

# Confronting Orientalism with Cinematic Art: Cultural Representation in Bruce Lee's *The Way of the Dragon*

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## Abstract

Taking Edward Said's discourse on Orientalism as a point of departure, this paper attempts to explore how Bruce Lee confronts Orientalism with cinematic art. It analyzes one of Lee's representative films, *The Way of the Dragon*, examining how the director manipulates traditional *kung fu* cameras to subvert stereotypical cultural representations. In this unique action film, he makes the best of Chinese *kung fu* while appealing to the art of Western filmmaking, where—as an actor and director—he strives to screen against and beyond occidental stereotypes. As a result, he transforms a Western mythology into an Asian heroic myth and tinges the theory and practice of his *kung fu* formation with a Gramscian hegemonic vein in a sophisticated manner. This study also discusses audience receptions of Lee's cinematic representations based on Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model for cultural analysis. From Lee's brand new perspective, the audience witnesses that an Oriental nobody dares to go so far as to stand up against Orientalism and manage to defy Western sweeping generalizations of the Orient. The film thus rewrites the stereotypical discourse that portrays the so-called Chinaman as affected and not effective. Presenting a firm Chinese subjectivity by means of *kung fu* fightings on the stage and in the limelight, Lee succeeds in asserting himself as an important international cinematic figure who in one sense or another utters the unutterable suppressed inner voices for the Chinese people, the Oriental, and all those who belong to the marginal.

**Keywords:** Bruce Lee, *The Way of the Dragon*, Orientalism, hegemony, Cultural Studies, cinematic art

# 以電影藝術拮抗東方主義論述：李小龍《猛龍過江》之文化再現

## 摘要

援引薩依德東方主義論述，本論文嘗試分析李小龍從影代表作——《猛龍過江》，探索導演李小龍如何操控傳統功夫片鏡頭，以顛覆西方刻版之文化再現。換言之，本論文研究李氏如何藉由電影藝術之種種可能以擷抗西方主流的文化論述。在李氏獨樹一幟的動作影片中，他一方面在鏡頭前巧妙呈現傳統與獨創的中國功夫招式，同時更訴諸西方影片製作之藝術與巧門，使身兼演員與導演的他得以在大銀幕上大顯身手，徹底改寫西方人對中國人之刻板印象。再者，就武術理論與實踐而言，李氏亦賦予其武學論述葛蘭西文化霸權之色彩。透過霍爾編碼與解碼之文化分析模式，本文亦探討李氏電影再現之觀眾接受狀態。要言之，巧妙結合功夫格鬥與電影藝術，李氏藉由其突出之國際銀幕英雄形象，以及扶弱抑強之電影敘述，可謂為飽受壓抑的中國人、東方人與邊緣族群一舒心聲，重新申張受迫者之主體性。

**關鍵字：**李小龍、《猛龍過江》、東方主義、霸權、文化研究、電影藝術

Chinkie Chinkie, *Chinaman*.

Sitting on the fence;

Trying to make a dollar

Out of fifteen cents. (Quoted in He ix, emphasis added)

A grove which springs through leveled battlements

And twines its roots with the imperial hearths,

Ivy usurps the laurel's place of growth—

But the *gladiators'* bloody Circus stands,

A noble wreck in ruinous perfection! (Byron 569, emphasis added)

Taking Edward Said's discourse on Orientalism as a point of departure, this paper attempts to explore how Bruce Lee confronts Orientalism with cinematic art. It analyzes one of Lee's representative films, *The Way of the Dragon*, examining how the director manipulates traditional *kung fu* cameras to subvert stereotypical cultural representations. Orientalism includes Western historicism, Eurocentricism, imperial representation, and the feminization of the Oriental Other. The paper examines how Lee confronts such Western Orientalist representations by using the art of Chinese *kung fu* and appealing to the art of Western filmmaking, where—as an actor and director—he strives to screen against and beyond occidental stereotypes. Through Lee's scenarios played out on the big screen, he manages to in a sense transform a Western mythology into an Asian heroic myth and tinges it with a Gramscian hegemonic vein in a sophisticated manner. In other words, Lee makes the most of the richness, complexity as well as possibility of cinematic art, combined with his unique theory of *kung fu*, to move beyond Western monolithic cultural representation, under which any oriental identities are doomed to suffer a certain degree of wipeout. This study also draws on Gramsci's concept of hegemony to interpret Lee's acting career, *kung fu* philosophy, and plot encoding. This analysis focuses on Lee's use of traditional cinematographic filmmaking techniques, such as setting (the legendary, nostalgic Colosseum, and a sense of cultural penetration), plot (the just revenge of a rural Oriental against Occidental exploitation and superiority), characterization, and cultural subjectivity. In addition, the paper also discusses audience receptions of Lee's cinematic representations in *The Way of the Dragon* based on Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model for cultural analysis.

