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Sammo Hung: The Kung Fu Comic's Sublime Body

Luke White

[Figure 1 here]

With his first credit in 1961, the Hong Kong Movie Database (as of 2022) lists Sammo Hung Kam-bo[1] as an actor in a staggering 192 films, as director of 33, producer of 47, and martial arts or action director of 77. Not only prolific and varied in his output, he has also been hugely influential, contributing to changes in choreographic, performance, and directorial style throughout a period that spans the rise and global proliferation of Hong Kong's martial arts cinema—Stephen Teo has called him "a kung fu man for all seasons" (2009: 156). Faced with this bewildering variety, my aim here will be first to offer a brief overview of Hung's significance, and then focus in on one aspect of his career. Within the context of this book, it is Hung's star persona, developed in roles in the kung fu comedy genre of the late 1970s, that is most significant. In understanding this, the central fact to consider is Hung's unusual appearance (see figure 1). Rather than a youthfully athletic, built body such as that of Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan, what made Hung an iconic figure was the seeming contrast between his rotund frame and his prodigious speed, agility, flexibility, and strength. After reviewing Hung's career, then, I will be analyzing the meanings of this unusual star body. This focus will allow us to further understand the threads through which Sammo has tied together his image not only as performer but also choreographer and director.

The Body of Work: Sammo's Genre-hopping Corpus

Hung was born in 1952 and schooled from the age of nine in Beijing opera performance at Yu Jim-yuen's China Drama Academy. There, he was the "big brother" of a group of children who would also become martial arts legends, including Jackie Chan, Yuen Biao, Yuen Wah, and Corey Yuen (Chan 1999: 21–127). Performers from the school's troupe would be loaned to movie studios for

bit-part and stunt roles, and it was during this period he received his earliest film credits. Hung's involvement grew rapidly and by the age of 14 he was assisting Han Yingjie on the choreography for King Hu's *Come Drink With Me* (1966), one of the films that launched the Shaw Brothers studio's "new action era" and gave impetus to the new genre of *wuxia* films that amplified the graphic violence of previous swordplays and paved the way for the kung fu film. Leaving the China Drama Academy at 16, he took up minor roles, performing and directing stunts and increasingly choreographing action for Shaw Brothers. He found work for several younger ex-students of the China Drama Academy—including Jackie Chan—giving them a leg up into the industry (Chan 1999: 117, 157–62). Hung became a favorite collaborator on Hu's movies: we see him, for example, in the famous forest fight of *A Touch of Zen* (1971). He was the choreographer for Hu's *The Fate of Lee Khan* (1973) and *The Valiant Ones* (1975), where he also plays the principle villain.

Hung was also in on the ground floor when the new studio Golden Harvest was formed in 1970, taking on the job of house choreographer for their early action films and working with such stars as James Tien, Carter Wong, and Angela Mao. Where he appears in these, it tends to be as a "bad guy," his size making him a formidable opponent who foregrounds the skill and pluck of a smaller hero or heroine. However, Hung soon also took significant supporting roles—notably in *Hapkido* (1972). In the match at the very start of *Enter the Dragon* (1973), Hung played Bruce Lee's burly opponent, his no-nonsense approach to the physicality of combat (as well as his bulk and acrobatic skill) helping Lee set out a manifesto of his film-fighting philosophy: with both kickboxing and groundwork, it has as much in common with today's "MMA" as classic "kung fu."

For Golden Harvest, Hung also put together the slapstick action scenes for the Hui Brothers comedies. These included a brilliantly inventive fight in a restaurant kitchen in *Private Eyes* (1976) in which Michael Hui and an opponent go toe-to-toe using pans, woks, a swordfish, shark jaws, and even a string of sausages wielded in imitation of Bruce Lee's nunchaku. These hugely popular movies launched the dominance of humor over action at the Hong Kong box office throughout most

of the 1970s. The significance of Hung's involvement in them should not be underestimated in accounting for the development of the hybridized kung fu comedy genre. This combined aspects of the Hui Brothers comic formula with acrobatic and martial performance styles derived from opera (White 2020: 33–8). Although it remained largely a heroic film with prominent comic elements added, Hung's directorial debut *Iron-Fisted Monk* (1977) anticipated many elements of the comic action formula that Yuen Woo-ping and Jackie Chan would cement with the success the following year of *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* and *Drunken Master*. In it, Hung's highly acrobatic action already draws more on the tumbling of opera than the performance of southern martial arts styles that had dominated the preceding years of kung fu's drive to display "traditional" kung fu. These acrobatics were interleaved with slapstick clowning and low, bodily humor. As well as his directorial debut, *Iron-Fisted Monk* was the first film in which Hung was the leading protagonist, and it marks the beginning of his establishment of a star persona.

