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Accepted Manuscript for the book

The Cinema of Stephen Chow

Ed. Gary Bettinson and Vivian P.Y. Lee

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024

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Way of the Intercepting Pun: Language and the Body in Stephen Chow's Carnival of Kung Fu

Luke White

The English-speaking audiences who first came to know Stephen Chow through *Shaolin Soccer* (2001) and *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004), the films through which he made his bid for global stardom, could be forgiven for understanding him straightforwardly as a kung fu performer. Chow may have seemed cast in the familiar mold of Bruce Lee or—perhaps even more pertinently due to his combination of kung fu and comedy—Jackie Chan. Indeed, as other commentators have noted, this seems clearly to have been a calculation of the studios who made these films (Dumas 2009: 71; Hitchcock 2007: 221–22; Klein 2007: 193). The success of high-end CGI blockbusters such as *The Matrix* (1999), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), and *Hero* (2002), as well as Jackie Chan's recent Hollywood breakthrough with *Rush Hour* (1998) and *Shanghai Noon* (2000), had provided proof that martial arts provided a basis for the crossover appeal of Asian stars. This re-cemented the expectation that Hong Kong's cinema revolves around kung fu action. Chow appeared as the latest new face fulfilling these expectations.

However, Chow had already been for a decade the most popular star in his local market. With over thirty starring roles under his belt, Chow had broken Hong Kong's record for box office takings no less than five times (Klein 2007: 193). The fact that within this market Chow was known not as a "king of kung fu" at all, but rather of comedy—admired by

his fans for his verbal gymnastics rather than virtuoso martial performances—could only have been a source of puzzlement to his new audiences in the West. Evidencing this different conception of Chow in Hong Kong, Linda Lai's pioneering English-language essay on Chow, written just before his international breakout, reads his significance as residing in his witty, creative, quick-fire play with local Cantonese slang, and there is scarcely a mention of his interest in martial arts beyond a brief note that it is one of many seemingly "random" genres his work pastiches (Lai 2001: 246).

Indeed, when we look at some of Chow's most successful films of the 1990s, we certainly get a sense of the way that he spanned a range of genres, often placing himself far from the territory of kung fu. His breakthrough starring role was *All for the Winner* (1990), a spoof of Chow Yun-fat's gambling gangster film from the previous year, *God of Gamblers*. Like many of his other outings, *Fight Back to School* (1991) is as much a romance as an action film, casting Chow as a cop sent undercover as a school pupil, who then falls in love with his teacher. *Justice, My Foot!* (1992), takes the form of a courtroom drama. *Flirting Scholar* (1993), as its title suggests, casts Chow as a member of the Ming-dynasty literati rather than a warrior. *From Beijing with Love* (1994) is a Bond spoof. *The God of Cookery* (1996) parodies a popular televised cookery competition.

However, we would also be wrong to ignore a consistent foregrounding of martial arts references within his work. Chow's *Fist of Fury 1991* (1991), one of his first starring roles, plays on the plot and tropes of the famous Bruce Lee film evoked by its title. From early in his film career, Chow also produced comic *wuxia* (swordplay) pictures, such as *Royal Tramp I* and *II* (1992), which adapted Jin Yong's classic martial arts novel *The Deer and the Cauldron*. He followed these up rapidly with *King of Beggars* (1992), which tells the backstory of Beggar So, the ragged and disreputable teacher of Jackie Chan's Wong Fei-hung in *Drunken Master* (1978), thus writing himself into the mythology of another iconic martial

arts story. *Love on Delivery* (1994) has Chow learn kung fu in order to defend himself against bullies, win the heart of his love, and—as we would expect from a kung fu film—defend the reputation of the Chinese martial arts against the encroachment of Japanese karate. The *Chinese Odyssey* films (1995) and *Forbidden City Cop* (1996) looked back once again into *wuxia* cinema for stylistic and narrative inspiration.

