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**Luke White**

**Toward an Aesthetic of Weightlessness:  
Qinggong and Wire-fu**

*As accepted for **RoCH Fans and Legends.***

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Hong Kong's film and television martial arts genres posit themselves around our exhilarated identification with bodies in movement, and, more specifically, fantasies of the transcendence of the limitations of the body's materiality. Film critic David Bordwell has described their effect. He writes: 'As you walk out of the best Hong Kong action movies you are charged up, you feel like you can do anything', and goes on to conclude that such films can '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'.<sup>1</sup> However, different action genres seem to entwine our bodies in such fantasies differently.

It is often the 'kung fu' genre<sup>2</sup> as it developed in its classic form during the 1970s that is most beloved by Western fans (and especially – to gender things – 'fanboys'). Such fans fetishise the 'authenticity' of 'grounded' action, where cinematic effects are held

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<sup>11</sup> David Bordwell, 'Aesthetics in Action: Kungfu, Gunplay, and Cinematic Expressivity', in *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, edited by Esther M. Yau (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 73, 93.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'kung fu' offers problems for the writer or typographer (and the reader). Thoroughly naturalized into the English language, it's hardly a foreign word requiring italics, yet its meaning often remains unclear and subject to the effects of (mis-)translation – a fact speaking of the kind of effects of global exchange which animate this article more broadly. Italics seem further inadequate to mark the simultaneous naturalization of the term and its residual foreignness – and so miss its consequent ambiguity – as they might suggest a simple word with a fixed meaning in another language. With the term 'kung fu', however, after its journey from East to West, are we speaking of martial arts (perhaps Chinese martial arts in particular), or of 'skill' more generally (as the word in its original sense more properly designates)? Or is this a word that refers us to the cinematic genre that brought the term into English usage? And if so, will the reader understand this as referring in general to films with martial arts in (or perhaps in particular *Chinese* films with martial arts in), or to a much more *specific* and historically located sub-genre of martial arts cinema? In this case it is the last that I intend, but scare quotes often seem to be necessary surrounding the word, marking and drawing attention to its semantic instability and complex provenance.

subordinate to the portrayal of the physical skills of performers.<sup>3</sup> Long takes and full-body shots are privileged over constructive editing, wires, trampolines or CGI. The muscular and usually emphatically masculine body that emerges is able to escape gravity's hold on the flesh only through a power and skill produced through the disciplined physical training of both the character portrayed and also the star performing the role.

However, the swordplay (or *wuxia*) genre offers a different aesthetic of corporeal transcendence. With roots in Shanghai's silent cinema of the 1920s, this aesthetic is much older than that of the 'kung fu' variant discussed above.<sup>4</sup> However, it is also the aesthetic that since the 1980s has come to dominate Asian box offices and television schedules, and that then rose to global prominence with blockbusters such as *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, 1999) and *Hero* (Zhang Yimou, 2002). Contrasted to the kung fu film, swordplays typically present us a fantasy of the body's weightlessness, exemplified in the depiction of the martial arts technique of *qinggong* ('lightness skill'), using wires to allow actors and actresses to fly, spin and float seemingly effortlessly across the screen. Swordsmen – and swordswomen – can run across the surface of a lake creating no more than a few ripples; they traverse the city at rooftop rather than street level; they balance on a stalk of grass or the farthest and most insubstantial branch of a tree; rather than standing on the ground to fight, they take to the air and dive down at one another from the heights of a bamboo forest. If the kung fu body seems to work its alchemy of corporeal transcendence only through a plunge into the flesh, and through the triumph of muscles over their own materiality,

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Leon Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters: From Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

the *wuxia* body seems to have been unchained from the effects of gravity altogether, becoming as insubstantial as a shadow or an image.<sup>5</sup>

The question that intrigues me is how to understand these differences in terms of the responses of creators and audiences alike to their lived historical realities. Elsewhere, I have read the body in kung fu cinema, appearing as it did in the wake of the anti-colonial unrest of the late 1960s, as exhibiting aspects of the fantasies that Frantz Fanon diagnosed as haunting the colonized subject. This subject ‘dreams of muscular prowess [...] action and aggression’ and their ‘muscles are always tensed [...] ready at a moment’s notice to exchange the role of quarry for that of the hunter’.<sup>6</sup> If the sense of powerlessness and constraint that motivate these compensatory dreams are not unique to the colonial subject but a more general feature of modern experience, then this might explain something of the enduring appeal of kung fu cinema.

