

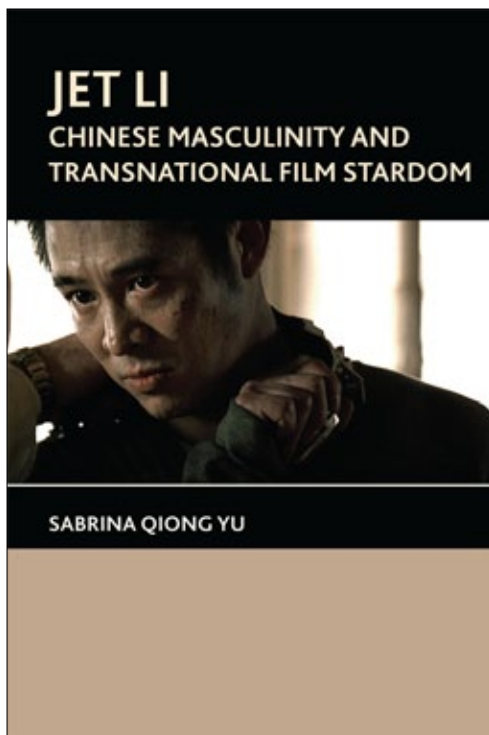
BOOK REVIEW

Jet Li: Chinese Masculinity and
Transnational Film Stardom

Sabrina Yu

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REVIEWER

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Chinese audiences may find it difficult to accept Jet Li's latest characterisation in Sylvester Stallone's *The Expendables 3* (2014). At the end of the film, Arnold Schwarzenegger cuddles up to Li, and the final glimpse of these two characters is of them nuzzling into each other. This scene strongly suggests (as has been confirmed by the director) a homosexual relationship – something rarely portrayed by such protagonists in the hardcore action genre. Embodying his name in the film (*Yin Yang*), Li's diverse, often conflicting transnational star image – involving a constant oscillation between masculinity and femininity, hero and villain, and even national and transnational – is a central motif of Sabrina Yu's multifaceted examination of Li's complicated star text, *Jet Li: Chinese Masculinity and Transnational Film Stardom*. Yu argues that Li's gender transgressive screen persona started two decades earlier, in *Swordsmen II* (1992), a film in which he allows himself to be emotionally attached to Asia the Invincible, a transsexual man. The transnational career of Asian stars (especially male stars) can be encapsulated in a famous line uttered by the transsexual character – 'mutilate your genitals before learning the invincible martial arts'. This is a line that reveals the politics and dynamics of transnational kung fu stardom. It is no coincidence that the ascending path to transnational success resembles the painful process of acquiring the invincibility via kung fu, which requires sacrifice and denial not only in terms of personal star image but also of national pride and cultural specificity.

Of course, Li is not the first transnational star to play out such a dramatic narrative, and Yu is not the first to explore such issues. Stephen Teo [1997, 2009] found traces of similar culture-crossing characterizations in his pioneering bicultural readings of the films of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. David Bordwell [2000], meanwhile, goes beyond individual characterizations and offers a formalist analysis of the traditions of martial arts aesthetics that foregrounds East Asian theatre traditions as well as American and Soviet filmmaking traditions. Finally, Leon Hunt [2003] crosses myriad boundaries from (among others) Asia to America, literature to theatre, theatre to film, film to gaming, and analogue to digital.

Yu's book continues the legacy of ambitious contemporary martial arts cinema scholarship by focusing on the increasing transnational presence of Chinese kung fu stars and their shifting meanings in various cultural contexts. In retrospect, Gina Marchetti [1993] provided a solid framework for studies of Asian stars in Hollywood. In the late 1990s, Stephen Teo [1997], Mark Gallagher [1997], and Yvonne Tasker [1997] scrutinized the context of transnational kung fu stardom and interrogated the crossover images of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan in their Hollywood adventures. Since the handover, film scholars such as David Desser [2005] and Kenneth Chan [2009] have noticed the gradual exportation of Hong Kong film talents and have explored the increased

Chinese presence in Hollywood. Through the cultivation of a 'cosmopolitical awareness', Hong Kong martial arts stars and filmmakers have transcended boundaries demarcated by disparate film industries and achieved transnational success [Szeto 2011: 18].