The martial arts are also, in fact, prominent in many of Chow's films that seem to position themselves outside the kung fu or *wuxia* genres. *Flirting Scholar*, for example, is ostensibly a love story and its protagonist Tong Bak-fu is a renowned calligrapher, painter, and poet. Chow, however, imagines his family as having a secret style of kung fu, and the plot is driven forward by his parents' old rivalries with antagonists played by martial arts icons Gordon Liu and Cheng Pei-pei. In *From Beijing with Love*, Chow's knife-wielding protagonist Ling Ling-chai refers to himself as a swordsman, and in imitation of the kung fu trope where a Chinese martial artist is victorious against foreign guns, the climax of the film has Ling, armed only with a cleaver, facing a villain outfitted in high-tech armor and weaponry. In *The God of Cookery*, the hero undergoes training in the kitchens of the Shaolin Temple to defeat his arch-enemy in a cook-off. Although Chow is far from unproblematically a "kung fu star," then, the martial arts and their cinematic history seem to be much more than one of many "random" genres through which Chow constructs his comic persona, and his roles in *Kung Fu Hustle* and *Shaolin Soccer* drew on already-existing networks of association adhering to his star image. These networks in fact go back as far as his role within the *wuxia* television series *Final Combat* (1989), which did much to establish his fame, his star persona, and even many of the catchphrases that became staples throughout his career (Xu 2012: 87).

So how *should* we understand the place of the martial arts in Chow's recipe for a star persona and performance vocabulary during the 1990s? What meanings are produced through his extended engagement with the histories of martial arts cinema? My initial foray above

already suggests there are a set of opposing pairs of terms that might help us think about this relationship: comedy vs. kung fu; language vs. the body; verbal vs. physical comedy; martial vs. comic performance. Threaded throughout my argument here, these oppositions will guide my analysis. They will also draw me toward a further binary opposition, important in Chinese culture but perhaps less transparent for English-speaking readers: that between *wen* (the scholarly) and *wu* (the martial).

My approach to Chow's work emerges from my broader research into the history of Hong Kong's martial arts comedy films and a concern with locating him in relation to this (White 2020). My starting point, then, is to consider the ways that Chow brings comedy and kung fu together in a unique way, which draws on but also differs from previous versions of this endeavor. I shall go on to explore the affinities Chow's work has to the carnivalesque bodies we see in the kung fu comedies of the late 1970s. I shall then also examine some of the ways that these films offered a narrative blueprint for the typical Stephen Chow film. Exploring the ways that within such plot structures Chow metaphorizes martial arts to imagine forms of linguistic and cultural expertise will allow me to further interpret the political or social position that he takes up through a mode of performance that is both strikingly verbal but also deeply rooted in a comic and martial body.

Performing Kung Fu and Comedy

Though comic moments and performances in Hong Kong martial arts cinema stretch right back into the Wong Fei-hung films of the 1950s (and probably before this, too), kung fu comedy emerged as a recognizable genre in the late 1970s, in particular with the success of Jackie Chan in *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* (1978) and *Drunken Master* (1978). Bringing comedy and kung fu together, Chan may seem initially to offer the clearest model for Chow's own formula. However, as soon as we start to think about the nature of Chow's and Chan's

comedy performances, significant differences appear. Although, as with Chow's martially themed films, action sequences in the golden age of kung fu comedy during the late 1970s and early 1980s were often interleaved with banter and/or slapstick, the core of the comic performances of Chan and his contemporaries lay in their gymnastic skills, through which representations of fighting were reimagined in a form akin to circus tumbling. Indeed, Chan, along with many of the other figures responsible for the rise of the kung fu comedy, was initially trained from early childhood in the grueling discipline of Beijing opera with its repertoire of highly acrobatic martial clowning, and this stood as the bedrock on which their extraordinary performances were built (Duncan 2007).

