

conflicts. The reiterated statement seems to fit the reunification rhetoric and carries particular significance given the crisis of Hong Kong's society which has been grappling with identity (re)formation since its reversion to China.

At a time when martial arts cinema becomes increasingly a global genre of post-modern pastiche, the predominant concern for verisimilitude in *Ip Man* and *The Grandmaster* appeals to audiences in Hong Kong and mainland China simultaneously. In contrast to Hollywood's *The Matrix* (1999, 2003, 2003) and *Kung Fu Panda* series (2008, 2010, 2016) in which digital stunts and parodies border on the edge of postmodern playfulness, these two films chronicle biographical details, study accurate moves of different clans and trace the spread of martial arts schools. Compared to the manifest message of patriotism of *Ip Man*, the embrace of exilic reunion in Hong Kong in *The Grandmaster* proposes a more sophisticated meditation upon individual fate and national history. The focus on the Foshan-born Ip Man instead of the San Francisco-born Bruce Lee, who globalized martial arts films, suggests a paradigm shift in the collective imagination of local identities. If the claim of affiliation with an imaginary China in classic Hong Kong martial arts cinema soothed public anxiety of transient existence in "borrowed time and space" (Kei 2001), these two films engage in a form of historical rewriting to probe Hong Kong-China connections through the subjective prism of Ip. The yearning to re-examine the positioning of Hong Kong as an intermediate between Chinese tradition and global amalgamation testifies to Stuart Hall's argument that cultural identity is a fluid notion undergoing cinematic (re)productions in the flux of social and historical forces (2004, p. 386). By situating *Ip Man* and *The Grandmaster* against the shifting orientations of Hong Kong martial arts cinema and society, the following parts of this paper explore how the reconfiguration of the classic genre implicates the efforts to construct a post-colonial identity in negotiation with mainland China.

The Northern Expedition of Hong Kong Martial Arts Cinema

Hong Kong martial arts films have exerted substantial impact upon the trend of popular culture in mainland China since the late 1970s. As a trading port populated by successive generations of immigrants from China and other places seeking shelter and fortune, Hong Kong became the major center for the production of pop culture. The martial arts cinema, rooted in Chinese folklore and literature, developed in Shanghai in the 1920s but was then marginalized for its supposedly "corruptive" influence upon nation-building (Teo 2009), only to be resurrected and promoted to the world by Hong Kong filmmakers. Due to China's turbulence following the end of the Second World War and the Civil War, mainland film capital and talents migrated to Hong Kong. The Shaw Brothers Studio (1958-2011), the largest film company in Hong Kong where harried directors were often given less than a week to grind out a movie, produced hundreds of martial arts films and established a set of generic conventions. The motif of revenge, fight choreography, stock characters and period costume permeated in the sword-fighting films and the kung fu films (Teo, 1997, p. 98) to celebrate the charismatic warriors. Recurrent tales of martial arts warriors safeguarding Confucian ideologies in the stateless *Jianghu* underworld King Hu's *Come Drink with Me* (1966) and *A Touch of Zen* (1970) and Chang Cheh's *The One-Armed Swordsman* (1967) won international attention. The martial arts world added a tinge of nationalism when Bruce Lee announced that "We Chinese are not the sick men of Asia" after defeating a roomful of Japanese karatekas in *Fist of Fury* (Lo, 1972) set in the 1920s Shanghai (Chute, 2003, p. 2). Legends of warriors mesmerized mainland audiences when Hong Kong movies flowed to the adjacent Guangdong province and then spread to other regions through state-sanctioned or underground channels. According to Thomas Gold, pirated copies of Hong Kong martial arts films flourished in poorly-equipped video shops in the urban center or on

college campuses and in 1985 reached as far inland as Dali, Yunnan province (1993, p. 911). As the culturally rich and economically affluent Hong Kong provided a model of modern lifestyle for mainland Chinese to emulate, the proliferation of Hong Kong martial arts films had triggered fanciful imaginations of convention and modernity in the mainland.