There have been ample studies of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan's representations of masculinity, which focus on the hyper-masculine kung fu body, physical risk, etc. [Witterstaetter 1997; Hunt 1999, 2004; Yau 2001; Louie 2002; Morris, Lu, and Chan 2005; Gallagher 2006; West 2006; Donovan 2008; Farquhar and Zhang 2010]. Yet, despite his transnational success and global fandom, Jet Li rarely receives such scrutiny – perhaps due to his ambiguous negotiation of Chinese masculinity on Western screens.

The martial arts bodies of Lee and Chan respectively embody the 'hard' and 'soft' ends of the masculine spectrum [Tasker 1997; Shu 2003; Lo 2004]. Li, however, seems less keen on either showcasing his body or on allowing comedic elements to dominate his action. Yu attempts to account for Li's unique negotiation of masculinity by introducing a Chinese paradigm according to which theatrical and literary traditions play an indispensable part in the interpretation of Chinese masculinity and the *wuxia* ethos (*xia*). She argues that one of the most interesting aspects of Li's persona is his flexibility, not only in terms of physical mobility across film industries but also his versatility in performing diverse, often conflicting roles, along with his willingness to engage with special effects and his emphasis on maintaining an ordinary and low-key off-screen persona.

While current studies of martial arts cinema primarily revolve around key questions such as action aesthetics and genre conventions [Bordwell 2000; Barrowman 2014], links with philosophy and cultural theory [Bowman 2010, 2013], and ideological or allegorical readings [Teo 1997; Sek 1997; Stokes and Hoover 1999; Sarkar 2001], Yu takes a detour and explores the transnational or transcultural meanings of some of the most important motifs in the martial arts genre – such as authenticity, masculinity, and the *wuxia* ethos. From her meticulous empirical studies of audience reception across races, social classes, and platforms, she contends that discrepancy (and similarity) in judgment may exist between critical discourses and 'real' audiences.

Given the inspiring quotes drawn from personal interviews and online fan sites such as *The Internet Movie Database* (IMDb), readers may be surprised to discover that fandom consists of much more than a homogenized mass of somnambulistic viewers incapable of individualized and culture-specific thinking. While acknowledging different critical perspectives, fans also adopt a 'holistic' perspective, showing more sympathy and sometimes even offering insightful ideas with the potential to reinvent the genre. In other words, Yu carries on the legacy of empirical research in the studies of stardom and fandom, and asserts that the 'assumed spectator' favoured by Western scholars may not be the best critical perspective. This is especially so considering the fact that academic discourses on stardom are gradually being 'decentred' (from Hollywood), disrupted by peripheral stars (Asian) and genres (martial arts), and metamorphosed by the Internet [Yu 2012: 182-183].

The first four chapters of Yu's text focus on the solid construction of Li's star persona as a *wuxia* hero by Chinese and Hong Kong critics and viewers, while the last four explore Li's diverse crossover images and transcultural receptions by global audiences. It is worth noting that Yu's reading of Li's films is highly selective, as she chooses to analyse films that best exemplify the conflicting views characterised by transcultural readings of kung fu film stardom. For example, *Once Upon a Time in China* [1991], *Swordsman II*, and *Fong Sai-yuk* [1993] embody what she calls the 'new *wuxia* cinema' [Yu 2012: 33], in which traditional kung fu heroes are reinvented and deconstructed by rapid technological advancement, proliferating views on gender transgression, and the diminishment of patriarchy in specific social, historical, and filmic contexts.

Meanwhile, *Lethal Weapon 4* [1998], *Romeo Must Die* [2000], *Kiss of the Dragon* [2001], *The One* [2001], *Cradle 2 The Grave* [2003], and *Unleashed* [2005] delineate orientalist constructions of Li as killer/villain/child, the asexualisation of Asian men in Hollywood, and a desinicisation of national sentiments. To highlight the similarity and difference between critical discourses and fandom, Yu incorporates in each chapter insightful comments from a variety of platforms and offers a more accurate, comprehensive picture of transnational stardom.

Hong Kong Cinema in the 1990s is probably one of the most frustrating yet intriguing eras in the industry's history. Overshadowed by the Tiananmen incident in 1989 and the imminent handover in 1997, critics tend to engage in ideological readings of film texts produced in that period [Yu 2012: 36]. Thankfully, in Chapter 1, Yu takes a different route and explores two equally important issues in the same period – the declining popularity of martial arts cinema and its possible reinvention through the new wuxia cycle. Focusing on three distinct portrayals of the wuxia heroes in that period – the parodied, the technologized, and the castrated – she contends that the new wuxia film cycle in the 1990s provides the foundation for Li's later transnational career.