Chow, of course, is not unskilled in martial arts, and they form a significant part of his performance repertoire. As Scarlet Cheng (2003) recounts, he was a martial arts enthusiast from a young age, and his adulation of Bruce Lee was one of the prompts for him to seek stardom—hence one reason, on the level of the personal, that martial arts cinema plays a prominent role in his output. However, Chow rapidly gave up on making virtuoso martial performance his unique selling point in a crowded field of kung fu specialists. Apprenticing in children's television and then drama roles, Chow developed his craft as a comedian instead. Alongside his famous verbal fireworks, Chow's trademark style also involved physical performance, but this was different from the tumbling of the kung fu comedies. Chow was known instead for his use of his face, on the one hand for his stony-faced deadpan delivery (Yu 2010: 220) and on the other for his manic face-pulling—he has been called "Asia's Jim Carrey" (Cheng 2003). Also like Carrey, Chow's comic style involved a high degree of energetic physical slapstick and what Christina Klein (2007: 194) calls "scenes of masculine humiliation."

Where martial arts do have a role in his films, he surprisingly often plays them "straight"—and the obvious reference is usually to Bruce Lee, rather than evoking Jackie

Chan's performances. Often, the aim is to establish a moment of heroism for the character, rather than comedy. A prime example is the final fight in *Kung Fu Hustle*, where Sing makes his entrance dressed as Bruce Lee to take on an army of axe-gang villains, high-kicking them as Lee does his opponents in the Japanese dojo in *Fist of Fury* (1972). When the mode of the fight does turn toward the comic, its seriousness is punctured by Looney Tunes–like CGI rather than Chow's physical performance. We also see the same "heroic" (rather than comic) use of conventional and gracefully athletic *wushu*-inspired kung fu in Chow's fights towards the start of *King of Beggars*, where the aim seems to be to create credentials (for both character and star) of a charismatic and virile male heroism rather than to provoke laughter through movement (White 2020: 163). Indeed, if there is an element of comedy in Chow's kung fu performance, this is usually through the mediation of forms of pastiche. His imitations of Lee are funny, this is to say, precisely because they are imitations.

The other way that martial arts become comic in Chow's films is where such imitations give way to bathos, either in the obviously ridiculous performance of "bad" kung fu, or precisely by avoiding kung fu performance at all where it seems called for. In the final match between hero and villain at the end of *Love on Delivery*, for example, which takes place in a boxing ring, the joke is that Chow's protagonist has not really learned any martial arts, and he survives against a superior enemy through a campaign of dirty tricks and gimmicks: by psyching him out and bluffing; by holding on to his enemy for dear life; with a series of sucker-punches; and by having his coach distract the opponent by throwing a sequence of ever-more-lethal objects up in the air beside the ring. Similarly, in *Fist of Fury 1991*, Chow's protagonist doesn't know any martial arts but just has a preternaturally strong right arm which sends his opponents flying through the air when he hits them. In all this, Chow, rather than a comic martial arts performer, would seem to be best understood as a comedian with a particular interest in the themes and imagery of martial arts cinema.

The role of pastiche in Chow's presentation of martial arts, however, seems to me to point to the overarching logic of his comic universe. This is built on a citational relation to genres and their conventions or stock images. It was the extreme and eclectic intertextuality of Chow's work that made many commentators (e.g. Bordwell 2011: 27; Hitchcock 2007: 219) read it as "postmodernist." Indeed, the famous absurdist "out of nowhere" effect of Chow's humor is often produced by the rapid collision of these mismatched genres. As an audience is whisked from one of these to another, there opens a dizzying abyss of the absurd where the viewer is suspended between different meanings, conventions, and codes. While we thought one set of rules applied, another was already in effect, and, within our moment of double-take, laughter erupts. As Eric Kwan-wai Yu (2010: 215) has pointed out, a similar clash of incongruous modes and codes is often at play within Chow's use of language: contemporary urban slang erupts into a historical drama; common and coarse language is found in the mouths of the supposedly refined; or archaic turns of phrase from 1950s social dramas reappear in the recent present.