In the coming years, Hung was a defining figure in the kung fu comedy, both in front of and behind the camera. *Magnificent Butcher* (1979), for example, built on the success of *Drunken Master* to cast him as a pupil of Wong Fei-hung, the character that Jackie Chan had played in that film. Helmed by the same director, it provided something close to an official sequel. In his directorial work, including *Dirty Tiger Crazy Frog* (1978), *Knockabout* (1979), *Odd Couple* (1979), and *The Victim* (1980), Hung developed a comic world of dog-eat-dog competition, borrowed from the modern-day Hui Brothers comedies but now transposed back into a southern-Chinese rural past located somewhere towards the end of the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth centuries. The cynicism with which Hung's characters seek to get one over on each other has been noted by critics and read as reflecting the economic reality of laissez-faire capitalism in 1970s Hong Kong (Chan 1980: 149). Within this fictional universe, Hung developed for himself a comic persona in equal part hapless everyman and cunning trickster.

Hung's action style in this period built on insights gained working with King Hu, who had been instrumental in making the camera itself as mobile as the performers, bringing it into the

action rather than presenting combat as an event on a stage. Though also influenced by the long takes and clarity of Lau Kar-leung, Hung offered a cinematic fluidity where the dramatic movement or cutting of the camera added significantly to the visual impact and excitement of a scene. He also experimented with undercranking (filming at lower frame rates to create the effect of speeding up action) and "power powder" (where a small amount of talc is placed on clothing to be sent out in a cloud when impact occurs). These both added to the sense of frenetic violence, and Hung's choreography came to be known not only for its speed, intricacy, and precision but also for its viscerality: whilst other choreographers "faked" contact between performers, Hung insisted on this, and on presenting it to the camera, often in slow motion (Hunt 2003: 40). Indeed, the intensity of their depictions of violence marks out Hung's comedies from Jackie Chan's. While Chan often sought to make movement dance-like (Anderson 2009: 192), Hung's films revel in physical damage, and this may well be part of his "cult" appeal. We see this with his two wing chun films, *Warriors Two* (1977) and *Prodigal Son* (1981), which are both fan favorites and hover at the boundary of comedy and brutality (Lam 2013: 66; Teo 2009: 156). Where Chan increasingly made chases, acrobatics, and the creative use of everyday objects and environments central to his comedy style—allowing the crossover to a broader market—Hung remained closer to his kung fu roots. If they share a concern with the dexterous use of props, for Hung this took the form of dazzling work with an array of weapons.

The 1980s saw Hung teaming up with former opera-school classmates Jackie Chan and Yuen Biao, who collectively became known in Hong Kong as the Three Dragons. Their collaboration started with *Project A* (1983) and also included *Wheels on Meals* (1984) and *Dragons Forever* (1988). All three were involved in the highly popular Lucky Stars series, which was kicked off by *Winners and Sinners* (1983), directed by Hung. Alongside the martial arts of the Three Dragons, it included an ensemble cast of Hong Kong's most iconic comedians of the era. In this period, Hung also mixed kung fu comedy with the supernatural in *Encounters of the Spooky Kind* (1980) and *The*

Dead and the Deadly (1982). As producer he initiated the craze for "hopping corpse" (*geongsi*) comedies with *Mr. Vampire* (1985).

When kung fu comedy's popularity waned, Hung nonetheless remained an important contributor to the martial arts genres that appeared in its wake. Hung's Vietnam War film *Eastern Condors* (1987) combined martial arts with gunplay and roused controversy about its levels of violence (Logan 1995: 96). As a producer he pioneered the "girls with guns" phenomenon with *Yes, Madam!* (1985), which gave Michelle Yeoh and Cynthia Rothrock their break in action roles. When the trend turned toward wire-fu swordplays in the 1990s, Hung directed one of its finest examples, *Moon Warriors* (1992), and he provided the choreography for Wong Kar-wai's martial art-house classic, *Ashes of Time* (1994). Along with Yuen Woo-ping, he action directed *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004), and went on to choreograph the globally popular *Ip Man* (2008) and *Ip Man II* (2010). He returned to both directing and starring in 2016 with *The Bodyguard*.