The texts examined in Said's *Orientalism* include novels, political writings, and

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travel narratives on the Orient, primarily written by English and French writers from the late eighteenth century until after World War II. Said's main argument is that representations of the Orient in Western discourse have always been predicated on unequal economic, political, and imaginative power relationships. He clarifies this with a thorough definition of his postcolonial neologism:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (Said 3)

Postcolonial theorists and scholars have challenged Said's systematic portrayal of Western discursive Orientalism. For instance, Porter argues that Said's Orientalism is theoretically inadequate, indicating that Said's portrayal of Western attitudes toward the East are too uniform and that he often neglects contradictions within specific Western discourses (Porter 185). Theorists, such as Clifford, have viewed this apparent ignorance of historical complexity as a painful irony. Orientalism occasionally verges on Occidentalism because it replicates the totalizing force of a method of representation whose ills it sought to diagnose (Clifford 260). Evidently, Said's Orientalism perspective itself does not suffice to be academically criticism proof. As a matter of fact, Said attaches his major focus always on the Palestinian people and his perspective is firmly situated in Palestine, his homeland. In other words, Said's Oriental world mainly refers to the Middle East and its surrounds.

Despite these questionings concerning his theory's academic adequacy and latent geographical confinement, Said's *magnum opus* contributes to the interpretation of Bruce Lee's *The Way of the Dragon*, a film almost universally regarded as a pure *kung fu* action film made for nothing but mass entertainment. With Said's critical view in mind, this research attempts to embed the film as a whole with its cultural, historical, and discursive aspects in a postcolonial context. In fact, Bruce Lee grew up in a time when Western supremacy over Oriental people reiterated by Eurocentrist historiographies, as Said's *Orientalism* contends, was widely echoed in Western discourses with regard to the Chinese people. Western contempt for the Chinese is unfailingly heard in the lines sung by white American children: "Chinkie Chinkie, Chinaman. / Sitting on the fence; / Trying to make a dollar / Out of fifteen cents" (quoted in He ix). Similarly, Nevius' personal observation of the Chinese people which he made in 1871 epitomized Orientalist sweeping stereotyping as follows:

The Chinese as a race are, as compared with the European nations, of a *phlegmatic and impassive temperament, and physically less active and energetic. Children are not fond of athletic and vigorous sports*, but prefer marbles, kite-flying, and some quiet games of ball, spinning tops, etc. Men take an easy stroll for recreation, but never a rapid walk for exercise, and are seldom in a hurry or excited. *They are characteristically timid and docile . . .* (Chin and Chan 68-69, emphases added)

In other words, Nevius sees the Chinese as contemptible, because they are without exception womanly, effeminate, and devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity—qualities boasted by their Western counterparts. After the Allied Forces of the Eight Powers (八國聯軍) directly or indirectly triggered by Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi (慈禧) in 1900, the racial stereotypes of the Chinese people were reinforced by individual and collective self-contempt imposed by a white supremacist vision newly defined by such an irresistible international political alliance that came from afar to defeat the Ching Dynasty, which remained until that time a stranger to defeat. After a tragic series of relentless imperial ravages—armed invasion, economic exploitation, political colonization, and negative cultural representation—the national pride of the Chinese people, just like her national wealth, suffered a certain degree of wipe out. The tyrannical power of language made the Occidental ventriloquists, who, like magicians, sealed Chinese lips and rendered them a dumb people deprived of the right to speech and self-presentation. As a result, “[a] certain freedom of interdiscourse was always the Westerner’s privilege; because his was the stronger culture, he could *penetrate*, he could *wrestle with*, he could give shape and meaning to the great Asiatic mystery . . .” (Said 44, emphases added).

