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**“Crippled Warriors: Masculinities and Martial Arts
Media in Asia”**

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Crippled Warriors: Masculinities and Martial Arts Media in Asia

Although this essay is concerned with a body of martial arts filmmaking centered in 1970s Hong Kong, I will start with a film released somewhat closer to the present and some two and a half thousand miles to the west of the former British colony. It is one which nonetheless pays extensive homage to the kung fu genre. Surya, the hero of the Hindi action comedy film *The Man Who Feels No Pain* (2018, India, dir. Vasan Bala), is born with congenital analgesia, and while this constitutes a kind of superpower, the film also emphasizes, from the outset, that this is a dangerous medical condition. Surya's neurotic father locks him away from the hazards of the world, but under the guidance of his grandfather, an idealistic but impractical fantasist, he attempts to learn about it by watching old VHS tapes of kung fu movies. It is through these that his sense of identity and his idea of reality and the proper way to act in it are formed, along with his ability to fight injustice through martial arts movements imitated from the on-screen antics of role models such as Bruce Lee. The intertwining of the film's nostalgic depiction of its Mumbai setting with Surya's imitation of Hong Kong media might remind us of the intensely transnational nature of Asian action cinema, both as consumed and produced, and of the images that circulate across it. Echoing its protagonist's obsessions, the film's narrative and its action sequences are constructed through a loving pastiche of movie tropes from Hollywood, Bollywood, and – above all – Hong Kong.

It might also remind us of the importance of the “kung fu craze” in the 1970s in molding the pan-Asian and transnational landscape of popular media on which the film draws. In an era of anticolonial unrest across the world, the global stardom of figures such as Bruce Lee seemed for a brief while to reverse the dominance of Hollywood, offering affirmative images of Asia on the world's stage. The kung fu craze did not just entail Hong Kong cinema breaking into the American and European markets, but also across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. Fore-echoing Surya's enthusiasms, the cultural theorist Vijay Prashad has written of his youth in Calcutta in 1974 as a Marxist and anti-imperialist activist, and of a Bruce Lee poster that adorned his

bedroom wall as an icon of Asian pride and proof that “we, like the Vietnamese, could be victorious against the virulence of international capitalism” (Prashad 2001: 127). For people across Asia and its diasporas, Lee was “the brother who showed Asians can kick some ass” (Pang 1991: 44, quoted in Prashad 2001: 140). Since then, of course, martial arts have become a highly visible aspect of Asian popular cinemas – a part of the “brand” as it were. We are now faced not only with Chinese stars such as Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Donnie Yen, or equivalents from Japan (Sonny Chiba or Estuko Shihomi), but also, for example, Thailand (Tony Jaa), Indonesia (Iko Uwais), and India (Vidyut Jammwal).

In this essay, my focus in thinking about this phenomenon will be the question of how masculinity is at stake within it. Many writers (e.g. Funnell 2014; Hunt 2003: 117–39; Lo 2010: 107–40; Yip 2017: 115–44) have also discussed kung fu cinema in terms of representations of fighting women, and there is certainly a strong tradition of female martial arts stars. However, my focus here will be the ways that the kung fu phenomenon entailed transformations in Chinese or Asian experiences of masculinity. This issue is evident in the example with which I started this essay. Highlighting the link of its thematic concerns to manliness, the title *The Man Who Feels No Pain* was drawn from a line in the Hindi blockbuster *Macho* (1985, India, dir. Manmohan Desai) (see Dalton 2018), and in the film’s trailer, Surya, outlining its premise to camera, explains, “You must have heard ... Men feel no pain. That is my disease.”

The Man Who Feels No Pain is also a useful example for my purposes here in that it allows me to introduce the motif, which it draws from innumerable martial arts films, of the crippled or impaired martial artist. Surya’s analgesia is itself such a disability, but even his identification with the hyperathletic Bruce Lee is marked by the (probably apocryphal) fact, which he brings up in his voiceover, of the star’s childhood epilepsy. Furthermore, Surya idolizes a one-legged Mumbai karate practitioner, Mani Kamraj (aka Karate Man), who he watches on video emerging victorious from a hundred-man tournament. The comical hopping karate that Mani performs is clearly a joke on classic martial arts movies featuring amputee heroes such as *The One-Armed Swordsman* (1967,

HK, dir. Chang Cheh) or *One Armed Boxer* (1971, HK, dir. Wang Yu). As this essay unfolds, I shall return to the recurrence of such images of impairment throughout the history of kung fu cinema in order to explore the ways that it has registered the anxieties of masculinity, and of Asian masculinities in particular.



