

**HEROES & VILLAINS OF THE EAST:
A COMPARISON OF THE PORTRAYAL OF THE
JAPANESE IN CHINESE AND HONG KONG
MARTIAL ARTS CINEMA IN THE 1970S AND 1990S**

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Introduction

A society can be defined not only by what it believes in or what it stands for, but who or what it stands against. An effective and frequently overlooked method of defining a society is to analyze its popular culture, particularly with regard to the villains faced by its heroes, historical and fictional. Whether in Greek and Roman epics, the Arthurian romances, or in superhero comic books, villains reveal as much about their culture of origin as the heroes, especially said culture's fears and concerns, such as domination or assimilation by foreign powers.

Chinese martial arts films are a perfect example of how the villains in a society's popular culture reflect its ideology. The abundance of foreign villains in Chinese martial arts films – namely the Manchus, western opium dealers, and the Japanese – reflects China's strong nationalist ideology, a great deal of which is based on the idea of resistance to foreign invaders and would-be conquerors, the Japanese included (Nathan and Ross 1997, 32-34). This sense of resistance is not limited to military force, but also to cultural influence, a concern which has been expressed in such martial arts films as *Once Upon a Time in China* (1991) and the more recent *Fearless* (2006).

Among these various foreign foes, it is the Japanese who are the most noteworthy nemeses of Chinese martial arts heroes because their portrayal has evolved and changed over time, while the portrayals of other foreign conquerors and invaders have remained the same. Beginning in the early 1970s, arguably the apex of martial arts cinema, one can detect a decade-by-decade evolution in the cinematic representation of the Japanese, from vicious anti-Japanese sentiment to grudging respect, eventually leading to more well-rounded, respectable, and likeable Japanese characters appearing in Chinese and Hong Kong martial arts films. Considering the hostile history between the two nations, it is intriguing to see how the Japanese are portrayed at a certain point in time, and how China and Japan were getting along in the real world concurrently. It will be observed in this

paper that the cinematic portrayal of the Japanese and the Chinese governments' official attitude towards Japan do not always match, and are at times complete opposites.

This essay will compare and contrast the portrayal of the Japanese in martial arts films in two specific time periods: the 1970s, when the portrayals were racist and derogatory, and the 1990s, when Japanese characters were finally allowed to be well-rounded, fully-developed characters. The changes in the portrayal of a long-time enemy are especially noteworthy in the realm of cultural analysis, and the films that reflect this change are a valuable tool for any cultural historian wishing to explore Sino-Japanese relations.

The 1970s

As previously mentioned, in the 1970s, Japanese characters in martial arts films were exclusively villains. If they were not the main villains themselves, they would serve as henchmen, as they did in such films as *King Boxer* (aka *Five Fingers of Death*), *The Way of the Dragon* (aka *Return of the Dragon*), and *Death Duel of Kung Fu*, in which Japanese characters were depicted as ruthless cold-blooded murderers, arrogant mercenaries, and seductive femme fatales, respectively. Their motivation often seemed to be doing evil for evil's sake. Even if there was no mention of Japan itself as a nation, it seems as though audiences were meant to automatically assume that when a Japanese character first shows up, he or she is intended to be a villain, either by character performance, background music, or other cinematography methods to enhance the mood of a scene and the sense of menace a character creates. However, the idea of the Japanese being the main villains was an essential plot point for several important films.

Putting these films in historical and cultural context will reveal that this literally hateful attitude seems to clearly stem from anger over the conflicts between China and Japan during the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century—the outbreak of Japanese imperialism. Japan made numerous attempts on its part to conquer China, both through direct armed conflict (Henshall 2001, 92) and strategic chipping away at China's strength (Chai 1972, 13). A popular conspiracy theory claims that in the infamous Mukden Incident of 1931, which sparked hostilities between China and Japan during World War II, the Japanese sabotaged their own railway and blamed the Chinese for it, giving them an excuse to go to war (Ferrell 1955, 66-67).