Hung also contributed to the globalization of Hong Kong–style action with the TV series *Martial Law* (1998–2000), an action-comedy police drama which pioneered using Hong Kong stunt teams to provide fights for an American production. Evidencing the extent of his international appeal, with *Martial Law* Hung became the first East Asian to headline a US TV show.

The Work of the Body: Contextualizing Sammo's Performances

What emerges from thus reviewing Hung's oeuvre—aside from its multifaceted nature—are two key aspects of his star persona. First, there is the centrality of the comedy genre in forming it: this was key in Hung's rise to fame; it dominates his output in the era of his greatest prominence; and in it, the meanings of his star persona were established. The second aspect, however, seems to introduce a paradox. Though we might expect a comic performer to be involved with more "lighthearted" slapstick (and this is certainly a core element of Hung's performance skill), he is also known for the intense brutality and corporeal "realism" of his combat scenes. I have argued elsewhere that these two aspects are not in fact as opposed to each other as we may expect (White

2020: 82–105). Here, I will analyze the ways this seeming contradiction takes form in Hung's star body.

However, as noted in this chapter's introduction, making sense of Hung's body as a "star text" must start with the apparent contradiction between his bulk and his athletic ability. This is all the more striking in the context of 1970s martial arts stardom. Hong Kong's star system in the 1950s and 1960s had been strongly oriented around female performers, even to the extent that they would take on male roles (Leung 2011: 44). This changed in 1965 with the announcement by Shaw Brothers, of a "new action era." This, it promised, would bring a new, gritty and "realistic" action, in which life and death is decided, rejecting the mildness and "theatricality" of combat in prior films (Gravestock 2006). This was largely incited by Chang Cheh, a critic and scriptwriter who the Shaw executive took on as an advisor. Chang proposed that an ethos of *yanggang* ("staunch masculinity") was necessary for Hong Kong to compete with the American and Japanese action films popular in Shaw's East and Southeast Asian market, which revolved around rugged male leads (Yip 2009: 88–92). Chang developed and promoted a new stable of "manly" stars, placing them in prominent action roles. This entailed a change in the idea of the male martial arts hero as it had been imagined in films such as the popular Wong Fei-hung series of the previous two decades. Wong, played by Kwan Tak-hing, a man with a face that looked like he had been born old, embodied martial virtue as a mature Confucian patriarch. In contrast, Shaw's new stars—Jimmy Wang Yu, Lo Lieh, and Yueh Hua, for example—were young and glamorous, fashioned in the image of American popular culture. They reflected a broader cultural concern with youth and Westernization that was also seen in the phenomenon of the "youth film" of the 1960s and reflected Hong Kong's shift to an increasingly young demographic (Fu 2000).

When Chang started to direct swordplays, his favorite star was Wang Yu, an ex-champion swimmer whose Olympian torso was often on display for the camera. With *The Chinese Boxer* (1970), Wang became the first star of the new genre of kung fu and the blueprint for its subsequent male heroes. In many ways, it is in comparison and contrast to Wang's image that Bruce Lee

defined his own, out-muscling Wang with his built body and showing it off even more than his predecessor. Wang, Lee, and whole a generation of performers were marketed as idols and ideals for emulation: young, handsome, heroic, muscular, and physically capable, not to mention urbane, modern, and fashionable.

The focus on their *yanggang* bodies offers a way to understand the "realism" Shaw claimed for their films. With their intense stylization and melodrama, this clearly wasn't defined in terms of a naturalist aesthetic. Rather, grounded in the viscerality of combat, the on-display muscles of the genre's stars provided the terrain for an intensely sensory engagement with the cinematic spectacle of the body. It is in the materiality of the stars' and audiences' bodies that we might seek a form of realism—one encompassing the different registers of "authenticity" in performance (virtuosity, tradition, and risk or ordeal) that Leon Hunt (2003: 21–47) has observed was central in kung fu cinema's reception. The paradox here is that the star's body is at once a matter of intense *materiality* but is also *ideal*. Kwai-Cheung Lo (1996: 106–7) has thus discussed Hong Kong cinema's muscular bodies as having passed from physical presence into the "sublime." This tension between the material and ideal is constitutive of the typical kung fu star's body, and this is something I will return to in my analysis of Hung.