The import of Hong Kong martial arts films filled the void of entertainment in post-Mao China in a timely fashion. While the majority of cultural products of the mainland was heavily ideological in the socialist realism tradition, the merging of individual quest and fast-paced Hollywood editing in Hong Kong films fed into public imagination of modernity. *The Shaolin Temple* (Chang, 1982), made by Hong Kong filmmakers in cooperation with the state-owned Zhongyuan Film Studio, kindled the kung fu craze in the mainland and paved the way for the Beijing-born martial arts champion, Jet Li, to become an international star. Chang Cheh, the premier auteur of Hong Kong martial arts cinema, conquered mainland audiences with his macho heroes in co-productions like *Great Shanghai 1937* (1986), *Slaughter in Xian* (1987) and *The River Dragon* (1988). Quite a number of young Mandarin-speaking audiences took pride in imitating some cool action moves and singing Cantonese theme songs of Hong Kong martial arts films. The folk hero of Cantonese master Wong Fei-hong, played by Kwan Tak-hing as the prototypical Confucian patriarch in over 70 Hong Kong films from 1949 to the 1980s, was re-invented in the *Once Upon a Time in China* series (Tusi, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994) layered with anti-colonial patriotism. Set in the declining Qing Dynasty, the martial arts saga described Wong Fei-hong's confrontation with Western colonists and exuded a mythical aura to retain a "cultural gravitas that efficiently embodies history and tradition" (Chan, 2009, p. 76). While these films reassured local audiences on the eve of Hong Kong's re-integration with China, the cast of Jet Li as the lead endeared the series to mainland viewers and signified a new stage in the northern expedition of Hong Kong cinema. Abiding by the mainland's import policies and subsidies, martial arts films flourished as a crossover vehicle for Hong Kong filmmakers to explore the mainland market and facilitated the commercial transformation of the Chinese film industry (Chu, 2010, pp. 131–145). More importantly, since Chinese consumers of Hong Kong films often gained a privileged sense of participating in a global activity (Bordwell, 2000, p. 9), martial arts films helped in shaping new conceptions of modernity in China by creating an uplifting utopia which had political ramifications – the righteous warriors could awaken the moral sentiments and solve social conflicts.

The revival of martial arts cinema as a prestigious cultural brand since the new millennium has been largely indebted to Hong Kong filmmakers. On the one hand, the (re)emergence of Beijing and Shanghai as major centers of film production challenged the status of Hong Kong. Once a central site of innovation and a focal point of Chinese language film, Hong Kong witnessed a rapid drop in film production from 131 films in 2000 to 41 films in 2003 (Peng, 2017, p. 5). On the other hand, the amount of co-productions rose from 26 in 2003 to 54 in 2016 since the signing of Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement protocol (Huang, 2017; T. Li, 2017). For more than a decade, the "new wave" martial arts cinema cast a plethora of actors from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China (with the mixture of Pinyin and Wade-Giles transliteration of Chinese names) and attempted to touch national memory and cultural emotions in Greater China. Whereas Tsui Hark's *Zu Warriors* (2001) hearkened back to the "martial arts magic-spirit" tradition of the 1920s Shanghai cinema, mainland auteur Zhang Yimou combined extravagant choreography with national allegory in *Hero* (2002). *Bodyguards and Assassins* (Chan, 2009) featured the martial artists' protection of revolutionist Sun Yat-Sen in Hong Kong in 1905, and Jackie Chan's tribal soldiers of Western China befriended Roman legions in *Dragon Blade* (Lee, 2015), not to mention Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-hsien's portrayal of a Tang Dynasty woman warrior in *The Assassin* (2015).

Compared to the often-stateless martial world of Hong Kong cinema in the 1960s and 1970s, the recent profusion of martial arts films promoted the image of China as a grand and ultimately unified civilization. The shift to historical dramas and ideological predilections in these co-produced projects, nonetheless, has led to criticism of losing the “authentic” local flavor of Hong Kong martial arts cinema (Lie, 2006; Z. Li, 2016). Against this complex matrix of social and historical circumstances, *Ip Man* and *The Grandmaster* utilize the martial arts genre in a trans-border context to negotiate between yearnings of displacement and belonging in Hong Kong society and the assertion of unification among mainland audiences.