In the wake of this difficult historical context for the Chinese people, Bruce Lee, as an actor and director, attempted to screen against Western erasing and stigmatizing discursive currents with his fists and his philosophical perspective. Although Western cultural perforation has dominated the image of the Chinese through literary, historical, and racial discourses, Lee used filmic representation to expose a new spectrum of the mysterious, unimaginable Chinese people to Western spectators. With well-designed cinematic performances, he gradually formed a new discourse regarding the Chinese people—a unique discourse that confronted Orientalism’s grandiose quasi-monologue. What Lee shows on the screen may be considered exaggerated (Wen 88) and his iconoclastic style may duplicate a new icon. However, the way the “little dragon” (Lee’s Chinese stage name) entered the filmmaking industry and eventually constructed his cinematic *kung fu* hegemony was a first, and this deserves detailed examination.

The way of the dragon refers to Lee’s geographical trajectory and cultural

crossover and it also subtly signifies his realization and infiltration of the Gramscian concept of hegemonic formation. The term hegemony refers to Antonio Gramsci's flexible theory on ideal versus praxis conflict, as demonstrated in class struggles. This hegemonic concept is applied to the confrontation between racism and antiracism, or colonialism and decolonialism. In his 1920 *Notes on the Southern Question*, Gramsci argued that the proletariat in Italy could only become the leading class if it

succeeds in creating *a system of alliances* that will permit it to mobilize the majority of the working population against capitalism and the bourgeois State. This means that in Italy, in the real class relations as they exist in Italy, it depends on the measure in which it is successful in obtaining the *consensus* of the large peasant masses. (Gramsci 19, emphases added)

Initially, this statement by the Italian Marxist theorist seems to be irrelevant to the analysis of Lee's movies. Nevertheless, Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony has become a general term applicable to the strategies of all classes, not only the proletariat. For instance, Hall regards women and Africans as alternative proletariats if they are marginalized by society (Hall 1996: 425-26; Harris 104-11). In Lee's films, the Asian audience's collective psychological consolidation against their experiences of being bullied by White colonial powers leads them to identify with the heroes of Lee's films. That is to say, those who have experienced Occidental exploitation may psychologically empower themselves through Lee's cinematic representations, because viewers, drawing on their personal or national experiences of being unfairly treated, tend to project their colonial discontent onto the filmic scenario while watching Lee's movies and are accordingly inclined to identify with his protagonists, whose stunning on-screen *kung fu* performances can be "seen" as a small-scale, temporary victory over Western imperialism (as elucidated in the memorial DVD, *Bruce Lee: 31<sup>st</sup> Anniversary Edition*).

The Marxist theory of cultural hegemony is associated particularly with the Italian Marxist theoretician Antonio Gramsci, who contends that the ruling class has to be able to manipulate the value system and mores of a society so that their view becomes the world view (Gramsci 1994: 34). In Terry Eagleton's words, "Gramsci normally uses the word hegemony to mean the ways in which a governing power wins consent to its rule from those it subjugates" (58). In contrast to authoritarian rule, cultural hegemony is hegemonic only if those affected by it also consent to and struggle over its common sense. In this study, however, the author "appropriates" Gramsci's "cultural hegemony" with a new hermeneutic light: the division of social classes in

Gramsci's political analysis becomes the divergence among martial arts schools; the formation of class alliances which Gramsci appealed to in his Prison Notebooks can be viewed as a psychological identification with the film hero and spiritual alliances among the marginal groups, such as the colonized, the oppressed, the invaded, the bullied, the powerless, the poor, the exploited, etc. Likewise, the original Gramscian term "cultural hegemony" refers to cultural predominance of one class or state over others, which is further subtly drawn on in this research to depict an almost unanimous dominance, superiority, or prevalence of Lee's *kung fu* performance and philosophy over other schools of martial arts in the world, as portrayed and represented in *The Way of the Dragon*.

In other words, the way the non-Eurocentric audience decoded Lee's films represents a tendentious alliance between various ethnicities (a significant aspect discussed in the memorial DVD, *Bruce Lee: 31<sup>st</sup> Anniversary Edition*), which gradually formed the alternative hegemony of Lee's *kung fu* films, a new cinematic genre closely connected to Chinese culture. Because Gramsci's theory has been enriched and elaborated, if not postmodernized, by scholars to examine questions of "positioning, pleasure, and the media audience" (Harris 112), it is therefore appropriate to study films from Gramsci's hegemonic viewpoint. Lee's films can be analyzed from this perspective, because their plots and scenarios deal with "the crisis of national and racial identification" (Chiao 69). The emergence of crisis is crucial to Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, because it signals the start of disintegration after a class struggle settlement period (Hall 1996: 424). As for the "trans-class" (Harris 28) character of cultural hegemony, the conception of a perpetually unachieved hegemonic unity (Hall 1996: 424) is also observed in Jackie Chan's films, which attempt to imitate and emulate Bruce Lee by including comic elements in Lee's serious *kung fu* films. Thus, based on Gramsci's concept of hegemony that refers to gradual cultural formation or accumulation and continuous alliance among minority groups, the following discussion focuses on how Lee formed his own hegemony of *kung fu* culture or martial arts during his acting career with his unique philosophy of *kung fu* and his novel filmic encoding.