Furthermore, the Japanese committed numerous war crimes against the Chinese and other nations it conquered, such as the Rape of Nanjing (Brook 2001, 676-677; Yang 1999, 844) and the atrocities performed by Unit 731 (Baader, et. al. 2005, 220-224), none of which have been forgotten by the Chinese. Certainly the wounds the Japanese left behind would not yet have healed. Therefore, when analyzing the evolution of the portrayal of the Japanese, one should not be surprised that the farther back one begins looking at the films, the more hostility and hatred one finds in Chinese martial arts movies.

Among the first films to delve into anti-Japanese sentiment was *The Chinese Boxer* (1970), one of countless stories about a lone Chinese martial arts student out to avenge the death of his master and fellow pupils. The perpetrators are the Japanese masters of a rival karate school, who are also racketeers involved in gambling and protection rackets (Pollard, 2005). While often overlooked, *Chinese Boxer* is a significant entry in the martial arts film genre because it is one of the first straight martial arts films, also known as *kung fu* or “chop socky” films, as opposed to the *wuxia pien* genre, which consists of fantasy swordplay stories supported by elaborate choreography and special effects. It is interesting to note that the so-called “chop socky” genre of martial arts film and the trend of the Japanese as villains began with the same film.

The next, arguably best-known, and most important example of the “Chinese vs. Japanese” theme of this time period was 1972’s *Fist of Fury* (US title: *The Chinese Connection*), starring martial arts cinema icon Bruce Lee. While similar in plot to *The Chinese Boxer*, the vilification of the Japanese and the related sense of Chinese nationalism is stronger in *Fist of Fury*, and is therefore worthy of a more in-depth analysis. Furthermore, the plot of *Fist of Fury* is loosely inspired by the true story of the mysterious death of martial arts master Huo Yuan-jia, the founder of the Ching Woo Athletics Association, who was allegedly poisoned by the Japanese (United Kingdom Ching Woo 2004). While Huo’s death might not be seen as particularly noteworthy as part of the bigger historical picture, it had a tremendous impact on future Chinese martial arts films and the demonization of the Japanese within these films. In order to understand why, in the absence of solid historical record, we must look to historiography, folk legend, and even mere rumor about Huo Yuan-jia for the answers.

After the humiliation China endured at the hands of foreigners during the Boxer Rebellion, Huo’s victories over a Russian wrestler (1901)

and a British boxer (1909) were a source of inspiration to the Chinese, who were proud to see one of their countrymen able to overcome a foreigner in combat (United Kingdom Ching Woo 2004). After his death, rumors began to spread that he had been poisoned by a Japanese doctor who suddenly disappeared from Shanghai soon afterwards. Whether Huo was actually murdered and poisoned by the Japanese remains unknown, but Ching Woo's website continues to perpetuate the claim that the Japanese were responsible for Huo's murder. When it comes to the life of Huo Yuan-jia, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between reality and rumor, but it may be said that when it comes to creating a hero, truth does not always matter. In any event, regardless of what is fact and what is legend, the Japanese would receive the blame for decades in numerous movies based on Huo's life and mysterious death, and *Fist of Fury* was the first of many cinematic examples of this.

The film revolves around Lee's character, a disciple of Huo named Chen Zhen who is devastated to learn of his teacher's sudden death. Towards the beginning of the film, at a memorial service held at Huo's Ching Woo school, members of a Japanese martial arts school force their way inside and challenge the students of Ching Woo to a fight while deriding the Chinese and giving them a banner reading "Sick Men of Asia." Chen Zhen's anger quietly begins to boil, but before it has the chance to erupt, his senior pupils tell him not to accept the challenge to honor the peaceful teachings of Huo Yuan-jia, who discouraged such competitions between schools. This can be seen as a more subtle swipe at the Japanese, portraying them as violent and eager to attack, while the Chinese are peaceful and dignified, refusing to resort to unnecessary violence.

Although forced to back down and endure the humiliation at Huo's memorial service, Chen goes to the Japanese *dōjō* (school) on his own, bringing the "Sick Men of Asia" sign with him, and proceeds to single-handedly thrash all of the students and teachers. When the battle is over, Chen's anger is still not appeased and he takes out his anger on the furnishings of the school, even striking portraits and photographs of the school's founders. While this may seem like a mere act of rage, this is actually an insult of the highest order (Shou, 1995, DVD commentary), akin to striking one's memorial tablet or defiling a headstone.