The development of new images of the ideal, muscular, manly body also had resonance with longer histories of the Chinese martial arts. As the Qing dynasty collapsed at the end of the nineteenth century, reforming intellectuals described it as the "sick man of East Asia," a phrase that conflated masculinity, the individual body, and the health of the body politic. As Andrew Morris (2004) has detailed, one response to this was the development of China's physical culture, first importing Western exercises and then increasingly looking to its own martial traditions as a means of strengthening the bodies of its citizens and their fighting spirit, aiming to reinvigorate the nation as an industrial, political, and military force. This concern with stamping order on the individual body (and hence on society) through physical culture's corporeal ideals was shared across the globe, and was pursued at special length by totalitarian states, both communist and fascist.

Male bodies were the particular battleground for such debates, with national transformation imagined in terms of masculine virility, reversing feminizing orientalist stereotypes. The appeal of the new masculinities of the martial arts stars of the late 1960s and early 1970s, an era in which militant ideas of decolonization and ethnic empowerment were sweeping the globe, was this sense of offering "positive" ideas of Chinese masculinity. Repeated anti-Japanese and anti-Western plots cemented these nationalist significations of the ideal, muscular, masculine kung fu body. But out of this comes a second contradiction: just as it hovered between the ideal and the material, the kung fu star body was a product simultaneously of Western consumerism (in its very production through the machinery of movie marketing, and its reliance on the aspirational imagery of advertising) and an anti-Western, nationalist message. Furthermore, it was both an image of modernist discipline and postmodern hedonism.

Sammo's Kung Fu Carnival

A number of critics have noted, however, that the kung fu comedy marked a movement away from nationalist concerns (e.g. Chan 1980: 149; Hunt 2003: 102). Identity in Hong Kong was increasingly negotiated in terms of the local rather than the national. The heady and turbulent 1960s were becoming a memory, and politics increasingly "disappeared" from public life in favor of a consumerism opened up by Hong Kong's growing economic success (Abbas 1997: 5). For many, the comedy marks a retreat from kung fu cinema's militant ethos, expressing instead the capitalist values increasingly dominant in Hong Kong (Chan 1980: 149; Hunt 2003: 102).

Rather than the ideal bodies of the start of the decade, the kung fu comedy offered the spectacle of a body much closer to the "grotesque realism" that Bakhtin (1984) discussed as typical of medieval European carnival. Like the carnival, kung fu comedies are filled with images of corporeal excess, and their humor revolves around "low" bodily functions: eating, shitting, puking, and farting. Rather than emerging from the perfected body of the virile male kung fu star, martial skill is connected to all kinds of aberrant bodies. The old, the ugly, the drunk or mad, cripples,

women—and, yes, the fat—can all fight with fantastical ability. As martial and acrobatic performance itself was amplified to a breathtaking degree, the body involved seemed to belong less to aspirations toward the ideal than to a carnival logic of the excessive, marvellous, bizarre, or even freakish, evoking the fairground sideshow (White 2020: 38–41).

But carnival is not without problems as a concept. It was overused to the extent it became something of a theoretical cliché. Claims for carnival's "subversive" power need balancing by an awareness of the ways it functioned as much to reinforce as to undermine the social order it mocked (Stallybrass and White 1986: 13–14). Furthermore, there are problems in transposing an analysis based in the specifics of European culture to Hong Kong. However, as Hunt (2003: 111) has noted, the match between carnival and kung fu comedy is too strong to ignore, and anthropologists have suggested that its grotesque mode, with roots in the ancient world, is observable as a broader pan-cultural phenomenon. Certainly, a similar ribald humor is a significant element of the Chinese opera tradition in which Hung, along with many of those responsible for the kung fu comedy genre, was trained (Thorpe 2007). Furthermore, Bakhtin's account, written in Stalin's Soviet Union, was implicitly about modern-day power and its discontents, and some of the most compelling accounts of modern-day carnival have been in the context of colonial histories (Stam 1989: 123).

The notion of carnival, then, may still be of use in thinking about Sammo's comic body. In carnival, the world of scarcity and oppression was temporarily overturned for a day of feasting and freedom in which the hierarchies of the social order were upturned and everything elevated was brought down to earth for mockery. Kung fu comedy cinema offered something very similar for its working class audiences. Rather than a hierarchical ontology of things in their proper, fixed places, on which authoritarian power rests, carnival celebrated becoming and transformation, the passage between bodies and orders as they exceeded their limits, asserting a wild dynamism inherent to the principle of life that resists all attempts to stamp form upon it (Bakhtin 1984: 32). Taking up this grotesque mode, the kung fu comedy similarly reversed the trend for the ideal, beautiful, ordered bodies of kung fu stardom, invested as these had been on the one hand in the modernist call to

discipline and to reason's mastery of the physical, which had recently waned in ideological pull, and on the other the ongoing reliance of consumerism on ideal images.