Born in San Francisco in 1940, Lee acted in many films from a young age. He appeared in the film *Golden Gate Girl* (《金門女》) when he was only a year old. Since then, he acted in films, such as *The Transience of Riches* (《富貴浮雲》) in 1946, *The Kid or My Son Ah Cheung* (《細路祥》) in 1950, *The Beginning of a Boy or Blame It on Father* (《人之初》) in 1951, *Thunder Storm* (《雷雨》) in 1957, and *The Orphan* (《人海孤鴻》) in 1961. In *The Orphan*, he played a street rascal and critics praised his acting as outstanding. In 1964, he played a supporting role in *The Green Hornet* (《青鋒俠》), a successful American film starring Van Williams, a household name in America at the time. This detective and action film, with many scenes of *kung fu*

fightings and stunts, soon made Lee (who was short and of Asian descent) even more popular than Van Williams, the tall and handsome white star. As a martial artist who practiced oriental fighting and Western boxing, Lee seized the opportunity to star in a television series to demonstrate his fighting method, *Jeet Kune Do* (「截拳道」), and his unique weapon, the nunchucks (「雙節棍」). After *The Green Hornet* was screened in America, it became extremely popular among international audiences. Because many Chinese martial artists gathered in Hong Kong and the island was exposed to the booming stages of filmmaking on the Chinese mainland, *The Green Hornet*, especially Lee's fighting scenes, was received enthusiastically by Hong Kong audience. The year after the release of *The Green Hornet*, *The Black Belt*, a renowned American martial arts magazine, invited Lee to introduce his *Jeet Kune Do* martial theory to the world. The young *kung fu* theorist and fighter grasped this opportunity to publicize his invention, which was an advanced aggressive type of boxing that predicts an opponent's attacks and intercepts them with counter-attacks (Lee 1975: 59). He told a reporter from *Seattle Post* that "The Easterner's arts of self-protection and self-defense are 90% lying gossip. My fighting method is neither fancy figure nor pastime. It is really used to defend oneself" (Kuan 139). As a Chinese descent, Lee took great effort to advertise himself in the US by distinguishing his *Jeet Kune Do* from traditional Eastern fighting methods, especially Chinese martial arts. Imaginably, the remarkable title, "Founder of *Jeet Kune Do*," might allow him to win better attention in the US and hence more Hollywood roles. However, to the eyes of his contemporary Chinese martial artists running martial arts schools in America, Lee's teaching the white Americans Chinese *kung fu* and his ways of self-promotion might appear intolerably arrogant. The words that he wrote outside his martial arts school thus read: "Anywhere, anytime, if I am challenged, I will be there," which did make him, as he willingly expected, a person busy picking up the gauntlets thrown down by both Western and Eastern masters of martial arts (DVD, *Bruce Lee: 31<sup>st</sup> Anniversary Edition*). As a matter of fact, Lee's assuming confidence in both verbal discourse and physical combat might be considered as part of his strategy in dealing with a racially discriminating country, a strategy that contributed to forming his hegemonic career as an oriental martial artist in the U.S. So well did he know the art of compromise that after the great success of *The Green Hornet*, he reluctantly accepted supporting roles in *Long Street* (《盲探神犬/窄巷》) starring James Francis in 1966 and *Marlowe* (《醜聞喋血》) starring James Kamen in 1969.

Eventually, Lee decided to distance himself from Hollywood's cinematic mode of production. Tiring of Hollywood's racial discrimination which defied his ambition to play leading roles, Lee abandoned his successful *Jeet Kune Do* establishment and well-paid teaching programs in America. He believed that if he could win Western



recognition by playing a supporting role in *The Green Hornet* and demonstrating his *Jeet Kune Do* in *Long Street*, then embracing his Chinese identity and acting as a protagonist should be genuinely applauded and appreciated by Oriental audiences. Therefore, he ceased recommending himself to Hollywood filmmakers and stopped striving for any leading roles in the western society.