The first thing that drew my attention was Yu's definition of key terms. Wuxia is used to encompass both kung fu and Chinese martial arts films. Categorisation has always been a huge issue in studies of martial arts cinema, as different terms signify the specificity and diversity of martial arts traditions. While the majority of scholars (e.g. Teo, Bordwell, and Hunt) consider wuxia, alongside kung fu, to be a sub-genre of Chinese martial arts films, Yu uses it to represent the whole genre. This is probably because her argument prioritises performativity over authenticity – hence her stress on the amplification of the wuxia imagination through acting performances and technological mediation in martial arts cinema [Yu 2012: 53].

Despite the issues around definitions, Yu successfully links Stephen Chow's ambivalence and instability, the increasing exhaustion with traditional heroic images in the genre, and the popularity and reinvention of wuxia films in the 1990s [Yu 2012: 38]. Together with a higher tolerance for gender transgression demonstrated in filmic and social contexts, not only could Chow's schizophrenic pastiche subvert the heterosexual, sometimes misogynistic genre, it also paved the way for Li's diverse interpretations of wuxia heroes and prepared him for more radical transformations in his later transnational career.

In what follows, I will focus on three key issues that Yu discusses in relation to current scholarship in martial arts cinema: performance versus authenticity, Chinese masculinity, and the wuxia ethos.

MORE THAN A FIGHTING MACHINE: MARTIAL ARTS [AS] PERFORMANCE

A recurring question is whether kung fu stars can act. Considering kung fu performance to be a body genre and visual spectacle, English-language critical discourses have tended to put martial arts fighting and acting into an antagonistic relationship. In addition, instead of an acknowledgment of a kung fu star's acting skills, emphasis tends to have been put on the matter of authenticity. To address this complex issue, Yu formulates her argument on two levels: first, martial arts is part of acting/performance; and second, the acting/performance of martial arts can be enhanced by technological mediation.

Martial arts in cinematic representation have always been treated as (choreographed) 'performance' (or a bodily spectacle, in Western critical perspectives). It is not 'real' fighting in any sense, despite the requirement of some real skills. Therefore, Yu uses the term 'performance' primarily in the context of acting, rather than to remind readers of the plain fact that cinematic martial arts are not 'real'. It is also worth noting that, whenever the term 'martial arts' is used, she accentuates what Hunt calls the *archival* qualities (authentic punches and kicks) rather

than the *cinematic* (authentic camerawork) or *corporeal* (authentic body/risk) qualities [Hunt 2003: 29-41], so as to advance the second level of her argument about enhancing martial arts performance through technological mediation.

Instead of linking the notion of authenticity with André Bazin's realism [Bazin 1997, 2005] or contemplating its philosophical implications, Yu is more concerned with the transcultural readings arising from paradigmatic difference. To shed light on the escalating conflict between digital technologies and traditional representations of martial arts, Yu traces the debate on technological mediation back to the early 1990s, when special effects and wire-stunts were extensively utilised in new wuxia films. As argued by Hunt [2003] and Yau [1997], the increasing technological mediation in cinematic representation of martial arts [or 'technologised masculinity'] is connected with matters such as the depreciation of masculinity, the absence of martial arts training, and even the superfluity of human participation. Accordingly, Yu declares that expressive performativity and technological enhancement of the wuxia imagination is an exit strategy for an increasingly 'disconnected' martial arts cinema that over-emphasises the unrealistic and irrelevant question of authenticity [Yu 2012: 48, 52-53].

This also foregrounds the acrimonious debate surrounding Li's transnational star persona in Hollywood where his performances are often criticised as wooden and inauthentic. Yu attempts to tackle these two issues by proposing a two-pronged reconciliation of physical capabilities and acting skills, on the one hand, and authenticity and technology, on the other [Yu 2012: 47]. Focusing on *Once Upon a Time in China* in Chapter 2, Yu expands on Bordwell's ideas and asserts that fighting is part of acting, tracing a lineage back to Chinese theatrical traditions such as Peking opera. To Yu's mind, martial arts should be considered a language, resembling those of facial and linguistic expressions, and hence something crucial to characterization and performance. Fusing martial arts with theatrical traditions of 'pause' and 'pose' through cinematic enhancements such as close-ups or slow motion, Li's Wong Fei-hung demonstrates in an elegant, calm, even scholarly manner that martial arts fighting and acting are not mutually exclusive [Yu 2012: 61]. To demonstrate the disjuncture in transcultural readings of martial arts films, Yu scrutinizes reviews written by Hong Kong critics and argues that Chinese viewers tend to adopt a holistic approach in their critical judgments and are generally unconcerned with the authenticity of martial arts on the screen. Contrary to the mode of appreciation adopted by Western spectators, martial arts are considered only part of the performance.