Figure 1. The one-legged “Karate Man” (Gulshan Devaiah) of *The Man Who Feels No Pain*.

“Staunch Masculinity”: The Rise of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film

To begin this task, it seems important to trace the rise of kung fu cinema and the ways that this entailed changes in the balance of gender in the Hong Kong industry. The roots of Chinese martial arts filmmaking lie in Shanghai’s silent era. The 1920s saw an explosion of *wuxia* (swordplay) movies, in part setting out to rival American swashbucklers and in part showcasing the local performance traditions of Beijing opera acrobatics and martial arts (Teo 2009: 6–11). The popularity of the genre was such that between 1828 and 1931, when it was banned by the Nationalist government, a staggering 250 martial arts pictures were made, constituting 60% of the industry’s output (Desser 2000: 31). With the Japanese occupation, the civil war that followed, and the Communist take-over of the mainland, cinematic production shifted to the British colony of Hong Kong. Though denied access to the strictly censored screens of the mainland, Hong Kong moguls sought to build not just a local entertainment empire, but one that spanned the Chinese diaspora

across East and Southeast Asia. The studio that was particularly effective in this, and which soon came to dominate Mandarin-language cinema, was Shaw Brothers, who churned out lavish and colorful pictures in their vast studios at a level of technical production beyond the reach of their competitors, often drawing on expertise from the neighboring industries in Japan and Korea (Fu 2008).

However, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, martial arts and action pictures played a relatively marginal place in Shaw's formula, which focused instead on musicals, romance, and opera adaptations in the Huangmei style that was popular in Taiwan, Shaw's most lucrative market. Hong Kong's star system was centered primarily around female rather than male leads, and this was even the case in many of the swordplays of the era, to the extent that actresses would be cast in drag to play the male hero of a film. Audiences would flock, for example, to see Connie Chan and Josephine Siao play alongside each other, the former usually taking the role of the male lead and the latter his love interest or "martial sister," a swashbuckling heroine.

This would change with the announcement in the October 1965 issue of Shaw's publicity magazine *Southern Screen* of a "new action era" and a "new *wuxia* century." The article promised a newly gritty martial arts cinema, which would put fighting front and center, amp up the level of violence, and reduce the dance-like "theatricality" of opera-influenced combat in favor of a new "realism" (Gravestock 2006). Driving this agenda was the critic and screenwriter Chang Cheh, who Shaw's executive had taken on as an advisor and who would soon become one of the foremost directors of Shaw's new brand of ultra-violent martial arts movies and one of the progenitors of the kung fu genre itself as it arose in the early 1970s.

Chang's vision for the new action era revolved around a transformation in gender roles in Hong Kong cinema. Chang saw the local industry as being out of step with broader global trends, and he considered that in order to compete both at home and abroad, studios such as Shaw Brothers would have to modernize. Japanese samurai movies and American Westerns – both globally popular genres offering strong competition in Shaw's markets – revolved around toughly masculine stars.

Hong Kong, Chang argued, would have to follow suit. He thus promoted a programme of what he called *yanggang* – “staunch masculinity” – in the new action era, seeking to cultivate a stable of youthful, handsome, muscular, and rugged male leads (Teo 2007: 93–7). The actor that Chang initially chose for his own pictures was Jimmy Wang Yu, a champion swimmer who had only a modicum of martial arts training but, thought Chang, looked good holding a sword (Hunt 2003: 23). Wang’s athletic torso was frequently displayed in shirtless scenes, and he provided the blueprint for a wave of young martial arts stars such as Lo Lieh, Chen Kuan-tai, Ti Lung, and, of course, Bruce Lee, who rose to prominence with *The Big Boss* (1971, HK, dir. Lo Wei).