He returned to Hong Kong to star in *The Big Boss* (《唐山大兄》) in 1971 and *The Fist of Fury* (《精武門》) in 1972. They were directed by then famous movie director, Lo Wei (羅維), and produced by established film production companies, Golden Harvest and Four Pillars respectively. The two films set box office records, making Lee and his screen name *Hsiao Lung Lee*, which means “little dragon Lee” in Chinese, household names in Hong Kong. The action films were popular in international movie markets, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeastern Asia, and they helped improve Lee’s screen image as an unprecedented hero for the Chinese people. Suddenly, Lee’s *kung fu* attracted the attention of Hollywood producers and they invited him to star in future blockbuster action films. Most of Lee’s friends advised him to grasp this unique opportunity. However, he replied:

It is not yet the time. Don’t hurry! I want to make them realize that Chinese actors do not randomly accept others’ invitation. Besides, even without starring in Hollywood films, the film that Bruce Lee stars in can still become prevalent in Europe. It’s but a question of time! (Wen 83-84)

One may think that Lee’s negotiation with Hollywood film industry for his role has nothing to do with Orientalist representation. The fact, however, is that Lee’s negotiation with American movie industry stands for a solid proof that Hollywood has its own kind of Orientalism. After Lee’s great success in *The Green Hornet*, he had been promised the leading role for a TV program which allowed his audience to feast on his outstanding *kungfu* mastery and performance. Nevertheless, he was then told that a “white man” without any bit of *kungfu* fighting expertise was to replace him as the hero figure for the very TV program. The producer took traditional stereotypical “white” audience’s reception or preference into major consideration and broke his promise to a “yellow” action actor, whose consideration was done mainly out of a typical Orientalist perspective—a perspective of sheer racial discrimination based on nothing but skin color. It is therefore no exaggeration to say that Lee was forced to learn the indispensable art of negotiation when it comes to making a deal with Hollywood.

As a matter of fact, there is a long history of discrimination against Asians, including Chinese people, in the Orientalist representations in Hollywood films. For instance, D. W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms or the Yellow Man and the Girl* was released

during a period of strong anti-Chinese feeling in the USA, a fear known as the Yellow Peril. Although Griffith graphically portrays the theme of the film, namely cruelty and injustice against the innocent, his scenario is based on Thomas Burke's 1916 short story entitled "The Chink and the Child." In Burke's story, the Chinese protagonist is a sordid young Shanghai drifter pressed into naval service, who frequents opium dens and whorehouses; in the film, he becomes a Buddhist missionary whose initial goal is to spread the word of Buddha and peace. Notwithstanding such a whole new message of tolerance as well as religion, he is also shown frequenting opium dens when he is depressed in the film. Sessue Hayakawa (1889-1973) serves as another example for cinematic discrimination in Hollywood films. He was active at the outset of the American film industry and the first Asian actor to find stardom in the United States and Europe. He is the first Asian American as well as the first Japanese American movie star and the first Asian American leading man. His "broodingly handsome" good looks and typecasting as a sinister villain with sexual dominance made him a heartthrob among American women, and the first male sex symbol of Hollywood, several years in advance of Rudolph Valentino. However, with the rising tensions with Japan, Japanese actors were no longer welcome in Hollywood. Following the end of the war, Asian characters were depicted in a desexualized fashion, something that continues to our time in modern Hollywood and perhaps in the wider society as a whole. Anna May Wong (1905-1961) is also a good example for the present analysis. She was the first Chinese American movie star, and also the first Asian American actress to gain international recognition. Her long and varied career spanned silent film, sound film, television, stage and radio. Wong became a fashion icon and had achieved international stardom in 1924. However, frustrated by the stereotypical supporting roles she reluctantly played in Hollywood, Wong left for Europe in the late 1920s, where she starred in several notable plays and films. As one can see, Hollywood has never been a stranger to Orientalist representations or cinematographic discrimination.

Therefore, it was this newfound confidence in the high quality and novelty of his films that encouraged Lee to stop cooperating with director Lo Wei. Re-shaping his alliance with Hong Kong filmmakers, he began designing a new *kung fu* film, in which he was responsible for direction, adaptation, acting, and martial instruction, to fully express his martial arts philosophy. The result was *The Way of the Dragon* (《猛龍過江》). In this film, Lee invited international professional karate competition champions and *aikido* (Japanese martial art 合氣道) masters to bring Chinese *kung fu* to confront foreign boxing schools. This allowed Lee to successfully create a manifesto of Chinese *kung fu*'s supremacy over other fighting techniques and to assert his unsurpassable international cinematic position as an action film actor. The