Martial Arts Warrior as the Historical Subject

The strategic treatment of biographical materials in *Ip Man* and *The Grandmaster* merges personal accounts with the evolution of martial arts in modern history. To enhance the historical feel, both films use newsreel footage and title cards to evoke the collective memory of China’s humiliation at the dawn of 20th century. The declaration of Foshan as the foundation of southern martial arts at the beginning of *Ip Man*, and the discussion of the Jing Wu Athletic Association and Chinese Warrior Association in *The Grandmaster*, refer to the blossoming of martial arts schools during the demise of the feudal empire (Jing Wu Athletic Association was founded by Huo Yuanjia in Shanghai in 1910; Chinese Warrior Association was founded in Tianjin in 1912, and the Central Guoshu Academy was established by the Nationalist Government in Nanjing in 1927 to promote a systematic approach for training in martial arts). When China was preyed upon first by Western powers and then Japan, martial arts was taken as a means of empowerment, yet broadcast footage of real Japanese airplanes dropping bombs on China disrupted the popular fantasy. In *Ip Man*, the black and white shots of corpses on the street and flowing Japanese flags create an unscripted feel of the documentary; while the cross cut between Ip training on a wooden dummy and the Japanese army brandishing bayonets is accentuated by the title card “Japanese invaders burned down factories and shops since the fall of Foshan in October 1938, and the local population dropped from 300,000 to 70,000.” The visual evidence and statistical data lead audiences away from the familiar martial arts terrain of personal revenge to the collective forum of national trauma. This particular period is authenticated in *The Grandmaster* with a grainy montage of jumbled archival footages of Japan-occupied Manchuria. The usage of truncated historical touchstones is paralleled by the selection of Ip’s biographical details to foreground resistance against Japanese invasion and to obscure facts about civil disturbance. The historical figure used to be a police officer of the Nationalist Party and little was known about his life during the Japanese occupation. After the Communists won the Civil War in 1949, Ip left for Hong Kong for fear of prosecution and never saw his wife again after China sealed its border with Hong Kong in 1951. In *Ip Man*, the fictional ending of a business friend smuggling the injured Ip and his family to Hong Kong attributes the master’s forced exile to Japanese invasion (S. T. Zhang 2008) whereas a close-up shot of the teary-eyed wife in *The Grandmaster* shies away from the political subtext which leads to the separation of the family. Considering these maneuverings to fit into public imagination an “appropriate” patriotic hero in accordance with the mechanism of censorship, *Ip Man* and *The Grandmaster* become part of the national discourse that recreates the martial arts warrior as a pawn of history.

The positioning of Ip as a participant in and witness of history does not often cohere with the classic martial arts narrative. The conventional warrior uses his/her physical prowess to seek justice in the *Jianghu* underworld, yet such heroism is challenged with the presentation of a real-life figure intimately situated within the impact and formations of history. When Ip’s hometown is destroyed by the Japanese invasion, the usual conflict among stock characters is

in the collective consciousness of Chinese audiences. The permeated sense of nostalgia, shared by the forlorn protagonists in Wong Kar-wai's previous art-house hit *Happy Together* (1997), whose storyline of two Hong Kongers living in self-exile in Buenos Aires around 1997 inspired the conception of *The Grandmaster* (Tusi 2013) and assists the film in re-integrating these hybrid fragments into a national discourse. Through the lens of the biopic and martial arts cinema, *Ip Man* and *The Grandmaster* capture significant moments of social transformation in China's modern history.