This intertextuality has been seen as central to the appeal of Chow's films in terms of their address to Hong Kong identity: the dizzying range of references to the enclave's history and popular culture requires a "local" expertise to recognize, and through this one is addressed "intimately" as an insider (Srinivas 2005). Chow's madcap intertextuality, furthermore, evokes a form of Hong Kong identity in which postcolonial subjectivity is itself experienced as a collage of mismatched fragments. Chow's comedy intensifies this sense of the self as a collage of fragments in globalized, postcolonial Hong Kong by mixing "local" references with images from both Chinese history and Western popular culture: *God of Gamblers III: Back to Shanghai* (1991), for example, locates its hero in 1930s Shanghai, but as imagined in the Hong Kong television series *The Bund* (1980). It mixes in anachronistic jokes about the near homophony of McDonald's and Madonna when pronounced by

Cantonese speakers and sets a song and dance number enumerating the different regional variations of Chinese steamed buns to the tune of "Mambo Italiano."

This may, again, reinforce the sense that martial arts genres are not quite at the center of Chow's work. Chow, by dint of the mobility necessary to his logic of composition, refuses to be held within *any* genre, martial or otherwise. However, the way that this liquidation of genre may represent a condition of Hong Kong identity—and in particular serve as a means of exploring this through the history of its distinctive cinematic and popular culture—might go some distance to explaining the prominence of kung fu and *wuxia* imagery within Chow's mix. Martial arts cinema has played an extraordinarily prominent role within the development of Hong Kong's film culture, its identity, and its affirmation on the world stage. However, such an observation is still clearly inadequate in making full sense of the sheer insistence of martial arts references in Chow's films—and to the kung fu comedy in particular.

Kung Fu Carnivals

A first way we can understand Chow as taking up more than a citational relation to the kung fu comedies of the 1970s, and holding a deeper affinity with them, is in their "carnivalesque" nature. The carnivals of medieval Europe, argued Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), offered brief periods of relief from the scarcity and monotony of peasant life and the oppressive demands of church and state. In them, power was parodied and the world turned upside down in highly participatory revelry. At the heart of carnival, suggests Bakhtin, was a ribald humor rooted in what he calls the "grotesque body." This was a disorderly body always passing beyond its own limits in a joyous abjection, reveling in the most basic functions of life, and resisting any call to proper form or ideal order. Though presented as an analysis of a particular historical moment, Bakhtin's sketch of this popular mode of grotesque realism as offering moments of resistance to social and political domination—written at the height of Stalin's rule in the

Soviet Union—was clearly intended to have a broader relevance to human culture and indeed has found application in a variety of non-European contexts (Stam 1989: 123).

Indeed, a number of authors have used the term to describe Chow's brand of humor (Hitchcock 2007: 222; Lai 2001: 244), and I have elsewhere explored at length the relevance of carnival to the aesthetics of the kung fu comedy films of the late 1970s that followed the formula of Jackie Chan's enormously successful films *Drunken Master* and *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* (White 2020: 43–57; see also Hunt 2003: 110–11). These were posited around a humor that is every bit as earthy, grotesque, and corporeal as Chow's and involved a strong dose of carnival slapstick. Gags about farts and excrement, as well as excesses of food and drink abound, anticipating, once again, the fascination with the scatological and the ribald in Stephen Chow's films of the 1990s.

The kung fu comedies replaced the morally upright heroes of the martial arts films of the preceding years with bratty, mischievous, and often even cynical young protagonists. These usually teamed up with disreputable vagabond masters whose existence at the fringes of society upends the image of the dignified Confucian teacher. The folkloric tricksterism of these characters, who often want nothing more than to get one over on their rivals (see in particular, e.g., *Dirty Tiger, Crazy Frog*, 1978, *Knockabout*, 1979, or *The Young Master*, 1980) in many ways anticipates the "tricky masters" Stephen Chow plays in many of his films. Their dog-eat-dog world of competition and one-upmanship was influenced in its turn by Michael Hui's comedies, which topped annual box-office charts through most of the 1970s. In the case of Hui's films, the device has been interpreted as a commentary on survival in Hong Kong's increasingly cut-and-thrust economy (Lau 2000). Like Chow's heroes, the protagonists of the kung fu comedies are usually underdogs, orphans, and class outsiders.