Enter the Fat Dragon

Sammo's rotund body is a prime example of this non-ideal carnival aesthetic of the kung fu comedy. It is telling that his breakthrough from supporting or antagonistic roles to that of protagonist only occurs within this new framework. Other stars of the genre also depart from the ideals of the previous moment: Jackie Chan, though athletic and muscular, does not have a typically handsome face: his nickname at opera school—redolent of carnival imagery—was "Big Nose" (Feay 2005).

Hung's large frame implies the same prodigious appetites we meet in Rabelais's character Gargantua, whom Bakhtin places central in his analysis of carnival. Indeed, the carnivalesque nature of Hung's body as an on-screen image is made clear in many scenes. At the start of *Enter the Fat Dragon*, we are introduced to the character he plays, Ah Lung, a martial arts fanatic and obsessive Bruce Lee fan, feeding the pigs on his family farm. As Stallybrass and White (1986: 49–59) argue, the pig, with its similarities to human flesh, is the archetypal carnival animal, straddling categories of cultural classification in ways that unsettle the hierarchies of the chain of being. The cinematography lingers on the resemblances between the bodies of Ah Lung and his animals, and Hung plunges through their mass, crawling across their backs as the distinction between keeper and herd dissolves. Underlining the point, a humorously abrupt cut takes us from Ah Lung complaining about the excessive appetites of the creatures he is feeding to a shot in which he himself is guzzling down a plate of food. It is perhaps to alleviate the expense of his appetite that his father suggests he travel into the city of Hong Kong to help his uncle running a restaurant, and the action of the film—a "fish out of water" comedy in which the naive bumpkin is faced with the world of the modern city—is initiated. The equation between Hung's body and that of the pig returns later in the film—and in fact persists across Hung's oeuvre. In *Warriors Two*, his character, "Porky," sells pork

dumplings. In *Magnificent Butcher*, we are introduced to his character, Butcher Wing, wheeling a cart of pig carcasses to his stall, and then engaging in a dispute over them. In a later scene he mistakes his teacher's direction for preparing marinaded pig trotters for instruction on an esoteric kung fu technique to make his own arms and hands invulnerable to injury.

[Figure 2 here]

A second scene involving pigs in *Enter the Fat Dragon*, however, clarifies the basic joke around which the film—and Hung's star persona—is posited. Having arrived in Hong Kong, Ah Lung comes across a stall selling sunglasses in a street market. He tries on several pairs, looking across at a poster of Bruce Lee, hoping to emulate the star's look in his iconic Persol Ratti shades (see figure 2). He gestures across the market and asks the stallholder: "Do I look more like him?" The camera follows the gaze of the slightly confused stallholder toward a cartoon image of a pig in glasses, also on display on the same wall. Slightly unsure of why Ah Lung would want to resemble this, he offers his cautious assent.

The stallholder's confusion sums up the comic premise of the film, which revolves around Sammo's / Ah Lung's mimicry of Bruce Lee in a series of fight scenes, replaying the ideal kung fu body of the star in carnival mode. Ah Lung's very name emphasizes this link. Lung translates as "dragon" and Lee's Cantonese stage name was, of course, Siu-Lung, "Little Dragon."[2] The "Ah," a modifier indicating familiarity in address, already punctures the grand image of the dragon with its associations of royalty and the sublimely elemental. The comedy emerges from the collision of Bruce Lee's abilities—which seem in his films a manifestation of his perfect physique (Lau 1999: 32)—and Hung's overweight body. If Lee's body is sublime, then Sammo performs the short, carnival step from there to the ridiculous.

Hung's identification with Lee is also not confined to this film, and reiterated reference to Lee's prior "star text" became central to Hung's construction of his own. His Bruce Lee

impersonations are repeated, for example, in *Millionaire's Express* (1986) and *Skinny Tiger and Fatty Dragon* (1990). He was brought in to choreograph the new action filmed to complete the 1978 release of Lee's unfinished *Game of Death*. Hung, furthermore, repeatedly came back to the depiction of the martial art Lee had studied, wing chun, not only in *Prodigal Son* and *Warriors Two*, but also through his choreography of Wilson Yip's biopics of Lee's teacher, Ip Man. Hung revisited the role of Lee's martial ancestor Wong Wah-bo, which he had played in *Prodigal Son*, in the television series *Wing Chun* (2006) and played Ip's teacher Chan Wah-shan in *The Legend Is Born: Ip Man* (2010). In these representations, the connection between Hung's and Lee's texts passes beyond the original comic gag, and is played out across a range of genres or dramatic modes, as well as a range of professional roles, a fact I will return to later.