Kung Fu Masculinity, Orientalism, and the Global Context

To make sense of the ways that Hong Kong cinema’s images of martial masculinity were new, and to make better sense of them, we need to place them within their broader contexts. The first of these that I will address is the global field of representations and ideas of identity. Kung fu films arose in a transnational media landscape dominated, of course, by Hollywood. Moreover, in the longer term, European and American cultures had long held sway across the world, their hegemony rooted in the imperial and colonial projects of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which established material power in political, economic, and military terms. As a result, it was Westerners who were able to define the ground of “modernity” in their own image and to set the norms and standards by which other cultures should be measured – and by which the modernizing and Westernizing elites of many Asian countries often sought to measure and understand themselves.

Literary critic Edward Said (1995) famously named the discourse through which this dominant Western gaze defined and came to know and control its non-Western others – and to justify their subjugation – “Orientalism.” Orientalist discourse was deeply gendered, defining the West as normatively active and masculine in opposition to a fantasied passive and feminine Orient. Within the hierarchies of race set up by white culture, Chinese men were accorded a particular place. Asian males more generally were imagined as feminized (Loomba 2015: 154), in contrast

both to ideas of Black men as primitive and hypermasculine, and to an ideal white masculinity understood as virile yet controlled by reason (Dyer 2017). Chinese men in Western media, before the 1970s kung fu craze, were imagined through two opposing archetypes encapsulated by two popular screen characters: first, the perverse and sadistic Fu Manchu, evocative of “yellow peril” anxieties; and second, the subservient, emasculated, and unthreatening “model minority” Charlie Chan. Above all else, the scintillating muscularity and heroism of stars such as Wang Yu and Bruce Lee were a rejoinder to these stereotypes, offering new and glamorous images of Chinese and Asian muscularity on the world stage and on the territory laid out by the West and its cultural models. As Kwai-Cheung Lo (2010: 107–11) has argued, with Asian masculinity defined in terms of “lack,” Hong Kong cinema offered us, as a rejoinder, the spectacle of its potential for troubling “excess,” replaying Hollywood tropes of violence and muscularity in the register of hyperbole.

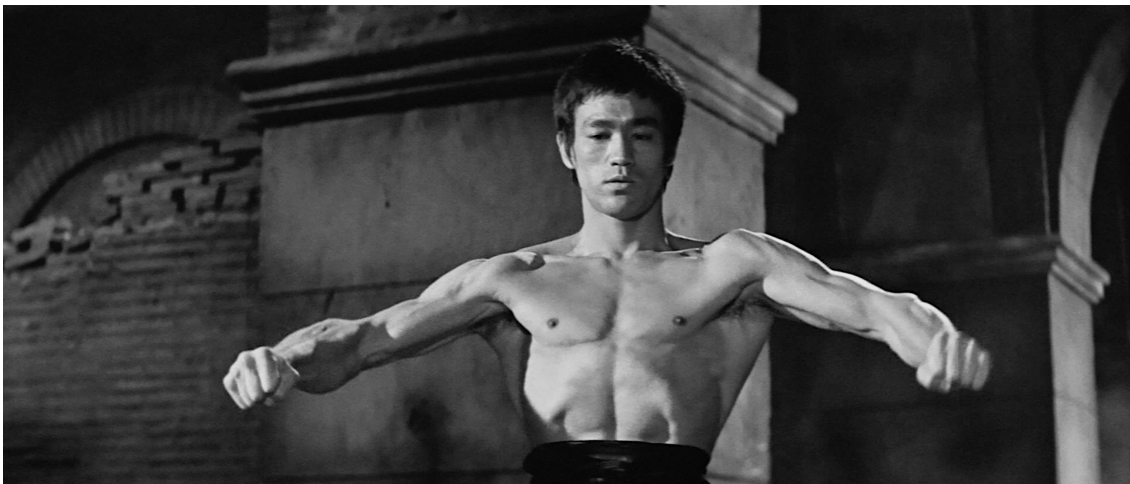


Figure 2. An “excess” of masculinity? Bruce Lee flexes his muscles in *Way of the Dragon*.