Just as they offered a new kind of protagonist, the kung fu comedies also upended conventions regarding the bodies we might expect to see in martial arts films. The kung fu genre had been posited around the ideal masculine bodies of its stars—the athletic torso of champion swimmer Jimmy Wang Yu, for example, or Bruce Lee's finely chiseled muscular physique. Indeed, as Lau Tai-muk (1999: 32) has argued, it often seems that the characters these actors played draw their impressive martial arts powers from their perfected bodies. The kung fu comedy, however, presents us with a very different image of the body. Its characters sprout warts and moles or grow monstrous lumps when hit on the head. Their bodies, like those of carnival, are always a matter of excess and of the transgression of proper form. The kung fu comedy's cast of cripples, beggars, the elderly and the sickly, women and children, effete scholars and scabrous monks, the obese and the pathologically thin are all nonetheless endowed with prodigious fighting abilities. These abilities are the product not of the discipline and hygiene of twentieth-century China's modernizing (and usually nationalist) martial cultures; rather, they seem to emerge as an expression of the vital energy of the collective carnival body of the people. The character of the "drunken master" himself, Beggar So, is emblematic of this non-ideal martial body: he is old, stinky, and ugly, he dresses in rags, and is usually under the influence of that most carnival of substances, alcohol. He is nonetheless a peerless master of cunning tricks and kung fu alike.

Kung Fu Hustle offers probably the most familiar treatment in Chow's comedy of such a carnival body, through its depiction of Pig Sty Alley. When we first meet the Alley's inhabitants, it is as they are at their ablutions, displaying—in varying states of undress—a collectively grotesque, comic corporeality. Among them, we soon learn, are a series of martial masters, but their ageing bodies are far distant from the ideal images we might associate with kung fu stars (see figure 1). An impoverished, dirty, and ragged manual laborer is an expert kicker. An effete tailor is a master of Hung Gar. And the balding

proprietor of a donut shop turns out to be an expert in spearsmanship. The skinny and lecherous landlord is a *taijiquan* expert, and his middle-aged wife—perpetually in dressing gown and curlers, smoking a cigarette—can weaponize her voice as a "lion's roar" that shreds cloth and shatters glass.

[Figure 1 here]

Kung Fu Hustle, of course, may stand out in Chow's oeuvre as a tribute to the kung fu comedy genre, as is signaled by the facts that the Landlord and Landlady are played by Jackie Chan's opera-school classmates Yuen Wah and Yuen Qiu and its choreography was overseen by kung fu comedy legends Sammo Hung and Yuen Woo-ping. This might mean we expect to see the genre's devices picked up here in particular. However, we see a similar concern in films before this, too. The team that Sing assembles in *Shaolin Soccer*, for example, is hardly less motley than the Pig Sty Alley inhabitants. Going back further, *Forbidden City Cop* starts with a scene on the imperial palace roof, where Chow's protagonist Ling Ling-fat, a member of the imperial guard, confronts a group of martial artists about to start a duel. They are, in fact, characters from Gu Long's famous wuxia novel *Before and after the Duel*, but in spite of their remonstrations at his prejudice, Ling refuses to believe that they are famous swordsmen because of their extreme ugliness. Such grotesquery often even becomes a hurdle to overcome in the romantic plots of the films, when attached to Chow's leading ladies. For example, Mui (Vicky Zhao) in *Shaolin Soccer* is plagued by terrible acne, and Sister Turkey (Karen Mok) in *God of Cookery* suffers bad teeth and facial scarring.

Mo Lei Tau and the Carnival Body

Jokes made through words, of course, can also be "about" the body, and Chow's wordplay is often on the same Bakhtinian register of "low" or "vulgar" reference to his physical and visual gags (Yu 2010: 216). The very term *mo lei tau*, almost inextricably associated with Chow's output, points to a fundamental link of his films to the grotesque body, even where this occurs through wordplay. The term *mo lei tau* is often translated as "something that comes out of nowhere and makes no sense, a non sequitur" (Stokes and Braaten 2020: 340). In this way of reading the term, *mo* (meaning without) negates *lei-tau* (combining "come" and "head/source") to make sourcelessness or senselessness its defining property. However, other derivations treat it as a contraction of a longer phrase, *mo lei tau gau*—"can't tell head from tail." For propriety's sake, the final *gau* is dropped because of its homophony with a vulgar Cantonese term for penis (Chang 2008: 89). This, of course, would stress the extent to which *mo lei tau* is at heart a carnivalesque metaphor of the body (and world) turned upside down.