In thinking about *Enter the Fat Dragon*, however, a first task might be to further understand the nature of the humor. The laughter elicited may seem at first to follow the pattern described by Henri Bergson as the fundament of comedy: something high, ideal, or abstract—the work of the spirit—is brought down to earth by contact with the materiality of human existence. Bergson writes,

> When we see only gracefulness and suppleness in the living body, it is because we disregard in it the elements of weight, of resistance, and, in a word, of matter; we forget its materiality and think only of its vitality, a vitality which we regard as derived from the very principle of intellectual and moral life. Let us suppose, however, that our attention is drawn to this material side of the body; that, so far from sharing the lightness and subtlety of the principle with which it is animated, the body is no more than a heavy and cumbersome vesture, a kind of irksome ballast which holds down to earth a soul eager to rise aloft (Bergson 1991: 90).

This, indeed, echoes the satirical function of carnival's assault on the high through low humor. We see this mechanism staged in *Enter the Fat Dragon*'s sunglasses scene. In it, Lung clearly has "a soul eager to rise aloft"—dragon-like—but the "irksome ballast" of his heavy frame

keeps him anchored close to earth, more pig than dragon. In the shape of the pratfall, this bathos is, indeed, a repeated device. Early on, for example, Ah Lung fantasizes about being Bruce Lee whilst being rowed to Hong Kong. Imagining himself stamping on an opponent to finish him off as Lee does in *Enter the Dragon*, his face quivering with grand emotion, Lung is rudely awakened by the realization that he has put his foot through the bottom of the boat. With the boat sinking, Lung has to swim ashore and arrives in the city bedraggled and pathetic. Similarly, the "intellectual and moral" aspirations that Lung draws from his idol, in the form of his dreams of chivalric heroism, often backfire. When he puts down his food delivery to aid a woman by pursuing the purse-snatchers who have robbed her, he returns to find he has been robbed, too.

[Figure 3 here]

Of course, it is not precisely Bruce Lee himself who is the target of this comic deprecation. As his extended concern with Lee's image attests, Hung's performances are works of devotion, artefacts of a self-image constructed through his own fandom. This becomes clear within *Enter the Fat Dragon* in a scene where Lung gets work as an extra on a "Bruceploitation" film. Lung is contemptuous of the arrogant Bruce Lee lookalike who takes the lead role, Tseng Siu-lung (played by Tony Leung Siu-hung, brother of the real-life Lee "clone" Bruce Leung). The two come to fisticuffs, each performing their own impersonation of Lee's style (see figure 3). Lung, of course, is victorious. It is a joke, of course, on the Hong Kong industry's continued exploitation of the dead star's image (as is the whole film), but beyond this, the scene seems to pose questions about the "truth" of Lee. It is not exactly Lee's sublime image itself which is mocked (though its peculiar replication across opponents is certainly a source of fun), but rather Tseng's belief that he can embody this. We could certainly read this in a Bergsonian manner as the "ballast" of Tseng's body failing at the transcendent task of assuming Lee's suppleness and grace. However, Hung's comedy seems more on the side of materiality than this would suggest. At stake in the opposition between

the two opponents is the distinction between the image and substance of Lee: Tseng has the looks and movie dazzle of the kung fu star; however, it is the "fat dragon" who has the actual skill. The contest thus revolves around the question of "authenticity," which Hunt (2003: 21–47) argues is a central concern of both academic and fan discussions of kung fu cinema. If Lee's early death posed the question of whether he was "real" and the task of separating movie effects from fighting ability, Hung offers us a particular answer, separating out Lee's cinematic image and ideal body from the raw physicality of fisticuffs. Hung's "real" Lee is to be discovered in a corporeality that his own body has in seeming excess. Rather than being lodged in the ideal, martial power emerges from the same material body from which grotesque humor emerges. This reverses the "spiritualism" of Bergson: vitality—the grace, suppleness, and power of the martial artist—emerges not from the soul but from something rather like the carnival body.

