively stark: the limitations on life were vivid for the Chinese poor in Hong Kong, and in 1967 it was made clear that these were ultimately policed with lethal force. In our own moment, control is increasingly ideological rather than obviously repressive, but nonetheless – whether consciously or unconsciously registered – the constraints of life under globalized neo-liberalism still press upon its subjects, constituting a ‘narrow world, strewn with prohibitions’. Because we are still not free, kungfu’s fantasies of running, leaping, punching and kicking remain potent, and this may be one reason that a series of cultural tropes and forms that have their roots in Hong Kong’s *wuxia* and kungfu explosion of the late 1960s and the early 1970s – from parkour to wirework action scenes – remain so popular in today’s transnational cultures of entertainment.

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