As Sherry Xu (2012: 85–86) discusses, a recent dictionary of contemporary Chinese slang derives the term from the broader and older vernacular of southeastern Guangdong, where it seems to refer to slightly different aspects of humor in different localities. Its range of connotations include witty dialogue, senselessness or nonsense, ribald swearing, and madness or mental deficiency. Overall, concludes Xu, it is a form of "earthy or rustic comedy" that permeated the folk cultures of the area. Chow and the kung fu comedy films both seem to have common roots in this popular culture. In fact, Bryan Chang (2008: 89–90) argues that although usually associated primarily with Chow, the first true *mo lei tau* film can be identified as the *wuxia* spoof *Legend of the Owl* (1981), directed by kung fu legend David Chiang. Like shared knowledge of Cantonese slang, this historically specific comedic culture provides a decidedly local reference point for the development of identities and

commonalities of address, while also erecting a cultural barrier to entry for outsiders who may not share the same tastes.

This question of the local as a means for the construction of identity was already growing during the rise of kung fu comedies. Rather than offering stories of national heroism, these presented tales of anarchic independence which were specifically set in the rural world of southern China, and it is no accident that their appearance marks a moment when Hong Kong's martial arts cinema switched from Mandarin to Cantonese. This shift from a national imaginary to a local one—visible not only in language and location but in the embrace of a local variant of grotesque comedy—has also entailed, I have argued elsewhere (White 2020: 55–56), an embrace of what Petrus Liu (2011) has termed, in his analysis of early twentieth-century martial arts fiction, the desire to become "stateless subjects." This sets itself against the state-oriented national political narratives associated either with mainland China or Taiwan that we often find expressed in the kung fu films of the early 1970s. "Stateless subjectivity" instead seeks to imagine modes of the social which do not revolve around the state and its projects. Both the kung fu comedies and Stephen Chow's *mo lei tau* films embrace carnival as a mode that may allow this, one that cannibalizes and satirizes all official (or "high") discourse, marking a space for a popular subject to exist at a critical distance from the cultures imposed from above.

This concern with the construction of the local in opposition to the national had special resonance in Hong Kong during the periods of both the kung fu comedies and Chow's rise to stardom. By the 1970s an increasing proportion of Hong Kong's population—the young in particular—were born in the colony, rather than having arrived as immigrants. The sense of belonging to the political entity of China was made more problematic by both the diverging lifestyle of Hong Kong's Westernized, consumerist economy and the horrors of the Cultural Revolution on the mainland. Cantonese-language television had further bolstered local

identity and, of course, made comedy (as well as martial arts dramas) an important part of this shared culture of the enclave. The success of *House of 72 Tenants* (1973) (the central reference point for *Kung Fu Hustle*'s Pig Sty Alley) and the films of Michael Hui paved the way for the kung fu comedies, just as they also provided models for Stephen Chow. Both *House of 72 Tenants* and the Michael Hui films offered comedy in Cantonese and depended on casts made famous on local television. By the time of Chow's rise to fame, of course, the anxieties of "1997" had added to the desire to assert a "stateless subjectivity."

Ironically, it is perhaps precisely this "statelessness" that has made Chow a growing icon within the mainland itself. Here, as Matthew Ming-tak Chew (2020) has explored, Chow's work of the 1990s has been taken up within a series of internet subcultures in spite of its linguistic specificity and in many ways forms a backbone of what has been called China's "online carnival": a highly participatory efflorescence of often-satirical memes, catchphrases, and video montages within which, as Chew (2020: 129) puts it, "there is no other source—unless one counts the Chinese state and its officials as one—that has generated so many online catchphrases" as Chow. Under the thumb of an increasingly totalitarian Communist Party, Chow's evocation of a popular subject beyond or beside the state would seem to have a particular resonance.