This materialism, and the concern through it with "authenticity," draw together the comic and non-comic dimensions of Hung's oeuvre both in front of and behind the camera. His concern with brutal impact and the pratfall alike elevates the materiality of the performing body. Hung's large frame turns out to be an apt vehicle for expressing this, as it is all the more subject to gravity and momentum, and serves to give an intense sense of the power that his weight can generate in flying kicks and grounded punches alike.

This concern with the materiality of combat also helps understand the role his emulation of Bruce Lee plays within his work as performer and choreographer. Corporeality becomes a mode in which to replay Lee's rejection of both graceful, operatic movement and "form" in martial arts in favor of streetfighting pragmatism. This is translated into Hung's concern with high impact choreography, and with what Wayne Wong (2017) has theorized through the notion of *shizhan* (combativeness), which he opposes to *zhenshi* (authenticity). The latter term refers to the "authenticity" of tradition, which had been important in the Shaolin films of Chang Cheh and Lau Kar-leung. In contrast, *shizhan*, which Wong understands as drawing aesthetically from the works of Lee, names a concern with the pragmatics of violence, characterized in choreography by speed

(*kuai*), brutality (*hen*), and precision (*zhun*). Wong's example of this is Donnie Yen's performance in the Ip Man films, the first two of which were choreographed by Hung. This *shizhan* aesthetic is more broadly found in Hung's oeuvre, a product of Hung's translation of Lee's street pragmatism into an action style revolving around corporeal materiality. Wong argues that the Ip Man films, bringing together wing chun traditions and philosophies with Lee's combative action aesthetic, unite *zhenshi* and *shizhan*. This is a longer concern across Hung's career, which synthesizes the operatic acrobatics in which he was trained, his interest in southern Chinese fighting styles, and Lee's sensibility for "combative" pragmatism, translated into the spectacle of bodily impact.

This embrace of materiality is also found in the nature of the laughter Hung's comedic work evokes. Here, rather than only a passage from lofty aspirations down into the mire of the body, which Bergson suggests is at the root of laughter, Hung takes us in the other direction too, and this seems quite in line with carnival's celebration of the corporeal. More central than his pratfalls or the slapstick punishment of the fool is the sense of wonder where Hung's "heavy and cumbersome vesture" rises to offer us the "gracefulness and suppleness of the living body." When Hung performs in the style and image of Bruce Lee, it is not to fail in the attempt or to affect clumsiness but to conjure the marvellous from his seemingly disjunctive flesh. One scene in *Enter the Fat Dragon* echoes the scenario from *Way of the Dragon* in which its hero Tang Lung confronts a group of foreigners who are causing trouble in a restaurant and laugh at Chinese kung fu. Like Tang Lung, Ah Lung takes the foreigners out onto the street to confront them, and Hung/Lung performs the same (already comedic) operatic kung fu dance that Lee performs, at the end beckoning his opponent forward. Every Bruce Lee fan knows what to expect next—the lightning-quick kick "dragon seeks path," which stuns his opponent. Puncturing this expectation in a moment of bathos, Sammo's Ah Lung stamps on his adversary's foot instead—but then, before we've quite done a mental double-take, executes the spectacular spinning kick with which Lee then finishes off his opponent, "dragon whips its tail," and does so with grace, speed, and power. The stamp becomes a moment of invention within a witty play on Lee's prior performance.

Hung, then, offers us something very different from the prior stardom of figures such as Bruce Lee. As a comic, Hung doesn't offer us a new ideal, but his performances work with and against the images he parodies and pastiches, taking them through the detour of the materiality of his body. As with carnival, there may be moments in this where the ideal is undermined, but it is also reiterated in Hung's very re-enactment of it. Like the women warriors discussed by Kwai-Cheung Lo (2010: 83–116), Hung—not exactly sick but the "fat man of East Asia," perhaps—re-performs an ideal masculinity from a position seemingly excluded from it, dramatizing not perfection but the struggle to attain it or valorize oneself in its terms. Such struggle is dramatically and psychologically compelling, and in Lo's (1996) Lacanian terms, it might be seen as sustaining the "sublime" ideal not by attempting to fill its place but marking the impossibility of doing so by incongruously presenting himself in its stead. Nonetheless, Hung's image also detaches kung fu's grace and power from normative bodies, highlights their artificiality, and situates them as objects for active play and meaning-making.