The Japanese retaliate, coincidentally attacking Ching Woo while Chen is away. They defeat the Chinese students and try to destroy Huo Yuan-jia's memorial tablet, which one student defends with his own body, howling in agony as a Japanese fighter stomps on his back again and again.

It is interesting to note that the actions of the Japanese are not all that different from Chen's, including the desecration of the image of a school's founder. However, Chen's "visit" to the Japanese school is portrayed as a justified reaction to the events at Huo's memorial, while the Japanese assault on Ching Woo is treated as an act of sheer ruthlessness and villainy. While one reason for this slant is that the Japanese provoked Chen's initial reaction, and while the Japanese attack cannot be excused, another possibility is that to the filmmakers any assault on the Japanese by the Chinese is justified, while any attack by the Japanese is an act of villainy.

Chen later makes the discovery that members of the Japanese school, working undercover at Ching Woo, were responsible for poisoning Huo, and vows revenge. One curious aspect of this scene involves Chen stumbling across a Japanese infiltrator who poses as Chinese, and Chen is able to tell that the man is Japanese just because he is not wearing a shirt, implying racial differences between the Chinese and Japanese. One must also wonder why, when interrogating the murderer as to his motives, Chen does not wait for an answer before literally beating the man to death. Throughout the film, no motive for Huo's murder or the Japanese instigation of hostilities is ever given, and perhaps none is considered necessary. The Japanese are either acting out of malice towards the Chinese, or even engaging in evil for its own sake. This may be another way of portraying the Japanese as evil by saying the Japanese do not even need reasons to behave as they do.

The rivalry between Ching Woo and the Japanese school flares up to the point that Suzuki, the Japanese headmaster, orders his students to murder all the Ching Woo students. After Chen successfully returns from his mission of vengeance, he finds that most of his fellow students have been murdered, women and children included. The only other survivors, the ones looking for Chen, angrily declare that Chen was right for fighting back against the Japanese instead of trying to maintain peace. Previously, they had not supported Chen's actions, considering them to be unnecessarily provocative. This is a clear message that foreign abuses must be answered and avenged instead of tolerated.

Fist of Fury was a phenomenal box-office success by all accounts, and many fans consider it to be the quintessential Bruce Lee movie, let alone a highlight of the martial arts genre. While it can be assumed that Lee himself and his martial arts abilities were certainly enough to draw audiences, the nationalist theme and the anti-Japanese sentiment within the film might have also contributed to its popularity. *Fist of Fury* emphasizes

nationalism beyond mere anti-Japanese racism. Before Chen discovers his master was murdered, his anger towards the Japanese stems from their “Sick Men of Asia” comment. Chen’s patriotism is flaunted throughout the film, most notably in a scene in a public park, where a posted sign decrees that dogs and Chinese are not allowed to enter. When mocked by the guard at the entrance and by Japanese passersby, Chen lashes out at them, kicks the sign off the wall, and shatters it in mid-air, a scene that often is received with applause from Chinese audiences (Omatsu). Before he surrenders to Shanghai’s Japanese authorities, he forces them to promise that they will not persecute the Ching Woo for his crimes. The chief of police, who is Chinese, promises to look after the school, reminding Chen that “I am Chinese too.”

Throughout the 1970s, numerous martial arts films would carry on the theme of Chinese vs. Japanese, including *Hapkido* and numerous “sequels” and knock-offs of *Fist of Fury*. Surprisingly, however, the 1970s was a period in time in which relations between China and Japan were improving. Normalization negotiations between the two nations commenced in 1972 after years of semi-official trade agreements. Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei met with Zhou Enlai in China, where the two announced the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two nations on the condition that Japan sever its ties with Taiwan. This allowed trade between China and Japan to expand without limitation or restriction, and China became Japan’s third-largest export market in 1975 (Nathan and Ross 1997).