Martial Arts as Cultural Heritage

The pursuit of martial arts authenticity in *Ip Man* and *The Grandmaster* highlights local convention and cultural specificity. To distance themselves from digital spectacles like *The Matrix* which equips Keanu Reeves with expertise when his film character Neo downloads an array of martial arts skills from a computer program and conquers the virtual world, both films pay tribute to the classic Shaw Brothers cinema with "realistic" presentation of punches and kicks. Yip's invitation of Changquan gold medalist To Yu-hang as technical consultant, and Wong Kar-wai's 10-year-long research to imitate "how Bruce Lee approached his fight scenes" (Mottram 2014), manage to achieve a virtuosity which used to distinguish Hong Kong cinema from Hollywood's mere technological sophistication. Being a "body genre" or "genre of bodies" (Hunt, 2003, p. 2), the combination of actors' agile movements and fight choreography is essential to martial arts cinema, as is the use of trampolines in early Shanghai cinema and person-to-person combat with voluminous bloodshed in the Hong Kong cinema of 1970s. Since the display of physical prowess involves vigorous training like leg stretches and backward waist bending, film stars with combat techniques used to dominate the screen. Kwan Tak-hing, with actual knowledge of White Crane kung fu, played the iconic Wong Fei-hong for more than two decades; Bruce Lee demonstrated his Jeet Kune Do with his shuffle feet on screen; and Jackie Chan with martial training of stage performance uses outtakes of dangerous stunts as a trademark. In *Ip Man*, veteran kung fu star Donnie Yen restores the valuable convention with his crisp move of fists and kicks, and close-up shots of his swollen knuckles and bruised face create a realistic effect. Non-martial actor Tony Leung achieves the necessary physicality and fights convincingly after three years of martial arts training for his role in *The Grandmaster*. Acclaimed as one of the most "ethereal realizations of authentic martial arts onscreen" (M. Lee 2013), the film details the little twists and nudges with such technical exposition that the immaculate presentation of fighting styles of Wing Chun, Xingyi, Bagua and Hung Gar feels like a live action textbook. The reservation about applying technological mediation in the fight scenes displays a certain resistance against the computerized spectacle of fighting bodies which displaces local traditions into a globally palatable "digital imaginary" and erodes the notion of a singular national and historical cinematic tradition (V. Lee, 2007, p. 10). The adherence to authenticity in *Ip Man* and *The Grandmaster*, therefore, foregrounds cultural and national Chinese identity by recreating the real-life martial arts fraternities of early 20th century China.

The diverse group of martial artists embodies the inheritor and preserver of Chinese cultural convention. Compared to the *Once Upon a Time in China* series set mainly in Guangdong Province and with which the bulk of Hong Kong residents are affiliated through ancestry and kinship, *Ip Man* and *The Grandmaster* create a grand narrative embedded in the vast geographical expanse of China and its social fabric. From the transformation of the virtuous family man into the formidable warrior to wreak vengeance upon the enemy, to the ceremonious exchanges between northern and southern clans, Ip and his fellow masters revere Confucian ideals and honor codes of the *Jianghu* underworld despite the vagaries of modern life. Thanks to the collaboration with the mainland filmmaker Xu Haofeng, who transplants

elaborate fighting theories from his own films *The Sword Identity* (2011) and *Judge Archer* (2012), *The Grandmaster* demonstrates masters' musings about martial arts and life. The frequent usage of aphorisms couched in martial terminology recalls the juxtaposition of physicality and philosophy in King Hu's masterpieces. In *Ip Man*, the initial interaction between Ip and Liao, a head instructor of a newly opened martial arts school, illustrates Confucian ideals of benevolence. In order to establish his status in the local community, Liao insists on challenging Ip to fight but fails, and Ip helps to conceal the result to protect the newcomer's reputation and livelihood. The sophisticated act of saving face is rooted in the social convention of harmony and moderation, which is nonetheless jeopardized by foreign invasion. Having witnessed Liao's murder by a vicious Japanese colonel over a small bag of rice, Ip avenges his death by mutilating 10 Japanese karatekas in a duel and brings the blood-tainted rice bag to Liao's starving family. The heroic mission of vengeance is accomplished by Gong Er in *The Grandmaster* who braves disparagement from her misogynist elders and makes a vow of celibacy to defend family honor. In the 15-minute-long sequence at a snow-covered train platform, the woman engages in a life-or-death fight against the traitor while a steam engine train goes roaring by. The visual motif of modernity foregrounds Gong's dedication to the ancient tradition despite the ravages of time and circumstances. The description of resilient masters and their numerous disciples whose vignettes traverse Chinese history celebrates the preservation of lineage in a world of strict decorum and demeanor. Distinguished from the classic martial arts cinema where conflicts are solved by fighting, these films are more concerned about the continuation of cultural legacy. *Ip Man* and *The Grandmaster* take martial arts as an inalienable constituent of Chinese convention and enlighten the younger generation about the "core value" of traditional culture during rapidly changing time (Patten 2013).