Similarly, Yu attempts to tackle the cross-cultural mistranslation of 'authenticity', by proposing that it is a Western paradigm incompatible with the embodiment of wuxia, which dwells in transcendental visions of 'rivers and lakes' (*jianghu*). This is largely due to the genre's intertextual affiliation with literary conventions such as Louis Cha's (*Jin Yong*) novels. Applying Bordwell's [2000] ideas of expressive amplification to Li's performance in *Once Upon a Time in China*, she claims that fusing wuxia with technology can better clarify the ethos of the genre than merely showcasing authentic/realistic punches and kicks with no expressive mediation [Yu 2012: 60]. In addition, using the concepts of 'impersonation' (developing different personas in different roles) and 'personification' (maintaining the same persona in different roles), she contends that Li successfully 'impersonifies' various roles and is a more flexible kung fu star in martial arts performance than his predecessors such as Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. Without the 'burden' of authenticity, Li develops a more comfortable relationship with cinematic technology, one which allows him to reinvent dozens of wuxia heroes and transform himself into a transnational kung fu star.

Granted, the wuxia imagination can be enhanced by visual effects (VFX) and computer-generated imagery (CGI). Considering martial arts fighting as part of acting could help to avoid some of the pitfalls of authenticity in addition to providing a new vantage point from which to consider the merits of kung fu stars' performances beyond the visual spectacle provided by the martial arts action.

However, Yu's proposition may not be applicable to all 'sub-genres' of wuxia (such as kung fu, in her categorisation). For example, Western critics would not raise the issue of authenticity in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* [2000] or *Hero* [2002], as these films are inherently fantastical, according to the genre's conventions. Conversely, if wirework and special effects were extensively used in *Enter the Dragon* [1973] or *Shaolin Temple* [1976], authenticity would immediately become an issue. Just as imagination and expressivity are the motifs of the wuxia genre, authenticity and realism are equally crucial to the production and appreciation of more realistic sub-genres of martial arts films. To encompass the diversity and complexity of martial arts cinema, it is essential to consider other 'types' of wuxia films as well.

The key questions, then, would seem to be: In terms of performance or representation, why is 'graceful' wuxia superior to 'straightforward' kung fu? Why is technologised 'wire-fu' better than solid, authentic kung fu? Can authenticity also be part of martial arts performance? It appears to me that the negotiation between the real and the fictional is constitutive of the genre as such. Furthermore, while it is true that theatrical elements add expressivity to cinematic representations of martial arts, it is authentic martial arts that provides the raw material for further amplification. It is not difficult for kung fu practitioners to notice that 'pause' and 'pose' are inherent in real martial arts forms and routines, such as taijiquan and wing chun. In other words, they are amplified but not invented by theatrical traditions. Prioritising performativity and mediation over authenticity can, to a large extent, be self-defeating.

The key is not the enhancement of wuxia imagination and performing martial arts through technology at all levels, but rather using it in the right context. I agree with Yu that *Once Upon a Time in China* demonstrates the marriage of authenticity and technology. However, I remain sceptical as to whether the mastery of this art can be generalised to the genre. There are dozens of films in Hong Kong, such as Andrew Lau's *The Avenging Fist* [2001], trying to mimic the success of *The Matrix* [1999] and enhance martial arts performance and imagination by VFX and CGI. The result, however, falls short of filmmakers' expectations owing to its indiscriminate, excessive adoption of visual enhancement. Sometimes even the right context of mediation leads to poor outcomes. Tsui Hark's *Zu Warriors* [2001], despite its wuxia context, was severely criticised for its abusive use of special effects. The real issue is when and how to use technological mediation. While the digital effects of bullet-time (*The Matrix*) and X-ray moves (*Romeo Must Die*) have been internationally celebrated, a systematic theoretical framework has yet to emerge and the mechanisms behind such visual amplifications require careful scrutiny.