Chinese Masculinities: *Wen* and *Wu*

Masculinity, of course, is not cut of a single cloth, but is plural and is constructed differently across time and space, and according to a multitude of factors such as class, ethnicity, and sexuality (Connell 2005). Thus the picture of the gendering of Hong Kong cinema’s martial arts stars is made more complicated when we approach it from the perspective of the specific history of Chinese masculinities and the ways that these have interacted with the Western models discussed above.

As Kam Louie and Louise Edwards (1994) have argued, traditional conceptions of masculinity in China present two systematically opposite versions: the scholarly (*wen*) and the martial (*wu*). In late imperial China, it was the scholarly version that was privileged: rather than constituting a warrior caste, the ruling elite was defined by the education necessary for success in the civil service examinations and a thus a post in government. Furthermore, when we think about the *wen/wu* distinction in the familiar terms of yin and yang (with yin usually understood as embodying the feminine principle and yang the masculine), it is the scholar, posited around the transcendent principles of reason and order, who most closely represents the “yang” pole, rather than the warrior, associated instead with the “yin” qualities of the body and with all the disorder that comes with violence. While China’s literary warriors are tough and rugged in ways more recognizable in the West as “masculine,” it is notable that they are usually imagined as somewhat asexual and less concerned with romantic love than the homosocial bonding of martial brotherhood – which would, of course, develop as a core theme in the movies of Chang Cheh (Yip 2017: 85). Instead it is the delicate and refined scholar, sensitive though often passive and bumbling, who is the focus of love stories and who ultimately represents a “sexy” version of masculinity (Louie and Edwards 1994: 146–7). A prime example of such a scholar-hero from Hong Kong cinema is Leslie Cheung’s role as the hapless but good-hearted tax collector who falls in love with a ghost in the romantic horror comedy *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987, HK, dir. Ching Siu-tung). The androgynous Cheung himself was voted “Asia’s Biggest Superstar” in the 2000 CCTV/MTV music awards in mainland China (Chan 2000) and was named “The Most Beautiful Man in Hong Kong Cinema” by CNN (Yan 2018). These facts should remind us that the martial masculinities discussed here are only one half of the story. Similar “scholar” masculinities are, of course, influential in the broader rise of what Sun Jung (2009) has discussed as the “soft masculinities” that span contemporary East Asian popular culture, from the *bishōnen* aesthetic in manga through to K-pop boy bands and *danmei* (“indulging [male] beauty”) dramas in China.



Figure 3. A striking contrast to Bruce Lee: heartthrob Leslie Cheung's "soft," scholarly masculinity in *A Chinese Ghost Story*.

If these seem to offer a striking contrast to the martial masculinity of Bruce Lee and his ilk, their rise to global prominence is, perhaps, nonetheless unthinkable without the ways that kung fu stars had previously redefined Asian men as objects of desire and emulation. Establishing this required an amalgamation of Western and Chinese codes of masculinity, and in terms of the latter a reevaluation of its martial variant.

In Hong Kong itself, this re-privileging of martial masculinities was also a matter of class. Louie and Edwards (1994: 146) note that though the opposition of *wen* and *wu* cannot simply be ahistorically mapped onto the division between elite/lower socio-economic groups, nonetheless at various junctures where *wen* was inaccessible to the socially inferior, *wu* became their primary path to masculinity. Avron Boretz (2010), for example, has made an ethnographic study of how this is the case today among some of the most marginal social groups in Taiwan and China.

Furthermore, Man-Fung Yip (2017: 31) has noted how the conditions of Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s as a burgeoning manufacturing economy reliant on unskilled workers meant that for many men their laboring bodies were the source of their economic power and thus their masculinity. For Yip, kung fu cinema's images of the martial body as a source of power chimed

with the corporeal nature of this experience. They offered an affirmation of the power of such laboring male bodies in terms of *wu*. Through cinematic fantasies of heroism, these were imagined in terms of “liberated labor,” disavowing the actual conditions of exploitation which factory work entailed. The working-class heroes of kung fu pictures with modern-day settings such as *The Big Boss* and *Way of the Dragon* (1973, HK, dir. Bruce Lee) and the more general tendency of even historical movies such as *The One-Armed Swordsman* to focus on rebels and outsiders cement this association between the body in kung fu cinema and the laboring men who formed its core audience.