If relations between Japan and China were indeed improving around this time, why then is the cinematic portrayal of the Japanese exclusively negative? There are presently no records or director’s notes by the filmmakers that can be looked to as an answer, and so one can only speculate. Perhaps the films were a reaction to the improving relations between China and Japan, or an unwillingness on the part of the people to forgive Japan in order to benefit China. The frequent presence of Chinese collaborators with the Japanese, as seen in *Chinese Boxer*, *Fist of Fury*, and *Hapkido*, may be a response to this, condemning Chinese politicians and “collaborators” for getting friendly with their former enemies for their own personal gain. Alternatively, it may be as simple as the people not willing to forgive their former foe, even though the government is. Because Hong Kong was a British territory and free of the restrictiveness and authority of the Chinese Communist Party’s ideology during this time, it is unlikely that the anti-foreign nationalism that is so much a part of CCP doctrine is the

same sentiment expressed in films from Hong Kong.

Of course, there is an exception to every rule, and such an exception to the “Japanese are always evil” rule exists in this time period – namely, Lau Kar-leung’s *Heroes of the East*, also known as *Shaolin vs. Ninja* (1978). The plot involves an arranged marriage between Chinese martial artist Ho To and Kung Zi, who is Japanese, despite her Chinese name. Kung Zi is also a martial artist, but one who only practices Japanese styles and spurns Ho To’s offer to learn Chinese styles. Kung Zi’s refusal to adapt to Ho To’s traditional Chinese lifestyle results in conflict between them, followed by Kung Zi’s return to Japan. However, Ho To does not let her go that easily, and tricks her into coming back by deriding Japanese martial arts in a letter, hoping she will return for a rematch. While that part of his plan does succeed, she also brings seven Japanese martial arts masters with her. Ho To prevails against them all, although he does not kill them, and he and his wife reconcile.

Despite the film being a variation of the “Chinese vs. Japanese” theme, the treatment of the Japanese and their martial arts is quite respectful. Additionally, this movie finally provides Japanese actors and characters with roles beyond mere one-dimensional villains. There is a mutual respect between the Chinese and Japanese martial artists of the film, and they recognize their similarities as well as their differences.

The 1990s

China came into the 1990s smarting from international backlash to the Tiananmen Square Incident of 1989. China was globally isolated, by and large, and in need of loans from Japan. Japan ended up becoming one of the Group of Seven, a collective of nations that would agree not to condemn China’s actions in Tiananmen Square as well as other human rights abuses. For their part, China let up on its hostility towards Japan, allowing for more cordial, if not friendly relations (Nathan and Ross 1997, 89).

In a likely reflection of this new era of cooperation, Hong Kong martial arts films would progressively portray the Japanese in a more sympathetic light, including Japanese characters that are not villains or antagonists in any way, shape or form. It may have been realized that China would be thought of as hypocritical for demonizing Japan’s war crimes while the international community considered China to be no better. Another possibility was that some Chinese might have been grateful to the Japanese for loaning their country money when nobody else would. But

however it came about, a new era in martial arts films had clearly begun. Two such examples that will be examined are *Martial Arts Master Wong Fei-hung* (1992) and *Fist of Legend* (1994).

Martial Arts Master Wong Fei-hung, known in the United States as *Great Hero From China*, is one of literally over a hundred films about Chinese folk hero Wong Fei-hung, nearly all of which focus on themes of nationalism and Chinese cultural pride. Nevertheless, *Martial Arts Master Wong Fei-hung* makes the most surprising break from the cinematic anti-Japanese tradition by providing Wong with a Japanese love interest. This is especially noteworthy considering the anti-foreign sentiments demonstrated by Wong-Fei-hung in numerous other films, including *Once Upon a Time in China*, produced only two years prior.

Nevertheless, *Martial Arts Master Wong Fei-Hung* finds Wong Fei-hung smitten with a Japanese girl who has come to China with her brother, a samurai named Sakura. Sakura seeks to kill renowned martial artists to prove his superiority to all other warriors; naturally, Wong Fei-hung is on his list. Sakura is portrayed as arrogant and stubborn, not allowing his sister's love for Wong Fei-hung to dissuade him from trying to kill his rival. Furthermore, Sakura is ruthless and merciless when it comes to dispatching opponents in combat to the death. In this context, the resolution of the film is especially surprising. After Sakura is defeated by Wong, Wong spares his life and even prevents him from committing *seppuku*. Sakura accepts defeat and retires to a Buddhist monastery, abandoning killing and violence.