Furthermore, it is essential to take into consideration the unique spectatorship shaped by the conventions of martial arts action cinema in the early 1990s. Li's martial arts background gives him a huge advantage over the new wave of action stars of his generation, such as Leslie Cheung and Brigitte Lin. Despite his highly mediated actions in *Once Upon a Time in China*, Li was largely considered an authentic kung fu star when compared with his contemporaries. The authenticity debate instead mainly focuses on Li's films with contemporary settings in his Hollywood ventures such as *Lethal Weapon 4*, *Romeo Must Die*, and *The One*. In other words, the idea of authenticity is genre - as well as context - specific vis-à-vis the geographic site of production.

In brief, Yu's emphasis on performativity over the authenticity of martial arts on the screen has greater compatibility with the fantastical wuxia genre, which has a higher tolerance for phantasmagoric actions, or with New Wave kung fu films, which allow for more acrobatic movements. To better accommodate the specificity and diversity of the martial arts genre, more flexibility can be given to the idea of martial arts fighting as acting if it divides into, for example, fantastical performance (of wuxia) and authentic performance (of kung fu). It should also be made clear that, first, acting and performance are not synonymous, especially when the latter encompasses martial arts, acting, and technological mediations, and second, that authenticity is not only about the archival but the cinematic and corporeal, as well.

It is problematic for English-language critical discourses to privilege authenticity over acting/performance. However, subordinating authenticity under the guise of expanding the wuxia imagination through technological mediation fails to alter the binary structure. Despite Li's fantastical actions, *Once Upon a Time in China* is cinematically and corporeally authentic. For example, the 'lion dance' scene in the beginning of the film, which is shot mostly in long takes and full-body framing, adequately demonstrates Li's incomparable physical capabilities and his concrete martial arts trainings over the years. Could the wuxia imagination in *Once Upon a Time in China* be successful if the actor lacked substantial martial training? Is Jet Li then just a biased subject to argue against authenticity in the first place?

The mesmerizing power of martial arts cinema lies in the constant interplay between the real and the fictional, the violent and the elegant, moments of belief and of disbelief. In spite of the stereotyping of kung fu heroes in English-language scholarly writings, it is crucial not to simply reverse the binary structure. Privileging one side over the other would potentially undermine the genre's power of imagination rather than enhance it.

That said, Yu's emphasis on performativity does provide an exit strategy for the overall decline of martial arts cinema nowadays. As she points out, when cinematic and digital mediations are slowly replacing martial arts action, kung fu stars can no longer rely solely on their 'fists and kicks' and must instead embrace, as Li has, diverse roles and state-of-the-art technology.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO HOLLYWOOD: CHINESE MASCULINITIES

Another key discussion in Yu's book is the transcultural understanding of masculinity. Especially in the action genre, the definition of masculinity has been monopolised by Hollywood – white, heterosexual, aggressive heroes who rescue and develop sexual intimacy with heroines. In view of this monolithic paradigm, transnational kung fu stars on Western screens have been considered either supermen or effeminate, usually in sharp contrast to the heroic images constructed before their venture to Hollywood. Indeed, Li has a more feminine screen persona when compared to Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan due to concealing his body and minimising physical risk. Together with linear characterisation [villain, killer, child] and abandonment of the wuxia spirit, there is a total effacement of Li's masculinity [Yu 2012: 124]. Nevertheless, Yu proposes that such a view is only valid within the Hollywood paradigm of masculinity. By incorporating Chinese masculinity into her analysis, Yu demonstrates that not only could Li reveal to Western audiences a decent 'ideal' form of intimacy, commonly found in the Chinese literary writings, he could also potentially deconstruct the centrality of Hollywood masculinity by stressing gender and interracial equality [Yu 2012: 143].

As a prominent kung fu star, Li is unique in the sense that he seeks not to reproduce traditional heroic images and formulae for guaranteed box office success. His exploration of alternative masculinities began in the 1990s when he engaged in the reinventions of well-known wuxia heroes in the genre, such as Hong Hei-gun, Fong Sai-yuk, and Ling Hu-chong. Going back to Li's earlier work in *Swordsman II*, Yu notes Li's propensity for flexibility and subversion which comes up again in his Hollywood career [Chapter 3]. Despite the wuxia genre's innate rejection of homosexual themes, in the film Li takes up a role that potentially develops a romantic relationship with a transsexual man. Not only did Li achieve international success through his versatility in acting and his diverse wuxia image, he also ventured into areas inaccessible to traditional kung fu stars and opened up a new avenue where gender and sexuality could be explored further within a highly patriarchal and masculine genre.