Such an experience of powerlessness is not entirely irrelevant to the fantasies of lightness rather than muscularity that typify the swordplay. Fanon also discusses dreams where he spans rivers in a single stride or outpaces a ‘flood of motor cars’.<sup>7</sup> Within the colonial situation, the common dream motif of flight takes on for Fanon a specific resonance as an image of emancipation and escape – and this may highlight a

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, often the *wuxia* body, dressed, in contrast to the bare chests of kung fu, in billowing robes, seems reduced to the choreography of an almost empty costume, which it is the skill of the performer and the technicians in the wire-work rig to animate.

<sup>6</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 2001), 40–41. See my essay ‘A “Narrow World, Strewn with Prohibitions”: Chang Cheh’s *The Assassin* and the 1967 Hong Kong Riots’, *Asian Cinema* 26, no. 1 (2015): 79–98. Accessed December 28, 2015, doi 10.1386/ac.26.1.79\_1.

<sup>7</sup> Fanon, *Wretched*, 40.

wider set of related meanings that it takes on elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> In the oldest surviving Chinese martial arts film, *Red Heroine* (Wen Yimin, 1929) the titular character soars (super[wo]man-like) in the clouds, suspended on a wire, over a landscape in the tumult of civil war. The film is set in an unspecified past, but a viewer can hardly escape the echoes between the world it depicts and that of the Chinese politics of the day, as warlords and rival political factions fought for power, under the shadow of growing designs for colonial domination by surrounding international powers. The Red Heroine's flight is a transcendence not only of the laws of gravity, but also those of history.

What, though, are we to make of the return of the fantasy of weightless freedom in the late 1980s and 1990s, when swordplay and 'wire-fu' came once more to be a dominant form of martial arts fantasy in film and television? At this point, with its growing prosperity, and its prominent place in the global flows of money, goods, people and culture between Asia and the West, Hong Kong was feeling altogether less a colonial place, less what Fanon termed a 'narrow world, strewn with prohibitions'.<sup>9</sup> However, the return to Chinese governance in 1997 was looming, with all the uncertainty this seemed to bode. During the late twentieth century, many Hong Kong and diasporic Chinese, often in one form or another of exile or flight from Communist Party rule, had begun to define themselves decreasingly through a simple identification with the lost motherland – or at the very least certainly with its political

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<sup>8</sup> For more on the symbolism of flight in dreams – and their relation to themes of escape and freedom – see Wendy Gould, 'Dreams about Flying: Dream Meanings Explained' (an interview with Jeffrey Sumer), *Huffington Post*, July 13, 2011. Accessed December 28, 2015,

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/13/dreams-about-flying\\_n\\_891625.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/13/dreams-about-flying_n_891625.html).

<sup>9</sup> Fanon, *Wretched*, 29.

instantiation as an actual or desired nation-state. Hong Kong identity, perhaps especially in the run up to 1997, was increasingly articulated as separate from – and even opposed to – that of the mainland.<sup>10</sup> For Hong Kong and other diasporic Chinese, identity was increasingly ambivalent, complex and ‘hybrid’, not only about attachment to origins, but also to the global networks in which they increasingly saw their modernity – and their future hopes – expressed.<sup>11</sup>

In this regard, there is something curiously paradoxical about the thematisation of identity in swordplay cinema and television. If ‘flight’ or escape from the gravity of history is at stake, this is nonetheless a flight into the (historical, Chinese) past. In this regard, the weightlessness of the *xia* (the swordsman or swordswoman who is protagonist of the *wuxia* story) is legible as a desire for escape from modernity, with all its contradictions – though such contradictions and conflicts often seem to reinscribe themselves at the heart of the *wuxia* story, projected into the mythical past. This is the case not least, perhaps, in the work of Jin Yong, probably the most influential novelist of the post-war *wuxia* genre, providing the source material for

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<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Taiwanese culture increasingly defined itself in relation to developing strains of Taiwanese nationalism, rather than claims to be the ‘true’ and legitimate rulers of a united China.