The main villains of the movie, as opposed to Sakura, are British opium dealers conspiring with Qing officials to open an opium den in Wong's home village of Fushan. In fact, Sakura even rescues Wong from an ambush perpetrated by British soldiers. Granted that this is because Sakura wants to kill Wong himself, the results are the same nevertheless. *Wong Fei-hung* was one of numerous movies to feature Wong, as well as other heroes, battling British opium dealers and American slave traders. Perhaps Westerners' roles as villains increased as Japanese vilification decreased.

The other significant film from this time period that must be highlighted, *Fist of Legend*, was released a year after *Martial Arts Master*, and goes even further in terms of showing sympathy to the Japanese in general. *Legend*, one of many remakes of Bruce Lee's *Fist of Fury*, paints Japanese militarism as the "villain" of the film, as opposed to all Japanese in general. Even other Japanese characters, such as the Japanese

ambassador and the students of the rival Japanese school, reflect an understanding of the bigger picture involving the geopolitical climate of the day, and these Japanese characters demonstrate respect for the Chinese. The change in the portrayal of the Japanese was deliberate on the part of the filmmakers. Li, who produced the film as well as starred in it, was responsible for the shift in attitude from the original *Fist of Fury*, wanting to present a more balanced view of the story, and he deliberately avoided portraying the Japanese as one-dimensional villains (Parish 2002, 113).

In *Fist of Legend*, as in *Martial Arts Master Wong Fei-hung*, Chinese hero Chen Zhen also has a Japanese love interest, Funakoshi Mitsuko, the niece of a renowned Japanese martial artist who Chen respects (and who likewise respects Chen). Considering the history of the Chen Zhen character, who is previously portrayed in *Fist of Fury* and its many clones as a passionately ethnocentric nationalist, this is no less surprising than Wong Fei-hung having a Japanese girlfriend, if not more so. He is even willing to leave Ching Woo for her and fight the school's headmaster for the right to stay with her.

The beginning of *Fist of Legend* basically follows the same structure as the original, featuring heroic Chen Zhen avenging the death of Huo Yuan-jia, his teacher. However, there are noticeable differences. The film starts with Chen studying engineering in Japan, and learning of Huo's death after a fight with a Japanese martial artist, Akutagawa Ryuichi. Chen leaves Mitsuko behind, vowing to comeback when the Japanese leave China, and returns to Shanghai and to Ching Woo to pay respects to Huo. Soon after, he challenges Akutagawa to a match to avenge Huo's death, thrashing Akutagawa's students first when they stand in his way. Akutagawa agrees to the duel, and despite the circumstances, there is a surprising degree of cordiality between Akutagawa and Chen, with Akutagawa demanding that no vengeance be taken however the fight turns out. After Chen easily wins the fight, he is suspicious about Huo's death. He doubts that Akutagawa is powerful or skilled enough to kill Huo, and suspects foul play. An autopsy of Huo's body reveals signs of poisoning, and everyone is left to speculate who was responsible and how the poisoning was achieved.

The vengeance plot is sidelined, however, when Akutagawa is murdered by General Fujita Guo, who frames Chen for the crime. Chen is arrested and placed on trial, and it becomes clear that the trial has been rigged by Fujita to ensure Chen's conviction. The Japanese prosecutor refuses to allow any Chinese witnesses to testify on Chen's behalf because

he feels they cannot be trusted not to lie. However, Mitsuko appears as a surprise witness. She lies to the prosecutor, telling him Chen was with her the night of the murder, and therefore shames herself publicly to protect him. This scene alone is enough evidence to how much the portrayal of the Japanese changed over the years, in that a film would show a Japanese woman willing to sacrifice her reputation for a Chinese man.

Chen returns the favor when the residents of Ching Woo refuse to accept Mitsuko just because she is Japanese. Huo's son, Ting-en, the new headmaster, demands that Chen give her up. While this may be fueled by Ting-en being jealous of Chen's popularity, there are also traces of racism from both Ting-en and the other students of Ching Woo. Chen defeats Ting-en but leaves Ching Woo, taking Mitsuko with him. As she sacrificed herself for his protection, he has now done the same for her.