Kung Fu, Physical Culture, and Modernity

Beyond the cinema, these new images of Chinese manhood also had their context within twentieth century discourses on the role of physical culture within the modern nation-state, and in particular the place of the martial arts within these.

China had suffered a tumultuous nineteenth century, witnessing the gradual collapse of the Qing dynasty, which had ruled since 1644. After centuries in which China had been a world power both economically and militarily, challenges from the West – in particular in the form of the Opium Wars (1839–60) and the “unequal treaties” enacted in their wake – had left China militarily humiliated and subject to a form of semicolonialism. She was also beaten in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–5. A collapsing economy further undermined the “mandate of heaven” of the Qing, leading to a period in which civil war and rebellion were rife. Failures to institute adequate reforms led to the final fall of the dynasty and the institution of republican government in 1911.

Within the new republic, the question of the ways that China should “modernize” and “Westernize” in order to compete within the cut-throat world of international commerce, politics, and war – but also how to retain culture and identity in the face of this modernization – were taken up as urgent ones. As Andrew Morris (2004) has argued, sporting or physical cultures – and within these the martial arts – constituted a prominent domain within which these debates were played out.

Joseph Alter notes in his foreword to Morris's book that these debates were part of a broader discourse on health, physical culture, and the nation-state that swept the world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from ideas of "muscular Christianity" to the cult of the body in Nazi Germany. Governments and reformers across the globe – whether involved with imperial projects or bolstering the nationalism that might resist these – concerned themselves with the strengthening of individual physiques as a means to fortify the body politic. Comparing the Chinese experience with that of Indian wrestling, Alter argues that across the colonized world this entailed the "gendered anxiety of empire itself," with exercise serving as a "mechanism for transforming effete self-serving subjects into manly citizens with a single, common purpose" (Morris 2004: xvii).

In China, it was Western callisthenics and sports – with their "scientific" credentials – which initially dominated, and local martial arts were looked on with suspicion as backward and superstitious, a part of what held China back from modernity rather than something that might help in the modernizing task (Morris 2004: 17). However, by the 1920s, modernized and rationalized versions of the martial arts were increasingly being located at the heart of China's physical culture (185–229). The success of Japan in building a technologically and militarily advanced society, able to go toe to toe with Western competitors, meant that its example was taken as a blueprint here (130–31). Japan had leveraged the mythology of the samurai to bolster a militarist ethos, and its transformation of its traditional fighting arts into modernized and sporting versions such as judo or jujitsu had made them successful exports across the world. With this example in mind, Chinese reformers recognized that the martial arts had the advantage of allowing the assertion of an image of the nation having within itself a source of health, strength, and power, rather than relying on something alien. By the end of the decade, the officially recognized term for Chinese combat systems was *guoshu*: "national arts" (220). Within the increasingly militaristic terms of the Nationalist government, they also had the virtue of being explicitly arts of war, with fitness culture increasingly tied to the creation of a muscular, drilled, and disciplined body of – implicitly male – workers and soldiers, ready for mobilization (223). Though fitness movements often included

women as a part of their progressive credentials, it was increasingly the bodies of men which were its fundamental stake (86–95). Within the Orientalizing Western optic which structured these reform debates, the more traditional ideals of *wen* and the ruling scholar classes who embodied them looked problematically effeminate, and their lack of *wu* masculinity was seen as a reason for imperial China's political and economic weakness and collapse.

The closeness of this link between health, masculinity, and the nation is evidenced in the famous phrase, probably first coined by Yan Fu in 1895 and taken up by a generation of reforming intellectuals in his wake, naming China *dongya bingfu*: “the sick man of East Asia.” Echoing orientalist imagery, it defined the nation in terms of decrepitude, impotence, and lack of masculine virtue.