<sup>11</sup> Sheldon Lu, quoting Aihwa Ong, writes: “The idea of a single national identity and loyalty to a nation-state is losing credibility among the people of Hong Kong and China for practical and political reasons. As a *homo economicus* in the age of transnational capitalism, mobile investment, flexible accumulation, and global postmodernity, the Chinese in diaspora renegotiates a flexible set of spatial, geographic, economic and cultural considerations in the identity formation process. As Aihwa Ong points out, “Such flexibility of options, whether financial, spatial, social, or legal, constantly destabilizes and even attenuates what it means to be Chinese. The shifting narratives rework global displacements and liminality into a self-inscribed alterity to the Western insistence on a single national identity””. Sheldon Lu, ‘Filming Diaspora and Identity: Hong Kong and 1997’, in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, edited by Poshek Fu and David Desser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 285.

countless films and television serials.<sup>12</sup> The *xia* in Jin Yong's novels, is most often a wandering, rootless character, whose origins and identity are (initially at least) unclear to him- or her-self. In a longer cultural context, the term *xia*, in fact, is often taken as synonymous with *youxia*, which means, literally, 'wandering swordsman'.<sup>13</sup> The *youxia* traverses the 'rivers and lakes' (*jianghu*), a realm of martial artists that runs parallel to and provides an alternative geography for the mundane world in which ordinary people's lives are tied down. The weightlessness of the *youxia* in motion, their mastery of *qinggong*, may seem an extension of this rootless, untethered existence, and of their detachment from those ties of official, statist politics and kinship that hold ordinary people within their orbit.<sup>14</sup>

Such a character may be emblematic of the experience of the diasporic, post-nationalist identity of much of the *wuxia* audience, not only in Hong Kong but in the

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<sup>12</sup> For the influence of Jin Yong on the *wuxia* genre, and the way that the conflicts of modern Chinese history and the contradictions of modern (Hong Kong) Chinese identity are registered in his work, see John Hamm, *Paper Swordsmen: Jin Yong and the Modern Chinese Martial Arts Novel* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006); Petrus Liu, *Stateless Subjects: Chinese Martial Arts Literature and Postcolonial History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> In his classic study of the figures of the *xia* and the *youxia* in Chinese culture, James Liu has translated *xia* as 'knight' and *youxia* as '(Chinese) Knight Errant', and discusses the interlinked history of the terms. As Liu notes, the translations are problematic in their transposition of a Chinese tradition onto a European one, with all the cultural specificity that this loses, not least with regards to the particular implications of aristocratic class that a knight entails (and which is largely lacking from the figure of the *xia*), and with regards to the rather different chivalric codes by which the European knight and the Chinese *xia* live. For this reason, I've preferred 'swordsman' here, though it's also a rather poor translation. See James Liu, *The Chinese Knight-Errant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

<sup>14</sup> The *xia* as such a 'stateless subject' is, of course, implied within the title of Petrus Liu's book of that name, (cited above) which is centrally posited around the idea of the Chinese martial arts novel as offering a mode of social organization independent of the state, and as offering a critique of nationalist-modernist positions that became dominant in early twentieth-century thought in the wake of the 'May 4<sup>th</sup>' literary movement.

transcontinental circuits of the Chinese diaspora, on and through which *wuxia* stories have circulated. *Qinggong* might thus be an apt image of weightlessness or drifting in diasporic identity with regards to origins –the *xia* as thistledown on the winds of history. It is also this same dematerialization of image and identity within the regime of globalisation, perhaps, that has drawn in an increasingly international fanbase, making the figure of the *xia* – and their location in a mythical past – appropriable to the fantasies of Western as well as Asian viewers. Just as the *xia* wanders the land, without regard to borders, so now do images of the *xia*.

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