Both films treat Hong Kong as a key site to conserve and invigorate the martial arts convention. Due to its colonial status which creates a "translating space" of Chinese and Western cultures (Kam, 2010, p. 2), Hong Kong becomes a haven for Ip to pass on and globalize Wing Chun art for future generations after his forced departure from a tumultuous China. When *Ip Man* ends with a succession of historical pictures recording his achievement, the parade of images culminates in a photo of Ip and Bruce Lee smiling into the camera. The final statement announces that the master's disciples have "reached more than 2000,000 all over the world and among them is the famous kung fu star Bruce Lee." As an offshore base on the political and geographical periphery of China, Hong Kong provides a shelter for the martial arts convention which had irrevocably faded into obscurity during the mainland's successive turmoils. The affirmation of the region's modern capacity to host a rich variety of personalities underwrites the ending of *The Grandmaster*. While Ip rebuilds his life as a martial arts teacher, the resistance fighter fleeing Japanese soldiers settles down in Hong Kong and opens a barbershop staffed with his disciples, and Gong lets go the unique family practice after succumbing to opium addiction as a pain relief. The reunion of these masters, reminiscent of the motley crew of martial artists in Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004), promises the renaissance of martial arts in Hong Kong and nurtures a civil community in separation from the state. The co-presence of the yearning for unfulfilled promises, the adaptation to changing circumstances and the outward looking global vision renders Hong Kong a dynamic space. When the film concludes with the smartly dressed Ip posing for an identity card photo in a suit and tie, the master comes to accept Hong Kong as his new homeland. The symbolic ending, in contrast to the constant "feeling of foreboding and crisis" about the region's uncertain status in previous Hong Kong cinema, applauds Hong Kong's unique significance and nourishing power (Kei 2001). Ip's simultaneous role as Hong Kong resident and the carrier and propagator of Chinese convention is marked by a poignant resonance which rings through to the territory's travails today, when Hong Kong is still grappling with its identity more than 10 years after its de-colonization.

Conclusion

The incorporation of modern history and biopic ingredients in *Ip Man* and *The Grandmaster* rejuvenates the martial arts genre to exemplify the zeitgeist of post-colonial Hong Kong. The actual figure of Ip becomes a cultural icon who cherishes the Chinese convention and adapts to new demands in a changing and challenging world. The recognition of historical and cultural affinity to China signifies a large degree of affiliation with the motherland, whereas the emphasis of Hong Kong's peculiar status suggests flexibility and compromise which is not always compatible with today's cultural Sinocentrism. As value-laden products in a dispersed circuit of cinematic deal-making and creative endeavors that is increasingly driven by the exigencies of the mainland market, the two martial arts films demonstrate the ongoing negotiation of cultural identities for postcolonial Hong Kong. From Peter Chan's account of three Chinese college graduates building a successful English language school in *American Dreams in China* (2013) to Hark Tsui's homage to the revolutionary classic in *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (2014); from Ann Hui's portrayal of literary celebrity Xiao Hong who migrated from Manchuria to Hong Kong in *The Golden Era* (2014) to the protection of revolutionary intellectuals in Japan-occupied Hong Kong in *Our Time Will Come* (2017); from Dante Lam's description of Chinese Narcotics Corps seeking justice in the Golden Triangle in *Operation Mekong* (2016) to Lau Wai-Keung's *The Founding of An Army* (2017) which commemorates the 90th anniversary of People's Liberation Army, the exploration of the complicated interplay between Hong Kong and the mainland becomes an important recent topic for the Hong Kong film industry. To reconfigure conventional terrains and topics involves a process of dialectic discourse and reflexive interaction through which ideas and meanings are negotiated and regenerated. The creative re-writing of the martial arts genre in *Ip Man* and *The Grandmaster* thus offers illuminating experiences in search of the ways towards realizing integrated regional and national identities.

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