

**Martial Arts in The Movies:
American culture will never be the same**

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Introduction

Movies have always been an influence on American culture. Clark Gable took off his shirt in *It Happened One Night* and revealed his bare chest. Overnight, sales of undershirts dropped. Marlon Brando and James Dean popularized the white T-shirt/jeans look, giving youth a new way to rebel. Ralph Macchio as Daniel-san in *The Karate Kid* had kids signing up all across the country for karate classes. Martial arts in particular have had an effect on American culture, which in turn has contributed greatly to how we view martial arts in general. This paper will describe and explain various ways that this has been done.

Chinese/Hong Kong Martial Arts Films

Being one of the biggest areas of martial arts moviemaking, Hong Kong is the place people usually think of when they hear "Kung Fu" or "Martial Arts."

The Beginning

The first martial arts films out of China did not feature authentic martial arts. Founded around the turn of the century, the Chinese film industry was born in a time when traditional values were being challenged by Western culture. As such, interest declined in authentic martial arts, and the first films involved artificial elements usually with supernatural abilities such as sword sorcerers, palm powers and flying. This

changed when the Hong Kong film industry produced the first of the Wong Fei Hong films. These films, having discarded the more stage-driven elements of the earlier films and replacing them with authentic martial arts forms, weapons and styles, also cemented the role of the martial arts instructor as an invaluable member of the production team.

American Impact

One may wonder how foreign, culturally distinct films that are subtitled have come to have such an amazing impact on the American audience, when fifty years ago the main focus of these films was only just starting to be introduced in the States. While the language may be different, the ideas behind the films may be a lot more familiar than one might realize.

Similar to a lot of our “blockbuster” films, their format relies less on literary devices and more on non-stop action. Now the usual assumption is that action equals entertainment; if this is the case, then a Kung Fu film is nothing if not entertainment! Action is an easy concept to understand, and it holds the attention as long as it's on screen. One doesn't watch the movie to grasp some deeper meaning; the motive is enjoyment, not spiritual enlightenment. Therefore, when this attitude is taken towards these films, "Hong Kong" as a place and culture becomes "Hong Kong" as a type, a style emptied of all "meaning and 'foreignness', except for, and because of its association to, the notion of entertainment" (brightlightsfilm.com).

The 1960's were the golden era of the Hong Kong Studios, but distribution was mainly limited to Asian countries. This all changed when Bruce Lee came onto the

screen. Maybe not the best martial artist, he had something that others at the time didn't: a personality and charisma that translated well to the screen. He was an actor first, having done many films as a small child. Many of his contemporaries at the time were excellent martial artists, but they did not present a compelling persona outside of their skills. Bruce Lee was able to combine the two and in doing so brought the unarmed genre of martial arts film to worldwide prominence. Not only did he present a realistic view of how martial arts are done, but defined a whole genre.

The term "Kung Fu" had been mainly reserved to Hong Kong, but when Bruce Lee gained prominence, suddenly every unarmed martial arts movie anywhere was called a "Kung Fu" movie, whether it actually had any kung fu in it or not. Even in this small way, Bruce Lee had a huge impact.

Japanese Martial Arts Films

In some ways a direct contrast with the Hong Kong style of martial art film, the Japanese samurai film brings not only sword fighting and action, but "philosophy, politics, and complex states of mind, all wrapped up in the beauty and stunning simplicity of the Japanese aesthetic" (Galloway 21). While most martial arts films, being Asian in origin, have a deep and centered cultural orientation, the samurai film will not only be Japanese in the material it presents, but also in the style it is shown. Because of this, many of the underlying metaphors, such as falling cherry blossoms symbolizing the suddenness of death or momentary nature of youth, may be instantly recognizable to a Japanese audience, but are less than obvious to Western viewers. Therefore, it may be no

surprise that the samurai film is set slightly more to the side in the public eye than perhaps its less complex cousins. That is not to say, however, that these films have not made an impact.

The Main Man

The most well-known Japanese director in the west, Akira Kurosawa is the man who has influenced, and been influenced by, Western culture more than any other. A disciple of John Ford, he has adapted Shakespeare, and at times his films were even accused of lacking "some intrinsic Japanese quality" (Galloway 32). However, aside from the many international awards that his movies garnered over the years, a few were even remade into American classics.

The movie *The Magnificent Seven* is directly taken from *Seven Samurai*. *A Fistful of Dollars*, Clint Eastwood's first movie as The Man With No Name and his breakthrough role, was a remake of *Yojimbo*. (Before this movie, if a person was shot, the camera would focus on the shooter, who would then shoot. It would cut quickly to the person shot, who would be hit and fall to the ground. The first scene in the movie where someone was shot was filmed over the shoulder of the shooter, as if one was standing right there.) Even *Star Wars* takes part of its plot from Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress*, such as the bumbling duo, the tough princess, and the idea of moving through dangerous territory while on a mission. In fact, many of the costumes were influenced by Japanese design, and the idea of the lightsaber being central to the Jedi's life was taken directly from the Japanese view of the sword.