Apart from challenging the hegemony of heterosexuality, the genre's innate connection with patriarchy is undermined by *Fong Sai-yuk*. Yu demonstrates that the film subverts traditional understandings of masculinity by highlighting the maternal relationship (Chapter 4). This emphasis on the maternal and familial is a vision carried on in the popular *Ip Man* series, wherein Ip is portrayed not as a patriarchal master but a family man possessing modern family values. Unlike the traditional *daxia* (adult hero) who usually traverses the *jianghu* (wuxia world) in a solitary and solemn manner, Li/Fong is more humanised and family-oriented. While this might be seen as adolescent or even childish, it prioritises Chinese fidelity and respect in a fashion often missing in the Western/Oedipal paradigm. In other words, Li demonstrates a concerted effort to explore various paradigms of masculinity and to subvert the heterosexual and patriarchal norms of the wuxia genre even before his Hollywood excursion.

Nevertheless, when Li reached the other side of the Pacific in the late 1990s, he was unwillingly sutured into a whole repertoire of stereotypical representations (Chapter 5). Yu investigates how Li's masculinity is exploited in Hollywood through various stereotyping strategies, including the 'charismatic villain, passionate killer, and childlike Chinese men' [Yu 2012: 124]. She declares that if a transnational kung fu star intends to survive in Hollywood, he needs to forsake his masculinity, heroism, and any nationalist sentiments acquired in his previous career. Despite the fact that there is an effacement of Li's Chinese masculinity as well as the wuxia ethos and that he may be complicit in reproducing or reinforcing racial stereotypes, his bold venture to the 'dark side' earned respect from fans across the globe and opened the door to his transnational stardom.

Indeed, Yu proves that it is more constructive to explore alternative paradigms of masculinity rather than simply denounce the stereotypes in Li's English-language films. In particular, the 'asexual' portrayal of Li should be understood within the paradigm of Chinese masculinity (Chapter 6). It serves as an alternative model to Hollywood's monolithic understanding of the notion. Alluding to the well-known *wen-wu* paradigm proposed by Kam Louie [2002], which refers to the scholarly-martial binary within Chinese masculinity, Yu disagrees with Louie's argument that the heterosexual desire of the *wu* masculinity was 'invented' by Hollywood as seen in the films of transnational stars such as Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Chow Yun-fat (assuming that they are representative of the Chinese *wu* masculinity). She asserts that heterosexual desire is always subtly present in the *wu* paradigm, though it is not explicitly expressed in terms of physical intimacy and sexual intercourse as dictated by Hollywood. By situating Li's 'asexual' screen persona in a Chinese paradigm, Yu postulates that Li's treatment of the character is actually an ideal form of maleness in the Chinese context characterised by abstinence from sexual indulgence and subtlety of romantic expression. In other words, Yu demonstrates the necessity of acknowledging different cultural paradigms in the transcultural reading of kung fu stardom.

Furthermore, it is intriguing for Yu to propose that Li's platonic relationship with the heroines in his crossover images could offer an alternative model for male sexuality on screen, hence potentially 'deconstructing stereotyping representations of race, gender and sexuality in action cinema' [Yu 2012: 142]. This is especially valid if one considers the monolithic view in Hollywood that male sexuality onscreen equals physical intimacy. As a sceptic, I am glad that Yu reminds her readers of the fact that this potentially subversive treatment of the male hero could be read as a strategy to make Li less threatening and hence more acceptable to Western audiences, conforming to and reproducing the stereotype of Asian men as children. Yu invokes 'double castration' to describe the dilemma Li faces: the conservative plot prevents him from developing interracial romance on the one hand and his subtle, decent expression of love is not appreciated by Western audiences on the other [Yu 2012: 138].

BEYOND VISUAL PLEASURES: THE WUXIA ETHOS

The third discrepancy in the transcultural reading of martial arts cinema is the significance of the wuxia ethos – or, in her word, the *wuxia* ‘spirit’ (Chapter 7). In spite of the genre’s transnational development over more than four decades, a majority of Western critics and viewers adhere to the tangible, visible side of martial arts cinema in which martial arts and their performers exist merely for the sake of spectacle. However, as Li’s off-screen persona emphasises, learning the philosophy of *wushu* (viz. non-violence) is more valuable than two hours of sensual excitement.