Culture as Kung Fu (and Kung Fu as Culture)

Perhaps precisely because of all that Chow's comic mode shares with the kung fu comedy, the latter also seems to provide the basic typical plot structure for his films, irrespective of the ostensible genre that they inhabit or parody. As Klein (2007: 192) notes, Chow's most typical protagonist, like that of Jackie Chan's *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow*, is a naive, economically marginalized young outsider. Failing this, he is likely to be (as was the hero of Chan's *Drunken Master*) a privileged playboy who meets a disaster that reduces him to a similar

plebeian social status. In the kung fu comedy, there will typically be an extended sequence of punishing training in an obscure, fantastical, and deadly martial art through which this protagonist must transform himself—not only physically but morally and spiritually—into a hero. He is then able to take on the film's villain in a final climactic battle.

Although Chow's films typically take on this basic narrative structure, the martial arts—in cases where they are not directly the means of competition—are often substituted for a range of other activities. In *Shaolin Soccer*, for example, the heroes must defeat "Team Evil" in a soccer tournament. In *All for the Winner*, the competition is in gambling; in *Legend of the Dragon* (1990) it is in snooker; in *God of Cookery* it is cuisine; in *Justice, My Foot!* it is the Law; in *Flirting Scholar* it is poetry, music, and art appreciation.

[Figure 2 here]

Often these other skills are represented exactly through the tropes and techniques of martial arts cinema and as a kind of "kung fu." At the start of *Flirting Scholar*, for example, Tong Bak-fu demonstrates his virtuoso brushwork to paint a picture for a friend. He takes up martial stances and spins, flips, and wields the brush as if it is a sword (see figure 2), all to the accompaniment of swordplay sound effects and heroic music. As he starts to use another character's body as a painting implement, a range of further cinematic techniques are set into play—including wirework—to present the making of art through a pastiche of the weightless flying, somersaulting, and spinning kinetics of swordplay films. Later, in *Flirting Scholar*'s poetry competition Tong causes his opponent to collapse, spitting blood as if he had taken a heavy physical blow, at the force of Tong's superior verses.

A similar device is used in the final battle of *God of Cookery*, where Chow and his antagonist Kok have both learned their cooking skills in Shaolin Temple. As they start to

chop ingredients, they call out their chopping "styles" like characters in a *wuxia* drama announcing kung fu moves. When the cook-off program's presenter praises their "good knife skills," the phrase used is ambiguous: the Cantonese word used, *dou*, could refer to either a cook's knife or a martial artist's saber. The techniques announced become ever more martial-sounding in name. Kok's "eighteen-style frying" and Chow's "dog-beating sauteeing" in fact are clearly references to the "eighteen dragon-subduing palms" and "dog-beating stick" techniques imagined in Jin Yong's famous *wuxia* novel, *Legend of the Condor Heroes*. Like a *wuxia* character, Kok uses internal *qi* power from his palms to increase the heat of his stove. As the competition escalates, the cook-off becomes increasingly literally imagined as a battle, represented through the pastiched poses, sound effects, and cinematic techniques of martial arts cinema.

This metaphorization of the martial arts to imagine non-martial skills can be understood as an artifact of the Cantonese language, where *kung fu* refers ambiguously to both skills in combat and more generally to any mastery developed through sustained effort and self-transformation. However, there seems something very specific in Chow's comic transposition of the cinematic tropes of martial kung fu into incongruously non-martial endeavors. This incongruous transposition in particular crosses the dividing line between the realm of the martial (*wu*) and the cultural (*wen*).

Wen and *wu* form an important binary opposition within Chinese culture and, as Kam Louie and Louise Edwards (1994) have argued in their work on Chinese masculinities, map out the two routes for men towards manhood: one based on the image of the warrior and the other on that of the scholar. The latter, defining the elite class of the late imperial period, was the privileged of the two. There seems, then, a huge significance in Chow's re-spin of the image of martial training to represent activities that seem to belong to the literati and the realm of culture, and which thus imagine the latter as a kind of battle or fight. Just as Chow

produces laughs by crossing the boundaries between genres, here he stages the incongruity of transgressing what is a core cultural-conceptual boundary.