The hero himself, Chen Zhen, has also evolved from an angry nationalist to a calmer, more moderate, well-rounded character. Chen treats his Japanese opponents with a degree of courtesy, if not open friendship, and he receives the same treatment in kind. Nevertheless, he is proud of his Chinese heritage and his affiliation with Ching Woo, and he takes down a group of *kokuryū* members who burst into the university where he studies and try to kick him out towards the beginning of the film. In the recreation of the classic *dōjō* fight, when Chen storms the Japanese martial arts school to fight the man that "killed" Huo, the students demand that he leave because he is Chinese. Chen responds, "Here is China," [sic] and that any Chinese has the right to go where he pleases in his own country. At the end of the film (in which Chen's death is faked, unlike the original), Chen asks where a military conflict with the Japanese would be most likely to take place, and asks to be taken there.

These inconsistencies indicate confusion or a lack of certainty as to his personal feelings towards the Japanese. When Mitsuko asks him at the beginning of the film if he hates the Japanese, Chen replies, "I don't know...in these uncertain times, we [Chinese] may have no choice." Perhaps this is a recognition that hostile attitudes towards others are created by circumstances.

Likewise, Chen's Japanese opponents, except for General Fujita, are no longer the one-dimensional racist stereotypes from earlier films, but men of honor who fight for the sake of testing their skills rather than for the sake of any animosity towards the Chinese. Akutagawa Ryuichi, the Japanese fighter who apparently killed Huo Yuan-jia in a competitive match, is horrified to learn that the match was rigged and that Huo had been

poisoned before the fight on orders of General Fujita. Akutagawa had wanted a fair fight with Huo, and displays genuine anger when he learns the truth about Huo's death. When Akutagawa confronts Fujita, calling him a disgrace to the *samurai* spirit, Fujita kills him, reiterating that the true *samurai* spirit demands victory, even if it means becoming a criminal of history. As mentioned previously, this humanizes Fujita himself, in a way, by giving him an ideology to believe in, rather than making him a killer for the sake of killing. Fujita is the film's only true villain, representing Japanese militarism. He realized that the actions of the military may be considered wrong by future generations, but considers it a reasonable price to pay for Japanese prosperity. In this way, Fujita is also humanized and given depth in a way previous Japanese villains were not.

Throughout the film, Chinese demonstrations of prejudice towards the Japanese are portrayed as unsavory, a trend that began with films such as *Duel to the Death* in the 1980s, but is taken even further in *Fist of Legend*. When Chen's Japanese girlfriend comes to China to be with him, the students of Ching Woo refuse to allow her to stay with them because she is Japanese, and Chen himself is derided by his students as a traitor to the Chinese because of his feelings for her. Chen leaves the school to be with her, but they are unable to find any housing on account of Chinese landlords who refuse to rent to a Japanese. The two are forced to take up residence in an abandoned shack in the countryside, scratching out a living. This provides an interesting twist on the more negative aspects of nationalism and the way it can lead to prejudice and bigotry.

Although *Fist of Legend* is highly regarded by martial arts cinema enthusiasts and is considered to be one of the gems of the genre, it was only a moderate success at the box office (Parrish 2002, 113), and there is no definitive explanation as to why this is so. Li himself stated that he was disappointed by this, saying that because the film had failed to find a broad audience, its message could not be disseminated, although he did not offer an explanation for why he felt the film did not do as well at the box office as he hoped. There are several possible reasons why *Fist of Legend* was not a success, and one of them might be that the positive portrayal of the Japanese may have turned Hong Kong audiences away, though there is no direct evidence for this. *Martial Arts Master Wong Fei-hung* was also not a box office success, and this can be attributed to it being seen as a low-budget attempt to cash in on the *Once Upon A Time in China* series and the *wire-fu* style it popularized. However, as with *Fist of Legend*, the idea of a notable Chinese hero famous for defiance of all things and people foreign

may have kept Chinese audiences away.