These themes and histories would be taken up in the kung fu craze and the images of the masculine body that it entailed. They are perhaps most explicitly and directly imagined in Bruce Lee's *Fist of Fury* (1972, HK, dir. Lo Wei), set in 1910 in the foreign occupied Shanghai International Settlement, in the wake of the death Huo Yuanjia, one of the real-life pioneers of the patriotic martial arts reform movement discussed above. Lee plays Chen Zhen, a fictional student of Huo who has returned home to mourn the death of his teacher, which turns out to be due to poison at the hand of Japanese antagonists. In an early scene, these Japanese enemies crash Huo's funeral and “gift” his school a calligraphic sign with the words “Sick Men of East Asia” on it, an insult not just to their national pride, but also to their masculinity. Reclaiming both of these things, Lee visits the Japanese dojo, takes off his shirt to reveal his ripped muscular physique, and single-handedly beats and subdues the whole of the school, forcing its senior students, literally, to eat the paper on which their insult was written. “Now you listen to me, I'll say this only once,” he tells them. “We are not sick men!”

Crippled Kung Fu

The images in *The Man Who Feels No Pain* of illness and disability, associated as they remain with the martial artist's body, make their sense precisely in relation to this longer and deeper concern with a relation between kung fu, health, and manliness. This is to say, of course, that Surya and Mani are, rather literally, "sick men of Asia." They are also far from alone in this within the realm of contemporary martial arts cinema and media (from both Asia and the West). In the Netflix series *Marco Polo* (2014–16), Marco is taught martial arts by the blind Wudang swordsman Hundred Eyes (whose backstory is told in a standalone Christmas special). In the Star Wars spinoff *Rogue One* (2016, USA, dir. Gareth Edwards), Donnie Yen plays a similarly blind, monk-like character, Chirrut Imwe. Zhang Ziyi spent months living with an unsighted woman to prepare for her role as Xiao Mei in *House of Flying Daggers* (2004, China, dir. Zhang Yimou). In the film *Dragon* (2011, HK, dir. Peter Chan), Liu Jinxi (Donnie Yen) severs his arm to break ties with the criminal gang he was a part of but is nonetheless forced to fight its boss one-handed. That the role of this villain is taken up by Wang Yu, the original "One-Armed Swordsman," underlines the relation to the classic film of that name, which, quite aside from the innumerable sequels and reboots of the 1970s, was also remade by Tsui Hark as *The Blade* (1995, HK). In *Shaolin Soccer* (2001, HK, dir. Stephen Chow), Ng Man-tat plays an ex-soccer star whose leg was crippled by rampaging fans after he deliberately threw a match. He seeks redemption by coaching a new squad of kung fu-enhanced players. The list would rapidly expand if we were to include mental as well as physical impairments, such as the autism of Zen (Jeeja Yanin) in *Chocolate* (2008, Thailand, dir. Prachya Pinkaew) or the madness and alcoholism of Su Can (Vincent Zhao) in *True Legend* (2010, China/HK, dir. Yuen Woo-ping). In all these examples, the image of the sick or deficient body seems to haunt the ideals of masculine perfection and strength upon which martial arts cinema is so strongly premised, insistently returning like a Freudian symptom.

The trope has its roots in the newly violent martial arts cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, not only in Hong Kong but across East Asia. Above all, it was established in the hugely popular series

of films featuring Zatoichi (played by Shintaro Katsu), a blind master swordsman who wanders the landscape of nineteenth century Japan in the disguise of a lowly masseur, protecting the weak and innocent against gangsters and officials who seek to exploit them. Between 1962 and 1973 some 25 Zatoichi movies were made, followed by a TV series that ran from 1974 to 1979. Zatoichi's enduring appeal is evidenced by the resurrection of the character, this time played by Takeshi "Beat" Kitano, in *Zatoichi* (2003, Japan, dir. Takeshi Kitano). This was followed by *Ichi* (2008, Japan, Fumihiko Sori), which featured a blind swordswoman who was once rescued by Zatoichi, now searching for her mentor. Two years later, *Zatoichi: The Last* (2010, Japan, dir. Junji Sakamoto) sought to provide the saga an ending.

In the 1960s, this series was not just popular in Japan, but also across East Asia and was rapidly imitated by filmmakers there. The publicity for Taiwan's *Three Blind Spies* (1965, dir. Chin Han) made explicit comparison to Zatoichi (Yip 2107: 169). Though the influence of Japanese cinema was probably indirect in the case of South Korea, *Returned One-Legged Man* (1974, dir. Lee Doo-yong) was just one of a spate of films made there featuring impaired heroes. Its motif of a leg injury had special resonance with regard to the importance of kicking in Korea's iconic national martial art, taekwondo (Yip 2017: 170).