I have already noted how it is through cultural and scholarly activities such as poetry, art appreciation, fine cuisine, and legal argumentation that Chow frequently "fights" opponents. The device of transgressing the *wu/wen* opposition is there, however, even in films such as *King of Beggars*, which may seem more squarely to be "martial arts" stories. Its hero So Chan is a martial arts genius, but, as he is illiterate, he cheats in the written component of an imperial military exam and is crippled and condemned to beggary as punishment. Though he ultimately has to recover his martial arts skill to defeat his enemy, what takes the place of the kung fu comedy's typical training montage is his learning to read and write, which allows him to access the text of the martial arts manual he will use to heal himself. This, of course, turns martial arts from a physical (*wu*) pursuit into a matter of culture and heritage (*wen*), mediated by language.

It seems to me that there are two implications of this transgression. The first is that class is very much at stake here, and this is so within a Hong Kong society that has remained deeply divided in terms of opportunity. Chow's cleaving to the iconography and performance of martial arts is a part of what Yu (2010: 215) calls his "demotic spirit," drawing a connection to all of the underdog heroes of kung fu cinema. So's "training montage" in *King of Beggars* only also takes on a dimension of moral transformation through his parallel plunge into poverty as a beggar. Chow's heroes generally only triumph through a similar moment of social and personal abjection that connects them to proletarian reality as a source of authenticity and hence strength. However, the characters he plays also usually have to carry their combat out in the realm of culture—in the alien territory, that is, of the educated elite—just as perhaps is the case for the working classes in real life.

The second implication is regarding culture as a form of heritage. Coming into possession of this seems important in Chow's films as a resource and a form of power—that is to say, a kind of kung fu. After a title sequence focusing on calligraphic marks, for example, the first shots of *King of Beggars* stress the lineage of scholars and officials from which So Chan is descended, and this is the heritage he must reclaim in order to take power in the world by learning to write. However, the "culture" that Chow's films imagine its audiences need to possess is far from simply a "high" one (just as it isn't only a national one). In their intertextual and citational form, the films themselves seem to be about ownership of a cultural past and we must master their web of references to enjoy them in just the same way that Chow's characters must acquire cultural kung fu. However, it is now the history of Hong Kong's popular culture itself that is being claimed (and beyond that, perhaps, a global popular cinema and culture). Similarly, Chow's signature performances of *mo lei tau* banter—perhaps the key form through which Chow as a performer and his characters alike do battle—involve an engagement with the field of language and letters (*wen*) rather than the body and violence (*wu*). But this is now an emphatically popular, even carnivalesque (and local) form of language that provides the field of play for wit, creativity, and even social and cultural contention.

This might help make sense of the ways that, as Yu (2010: 215) argues, Chow's work is often "vulgar" but seldom "dim-witted." It asserts a kind of a cleverness and mastery of words (as well as the body) that belongs emphatically to the popular, one that competes with the command of language proper to what were once the "literati" (*wenren*). There is ultimately a commonality in the oppositional place that both kung fu and comedy take regarding the scholarly and the elite. While *wen* is associated with the forces of yang (order and reason), both comedy and martial arts have been associated with yin, with the body, and with disorder. Across China's imperial and modern history, of course, both *wen* and *wu* were

highly regulated since they each presented sources of power to be managed and monopolized by the state. However, especially in the wake of the increasing privileging of *wen* as the more legitimate path to authority and status since the Song Dynasty (Louie and Edwards 1994: 145–6), it was the connection with popularity, corporeality, and chaos that the martial arts shared with the comic that, for various regimes, added an urgency to their management. Just as "boxing" was policed—and even at sporadic moments proscribed—the dangerous excess of carnivalesque laughter embodied in opera clowning was also a matter for censorship and control (Thorpe 2007: 78–80, 139). Chow's celebration and amalgamation of kung fu and comedy—his "Way of the Intercepting Pun"—is underpinned by this potential which they share as carriers of a stateless, carnival, and resistant popular subjectivity that subverts the ordering effects of "official," national, or high culture.

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