The cordiality between China and Japan would not last, as tensions erupted over Taiwan midway through the decade. Beginning in 1995, there were numerous overtures on Japan's part aimed at establishing diplomatic relations with Taiwan, a move that incensed the Chinese. Japan, for its part, threatened to freeze any and all loans to China after the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, presumably alarmed by China conducting missile tests in response to Taiwan's resistance to China's "One China" policy.

As for how this impacted filmmakers in Hong Kong, they may have felt caught in the middle by this tension. With Hong Kong set to return to Chinese control in 1997, it is likely that Hong Kong and its filmmakers would have wanted to back China's play and not show too much friendliness or sympathy towards the Japanese, fearing repercussions following China's reassertion of control. However, instead of returning to demonizing the Japanese, filmmakers for the most part simply ignored themes of space Sino-Japanese conflict.

Conclusion

The evolution of the Chinese attitude towards the Japanese that is presented in Chinese martial arts films demonstrates how perceptions do not remain static over time, and what the catalysts might be that can trigger an evolution in that perception. Furthermore, one can also observe that whatever the political will of a society may be, the will of the people within that culture does not always reflect their leaders' ideals. As has been demonstrated, the cinematic attitude towards the Japanese on the part of Chinese filmmakers has not always paralleled the state of political affairs between China and Japan. This is a valuable lesson that certain world leaders would do well to remember when considering their role in foreign affairs. It is insufficient to simply scrutinize the deeds or listen to the speeches of politicians in order to understand what a country believes in and values. One has to go directly to the people and focus on their popular culture, regardless of any misgivings about the quality or the substance of that means of expression. There is value in everything, and every aspect of popular culture that is overlooked is a piece that remains missing from a puzzle.

With this context now available, it can be understood why the Japanese are exclusively villains in the martial arts films of the 1970s, and why numerous films made during this period involve Chinese nationalists defending their homeland against Japanese invaders. We even see a popular

folk hero, who was allegedly murdered by the Japanese, being transformed into an icon and a symbol of Japanese villainy and the need to fight back against the Japanese and any other foreign aggressors. It does not even seem to matter that the matter of Huo's death has never been conclusively solved, including whether he was even murdered or not. The allegation and the rumor is enough, which is the ultimate sign of bias.

From there, one can observe the beginnings of change in the 1980s, with small steps being taken towards a more humanized, well-rounded portrayal of the Japanese that would continue into the 1990s. There can be no greater example of this than providing Japanese love interests to Chinese heroes renowned for their national and cultural pride, yet willing to accept and care for someone from a different culture – one that has been portrayed as an enemy. Even the villains became devoid of their more over-the-top “evil” characteristics, and were allowed to be given a certain degree of humanity. Perhaps the Tiananmen Square Incident proved to be the catalyst of change, forcing the Chinese to take a good look at themselves and their former adversaries, and forcing cultural analysts to examine the cinematic evolution of the Japanese. Did Chinese come to realize that their cinematic treatment of the Japanese could be considered hypocrisy in light of the Chinese government's own actions? Was it gratitude for Japanese financial support when all others were turning their backs on China? All of these factors must be taken into account when crafting an opinion on this topic.

The films, however, seemingly do not reflect the anger of the Chinese government, who at this time was willing to commence diplomatic relations with Japan. During the 1970s, when the films were at their most hostile, China was looking to make strides with Japan on the diplomatic front, and this may have displeased the local populace. Likewise, the cinematic reconciliation with the Japanese comes during a time of renewed tensions. This further proves that we cannot look solely to governments to express the sentiment of a culture. The voice of the artisans and the way the average resident of that society respond to their works must also be taken into account. With film, it is easy to do so by examining the financial success and enduring popularity of a certain film.

The observations and analysis within this essay therefore reflect not only the changes in perception of a former enemy over time, but also the benefit, relevance, and importance of studying all aspects of a society's popular culture, even a genre that may seem “low-brow” or insignificant to those engaged in cultural studies. Like literature and music, film is a

method of presenting a society as one wishes it to be seen, and a society's cultural self-perception and perception of others is something that must always be investigated in order to understand how a society functions, regardless of how it manifests itself in more high-brow or political avenues.

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