Zatoichi, furthermore, was a key reference for the genre-defining "new action era" *wuxia* film *The One-Armed Swordsman*, which launched the martial arts craze in earnest by becoming the first Hong Kong film to bank \$1 million at the box office, in 1967. This tells the story of Fang Kang (Wang Yu), whose father, a servant, dies defending the life of his master, the upright swordsman Qi Rufeng. Qi adopts the child but his other, more privileged, students bully Fang as an outsider, and he ultimately has his arm chopped off by Qi's daughter. He restores his broken sense of masculine self-worth by training in a special style of left-handed swordsmanship he learns from a partially destroyed manuscript given to him by his savior, a kindly peasant girl. His father's broken sword (the only heirloom he possesses) turns out to be peculiarly effective in performing this. The manual and sword each serve as analogues of Fang's amputation and reinforce the Freudian metaphor of

castration. However, of course, what seem to be disadvantages are turned to advantage when Fang comes to the rescue of his master against the same villain who had killed Fang's father and who has in the meantime developed a special weapon and style of fighting designed to trap and defeat Qi's "Golden Sword" technique. In his final victory, it is not only the emasculation caused by his amputation that is reversed, but also that of his lowly birth and lack of paternal legacy.

In the wake of *One-Armed Swordsman*, impaired heroes and heroines proliferated – in, for example, *The One-Armed Magic Nun* (1969, HK, dir. Chan Lit-ban), *Deaf and Mute Heroine* (1971, HK, dir. Wu Ma), *Vengeance of Snowgirl* (1971, HK, dir. Lo Wei), or, once the kung fu craze appeared, *One Armed Boxer* and its sequel *Master of the Flying Guillotine* (1976, HK/Taiwan, dir. Wang Yu). *One Armed Boxer* returned to the nationalist dimension of the discourse on martial masculinity, setting its hero against Japanese antagonists. Chang Cheh's *Crippled Avengers* (1978, HK) features not one but four protagonists who are variously maimed by the film's tyrannical villain, before being trained in kung fu in order to overcome their disabilities and seek justice. In the kung fu comedy era of the late 1970s such images of impairment exploded with films such as *Dance of the Drunk Mantis* (1979, HK, dir. Yuen Woo-ping), which includes a specially deadly "sickness kung fu," or *Drunken Arts and Crippled Fist* (1979, HK, dir. Ti Tang). I have argued elsewhere (White 2020: 30–58) that such images take their place here within a general "carnival" aesthetic that rejected the purity and order of the early twentieth century nationalist visions of the martial body, and perhaps its more "fascist" or militant modes of masculinity too, for a more anarchic ethos of excess and play.

Yip, in any case, traces the origin and meaning of the motif of the impaired martial artist in the broader trauma of Asian social and political experiences of the twentieth century (2017: 170–4). There are specific national circumstances that inflect this trauma: the atomic bomb, American occupation, and a feeling of alienation among the young in Japan; the increasing distance from China of Hong Kong identity and the experience of capitalist exploitation within its sweatshops; the split of Korea into two warring nations. However, overall, we might well read in the way that such

images resonated across a range of contexts – including, of course, the contemporary India of *The Man Who Feels No Pain* – a shared Asian experience with roots in the encounter with the imperial projects of the West. For Yip, disability becomes a tangible sign for a “sense of lack and disenfranchisement,” while the fact “that this handicapped character is also a superb fighter no doubt also signals a desire to be healed and restrengthened” (2017: 172). While Yip’s interpretation foregrounds national or local identities, these are, of course, closely intertwined with gender, and the “lack” he points to is also the emasculation brought about through imperial domination and the hegemony of Orientalist discourses on “Asian masculinity.” Although the twist is that illness has now paradoxically become a source of power, rather than something to be eliminated to achieve it, the transcendence of the sick and disempowered body in these films is similar to that commonly promised in early twentieth-century martial arts manuals, which often began with a foreword telling the story of the author’s own transformation from sickly youth to vigorous martial master (see e.g. Cheng 1985: 9).