Postscript: Ghosts of the Fat Dragon

There are two prominent places where Hung's comic body finds its echo in recent cinema. The most literal is *Enter the Fat Dragon* (2020). In this, Donnie Yen wears a "fat suit" to simulate Hung's proportions, though the plot seems to have little to do with Hung's 1978 film of the same name besides the premise of a chubby protagonist with a Bruce Lee obsession and a loose connection to the tropes of *Way of the Dragon*. The other echo is in *Kung Fu Panda* (2008), which although it makes no direct reference to Hung nonetheless replays the basic joke of a rotund martial arts hero. Underlining the link, Hung's *The Bodyguard* (2016) has a villain say of his character in this, "Boss, he's like a kung fu panda!"

In both cases, changes in cinematic technology change the nature of the laughter. The materiality of Hung's performances was inherent to the conditions of production of 1970s Hong Kong action. This was rooted in the physical labor of stuntworkers such as Hung, which substituted

for the high-tech spectacle Hollywood was increasingly offering in this period (Hunt 2003: 102). The machismo of this competitive milieu also provides a condition of the violence of Hung's films—and, perhaps, the less-than-admirable aspects of sexism and homophobia that dog his directorial output. The broader context for these problematic aspects of Hung's output, of course, is the wider anxiety about Chinese or Asian masculinity discussed above, and the desire to strengthen, purify, and reassert this in the face of feminization and inferiorization that had been so central to the Hong Kong martial arts cinema in the previous decades.[3]

By contrast to the sheer physicality of the work of these stuntmen, however, both Yen's Fat Dragon and Disney's Kung Fu Panda are effects of the digital immateriality of CGI. *Kung Fu Panda*, with its reverent resurrection of tropes from kung fu comedy, certainly seems to replay the carnival fun of Hung's body, and retains a contrast between the light, airborne movement of the Furious Five and the emphatically weighty Po, whose Bergsonian body repeatedly falls, bounces, and wobbles, remaining subject to the laws of gravity and momentum in a way no other character in the film is. This, in fact, turns out to be the secret of his ultimate victory over the film's villain, and at a stretch we might even read the film as celebrating Po's carnival materiality as the source of his strength. However, there is no physicality here: as an audience we also register any grace emerging from Po's soft body as an artefact of the multimillion-dollar technological infrastructure of Dreamworks' CGI machine. From one (slightly unkind) perspective, the banality of the film's "you can be anything you want" message itself is one that denies that materiality of life for a world and a self supposedly as fungible as the pixel.

In *Enter the Fat Dragon*, the padding and facial prosthetics that allow Yen to become overweight policeman Fallon Zhu are also complimented by computer graphics (especially in its climactic battle atop the Japan Radio Tower), making the film at points hardly less an animation than *Kung Fu Panda*. Yen, of course, moves with none of the cumbersomeness of a heavier physique, and wires accentuate his release from gravity. The marvel is once again that of the power of cinematic technology to transform bodies. Po and Zhu alike exemplify our condition of

weightless being amid the digital flows of transnational culture and capital. Sammo Hung's sublime carnival physicality nonetheless haunts their image, calling us back to earth.

Notes

1 In early credits, Hung's nickname was more commonly rendered Samo, but after market research for *Martial Law* this was changed to Sammo to aid pronunciation for American audiences. It also more accurately renders the Cantonese name of the cartoon urchin, Sam Mo (Three Hairs), from which this was derived.

2 The play on Lee's name is complicated by the fact that Hung's stage name as a child performer was Yuen Lung, so there is an element of self-referentiality here, too.

3 Female characters in Hung's films – for example in *Iron-Fisted Monk* or *Magnificent Butcher* – are often sexually assaulted by the films' villains to provide a reason for the hero's revenge, with the act presented as cinematic spectacle for a male gaze. *Encounter of the Spooky Kind* ends with its hero, played by Hung, beating his unfaithful wife brutally and mercilessly. In an article otherwise setting out to celebrate Hung's achievements, Lam Chiu-wing (2013: 68) notes that although sexist representation is endemic in the industry, 'The disdain for women in Sammo's film has to be the worst in all of Hong Kong productions'. For homophobia in Hung's work, see for example his combat with a team of transvestite assassins in *Twinkle Twinkle Lucky Stars* (1985). The effeminate Leung Yee-tai (played by Lam Ching-ying) in *Prodigal Son* might be Hung's most positive depiction of a queer character, but even here stereotypes predominate and form the occasion for numerous homophobic gags. That Hung's films harbour so much sexism and homophobia might well mark a limit to the extent their carnivalization reverses and pluralizes the nationalist narratives of those films or the (ultimately patriarchal) hierarchies and fixed ontologies that their idealizations of the male body supported.

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