The Other Main Man

The most widely influential Japanese actor of the twentieth century, Toshiro Mifune had a range and intensity that had not been seen before. Making sixteen films with director Akira Kurosawa (and cementing their partnership in history along with the likes of Wayne/Ford and De Niro/Scorsese), Mifune forever immortalized his roles in movies like *Seven Samurai*, *Yojimbo* and *Rashomon*. Although he acted in many other roles, his samurai portrayals are what he's remembered for best.

All of Kurosawa's films that were remade in the States also starred Mifune. Included in those mentioned above is *Rashomon*, which was also remade as *The Outrage* (1964, Directed by Martin Ritt). Mifune's performance, combined with Kurosawa's directing, made these movies good enough to remake, and in turn gave America some of its best Westerns. Mifune's influence was even farther reaching still; one example is Robert Conrad (star of TV's original *Wild Wild West*), who based his character's movements on him.

"Real" Martial Arts

Training in martial arts will enable one to do incredible things. It solidifies one's body, making it able to strike and kick with amazing veracity. It allows one the path of peace of mind and teaches how not to lose self-control in any situation. However, according to filmmakers everywhere, it also teaches how to leap across chasms, run along

treetops and defeat a hundred men at once with super-human strength. The ideas that most people have about martial arts come from how they've been portrayed in the media, many having nothing to do with what one actually learns.

One of the most notoriously mis-portrayed martial arts is ninjutsu. In the early to mid-80's, ninja movies were everywhere. The first one to start this craze was *Enter the Ninja*, about an army vet who travels to the Philippines and has to battle his rival, along with a landgrabber who wants his friend's property.

Most ninja movies show the ninjas wearing black uniforms, or sometimes white or multicolored. While there is some truth to the first two, the last is pure showbiz. However, most of their work was done in their normal clothes or some other disguise, such as a farmer or priest. Many ninjas were servants in Japanese houses, not worth noticing by the upper class and having unrestricted access. Most of the time their job would be to spy or spread disinformation. Only on rare occasions would they actually need to directly kill someone. If this was the case, they wouldn't need to sneak in and stab them with a sword; some poison in the tea was a much more effective method.

America and Martial Arts

The impact of martial arts on our culture cannot be overstated, yet it is so often under looked. It has ingrained itself so deeply that most people today take it for granted, whether in a movie, on TV, or even on stage. They don't realize that forty years ago, the American public held the concepts of martial arts and action quite separate. Fighting,

indeed even action in general, was more of just slugging away at one's opponent until they dropped. It was very one-dimensional.

When martial arts were introduced to American movies, they didn't just make people want to be superhuman and sign up for classes; they revolutionized the American concept of fighting. For instance, up until the 1970's, any American fights that were done were fought with the hands. If one used their feet, then they were considered a wimp. Now, if one just started swinging they would look clumsy and lacking in skill (not including boxing). The full body is used to fight, and the victor uses theirs more efficiently.

Similar?

One of the biggest similarities with specifically Hong Kong films can be found in the classic Hollywood Western. In "classical" Hong Kong martial arts films, positive feats of violence are the best expression used when trying to show Chinese identity, thereby making violence "a desirable enactment of nationalism" (ejumpcut.org). By creating a national identity associated with acts of violence, the mythological manner in which the Hong Kong martial arts film functions can be considered very similar to the classical Hollywood Western within the context of the United States.

Kids and Martial Arts

As mentioned earlier, martial arts cinema is all about action, and nobody absorbs action like children. Their attention spans being shorter than adults, filmmakers often try to make movies aimed at kids more visually appealing. Usually, that translates into action (and lots of it!), some of which contains martial arts or the influences thereof.

Violence has always been a part of children's film and television programming. Usually this has been Looney Tune-type explosions, or slaying of the dragon (even Disney musicals are incredibly violent). Nowadays, with the inclusion of martial arts and a little comedy, shows like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *Samurai Jack*, or recent films such as *Kung-Fu Panda*, showcase actual fighting to younger viewers. Whether this is good or bad is not the purpose of this paper. However, when talking about influence, certain films have made a bigger impact than others.

Karate Kid

When talking about children and martial arts, few movies have had as great an impact as *The Karate Kid*. A classic tale of the underdog rising above his enemies, this movie stormed the nation with its catch phrases and moves like the "crane kick." Sayings such as "wax on, wax off" have been quoted and referenced in countless situations, and the calm demeanor of Mr. Miyagi is now the standard portrayal of the wise sensei (incidentally, the founder of Goku-ryu karate was named Chojun Miyagi).

Conclusion

In our modern time, martial arts have always been influenced by film, and vice versa. Without exposure to a mass audience, martial arts would have taken a much slower route to general acceptance. In some people's minds, stigmas still underline what is predominantly an Asian art, but with inclusion in popular film martial arts have gone on to influence theater, dance, even ice skating. A more fluid idea of what action can be has created mega trendsetters like the *Matrix* series and has directly contributed to the entire video game industry, among other things. All of this would not have been possible if a few people in the beginning had not given America, and the world at large, a taste of how martial arts can really be.

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