Indeed, the crippled fighters discussed here share a lot with the women warriors discussed by Kwai-Cheung Lo (2010: 107–40): Lo notes that the most “stable” and privileged masculinities are usually reserved for the villains of Hong Kong movies. The woman warrior and the impaired martial artist alike must struggle to attain a masculine position from a fragile position, which makes them more compelling narratively and as objects for identification. Such characters address insecurities that perhaps have a specially potent force in postcolonial societies, but are, after all, more globally structural to patriarchal masculinity itself.

Conclusion: The Man Who Feels No Pain.

It is, I would argue, this cross-Asian significance in terms of the intersection between colonial histories and experiences of masculinity that draws the nostalgic gaze of *The Man Who Feels No Pain* back to the consumption of 1970s kung fu films on VHS tapes in 1990s India. Though the film was often treated by critics as an uncomplicated piece of frippery – “a fun ride ... eager to please”

and “undemanding, mindless enjoyment” (Dalton 2018) – it seems to have much to say about Indian history, both in the period of its young protagonist’s lifespan and in terms of its longer past under colonial rule and its aftermath. At one point, driving through the contemporary landscape of the skyscraping redevelopments of a Mumbai that he’s not seen since his early childhood in the 1990s, Surya wonders aloud, “What did India achieve in 70 years since independence?” His question is never answered, but this seems, in any case, something the film is quietly setting out to explore through its evocation of both urban and pop-cultural pasts. When Surya starts his martial arts training to heroically defend the weak against injustice, this is framed by his grandfather in terms of the story of his own youthful journey to Japan to join up with the nationalist hero Netaji to fight British occupation. (Surya only realizes later in life that the discrepancy between Netaji’s death and his grandfather’s birth means that the story is clearly a fabrication.) All this makes Surya’s peculiar life and illness seem allegorical of a national condition, and as with my analysis of Hong Kong movies (and Chinese martial arts culture) questions of national strength are folded onto experiences of what masculinity means at the level of the individual.

Characters in the film often function as “types” rather than in psychological depth, standing in for broader phenomena. The film’s father figures, in particular, seem to indicate aspects of masculine lack within the cultural landscape. Surya’s father is weak, unadventurous, and unimaginative (desiring his son to become an accountant), while his grandfather is a hopeless dreamer of grand political dreams. Neither is effectual enough to stop Surya’s mother from being killed, and failing to do so they become symbolically “feminized” by the role of caring for her child. Surya’s childhood friend and his love interest in adult life, Supri, has a father who is an even less attractive figure for identification: he is an alcoholic, wife-beating tyrant. Karate Mani’s stern and demanding father sets an impossible ideal and dies leaving his two sons locked in a feud over his approval and respect. In many ways it is the film’s women who are strong and liberated (like Hong Kong cinema’s prominent female warriors), and this further highlights the inadequacy of its men. However, Surya’s mother dies because of her eagerness for conflict, and Supri – who fiercely

protects Surya as a child when he is bullied and who we meet again as an adult in the process of beating up a gang who are drugging and raping a young woman – is, until the end of the film, unable to stand up for herself in the way she stands up for others. The film seems to propose that it is only through the substitute father figures of East Asian martial arts cinema – blind, one-armed, or even one-legged though they may be – that Surya can transform himself into the kind of man adequate to them, and to the task of reimagining Indian masculinity within the transnational flows of contemporary representation.

That this task of regeneration lies so squarely on Surya's shoulders as the film's male protagonist spotlights the ways in which it remains well within a patriarchal and phallogocentric world-view that persists across the history of martial arts cinema that I have been tracing here. However, what is interesting in Surya is that the masculinity he performs is certainly not the invulnerable, "hard" machismo that the title of the film seems to allude to, and with which we might associate martial arts and action heroes more generally. He is slight, bookish, "nerdy" even: one character teasingly names him "Indie Avenger" and "Mumblecore Justice League." In all this, he seems to echo the "soft masculinities" of East Asian pop culture. That kung fu cinema's many images of "crippled avengers" and "sick men" can serve as material for this construction suggests that the resources it offers for imagining masculinity are far more complex than perfectly sculpted and invincible "men who feel no pain."

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