What makes Yu’s work important is that she reminds viewers and scholars that there is an intangible, invisible side to the popular, secularised genre. Fully aware of the trap of essentialism, Yu carefully explains with a concrete example (her choice is *Hero*) that Chinese critics’ and viewers’ appreciation of a martial arts film usually transcends the sensual pleasure of visual beauty and incorporates the film’s interpretation of the wuxia ethos, which captures the capacity and audacity of challenging hegemonic discourses and overthrowing authoritarian regimes. However, with Li’s submission to the king of Qin, the reception of Zhang Yimou’s ‘marital art-house’ blockbuster among Chinese critics shares the fate of Li’s character, Nameless, in the final scene wherein he is pierced by hundreds of arrows. Putting the nationalist sentiments and orthodoxy aside, the awareness of cultural specificity and martial arts literacy are key issues disrupting the landscape of transnational martial arts cinema, stardom, and even the discipline of film studies. Perhaps facilitated by the popularity and pervasiveness of *Jin Yong* novels in Chinese communities worldwide for more than half a century, this discrepancy in literacy and spectatorship is an often-neglected yet extremely crucial point in studies of transnational film stardom. To further elaborate Yu’s idea, the hierarchy of martial arts cinema appreciation can be described as follows: visual performance, narrative, and wuxia ethos. Not being mutually exclusive, these three elements overlap with varying significance in a martial arts film.

This is perhaps why Yu disagrees with David Desser’s [2005] claim that there is an ‘Asianisation of Hollywood’, a conclusion that he derives from an increasing presence of masculinised Chinese men on Western screens. She points out that transnational kung fu stars have to be ‘desinicised’ in order to be accepted by Western critics and audiences. Desincisation means that transnational kung fu stars such as Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li are required to forsake their wuxia ethos and focus on reproducing Hollywood’s preoccupation with repeating visual spectacles.

To conclude the chapter, Yu points out that the difference in receptions across the Pacific signifies the constant negotiation between Li’s national and transnational identities. On the one hand, Li’s status as a Chinese, national kung fu hero helped him make his debut in Hollywood. On the other hand, his physical capabilities make him a flexible transnational star attracting audiences beyond borders. In spite of severe criticisms from Chinese intellectuals, Yu argues that *Hero* elevates Li to a new level of transnational stardom that further enhances the Chinese presence in the U.S. and even global market.

CONCLUSION

Sabrina Yu's work on Jet Li highlights the transcultural receptions of Li's films and star persona vis-à-vis discourses on, among other things, 'gender, sexuality, genre, race, nation, and cultural identity' [Yu 2012: 185]. Despite the diverse and at times even conflicting images of Li perceived by audiences across different social and cultural contexts, they are crucial to the construction of Li's transnational screen persona. Without these incoherent, often fragmented personae, Li would not have developed the flexibility that mesmerizes audiences around the globe. By incorporating martial arts into acting and performing antagonistic roles in Hollywood, Li demonstrates that Asian kung fu heroes are not merely fighting machines but real actors with acting skills. Furthermore, his transnational success has paved the way for the rise of 'martial-art house' blockbusters and the transnationalisation of Chinese stars as well as cinema.

Finally, I am glad that Yu spent the last chapter discussing Li's low-key, even humble offscreen persona as an ordinary man. Compared with Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and even Donnie Yen, Li's subtle strategy of not stressing the continuation of onscreen performance in his off-screen life gives him a greater flexibility in experimenting with new roles and incorporating different technological mediations, which may also lengthen his film career in an age of digital reproduction. This motif resonates with Yu's empirical endeavor whereby she brings the often-neglected discourse of fandom to academic studies of transnational kung fu stardom by reading innumerable fan letters, forum replies, and blog entries. Amidst the everyday, down-to-earth comments written by fans across the spectrum of race, class and gender, Yu uncovers that the engaged commentary produced by ordinary fans does in fact yield valuable insights shared by (if not more interesting than) scholars who treat Li merely as a text rather than as a real person devoted to philanthropy, wushu promotion, and Buddhist philosophy. Perhaps Li's transnational career can best be summarized with the following formula: to become a *lethal weapon* in transnational stardom, Li has to forget about *kissing* women and metaphorically *die*; only then will he have the chance to become *the one* who may finally unleash his star power and become a *fearless* transnational kung fu *hero*.

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