hegemonic construction of Lee's Chinese *kung fu* through big-screen representations helped the little dragon return to Hollywood, the starting point of his movie industry. After establishing his skills, Lee could enter the international cinematic field with a reputation that was easily identified by his various audiences. Therefore, Warner Brothers did not only hire him for his next film, *Enter the Dragon* (《龍爭虎鬥》) in 1973, but made him a co-producer. The meandering path of Lee's career struggles reflects the strategic way of the dragon: from Hong Kong to America, from America to Hollywood, from Hollywood to Hong Kong, and finally from Hong Kong back to his cinematic point of departure—Hollywood. This continuous power struggle explains his hegemonic formation. The power struggle displayed here is not as relevant to the conflict between capitalists and the proletariat as to the sophisticated confrontation between the dominant and the marginal in the filmmaking industry, which may be called the economy of global film production.<sup>2</sup>

Lee continuously clarified his concept of true martial arts (Wen 87), which at its core was consistent with Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. He did not teach people rules only for them to follow but aimed to educate students "how to see and think fighting. Through bodily action, he instructs his philosophy" (Li 35). *Jeet Kune Do* appeals to "both nature and spontaneity" (Chiao 71). In *The Legend of Bruce Lee*, Block indicates that the *kung fu* master hopes to "create a sort of *Western martial art* based upon succinctness, directness, and novelty" (quoted in Li 35, emphasis added). This may seem strange, because, according to Block, Lee seems to favor Western martial arts, but in the film *The Way of the Dragon*, he uses a series of fight scenes to emphasize that Western boxing is inferior to Chinese *kung fu*. This discrepancy may be explained by Lee's all-embracing, all-inclusive, and all-encompassing philosophy of *kung fu*. In the very film, he takes chance to clarify his thoughts on martial arts: "As far as *kung fu* is concerned, there is no such thing as sects. Just be true to yourself and express yourself whole-heartedly and completely" (Lee 1997: 44). In other words, although Lee attempts to subvert the overwhelming ideology of Western superiority, this does not mean that he simply neglects any advantageous strong points that belong to Occidental martial arts. By contrast, he strives to access all martial arts, be they Eastern or Western, to refine the fulfillment of his *kung fu* practice and theory.

In his youth, Lee was a pupil of Yip Man (葉問), a renowned master of *Yung Chun* boxing (詠春拳) in Hong Kong. He then strived to learn whatever boxing he

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<sup>2</sup> Evidently, Lee's meandering odyssey of cinematic enterprise and *ku fu* dream against Western Orientalist representations and cinematographic discrimination can be interpreted as his power struggle against the dominance of Western cinematic industry, as elucidated in the text by the author of the present research. His cinematic career shuttling between the West and the East, however, can also be interpreted as his resourceful means to strategically appropriate his unique "cultural hybridity," as proposed by the renowned postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, so as to achieve the final realization of his American Dream in the cinematic field.

encountered and gradually became skilled at both Northern and Southern Chinese boxings. When he was 15 years old, he attempted to combine the most useful combating skills (for instance, for a street fight) of Chinese and foreign boxing methods (Kuan 138). Besides the 18 techniques from the Chinese tradition of martial arts, Lee's methods of inhaling, exhaling, and breathing control are all based on Chinese boxing practices. By contrast, his stepping and moving methods were inspired by Muhammad Ali, the celebrated King of Western boxing. His iconic weapon, the *nunchucks*, originated from Japan and he learned how to use them from a Philippine martial artist. His intimidating wolfish howl and fatal kicks, known as Bruce Lee's three consecutive thunderous kicks (李三腳), originated from his extensive and intensive contemplation of the nature of martial arts. Drawing on Gramsci's terminology, it is this hegemonic character tending to include and embrace all elements related to physical confrontation that contributed to forging Lee's iconic figure as an all-around martial artist.

Lee, on the one hand, took great effort to familiarize himself with all accessible sources of traditional Chinese martial arts literature so as to deepen his discourse on the philosophy of *kung fu*; on the other, he was more than decisive to discard many traditional martial arts rules that he considered rigid and outdated. "Traditional formulas simply reduce your creativity and freeze your spontaneity and liberty. Haunted by the precepts of past tradition, one is no longer himself, for he simply imitates instinctively without any profound personal reflection" (Wen 64). This individual reflection on all aspects of all possible martial arts accounts for Lee's revolutionary undertaking; his fatal fists and killing kicks resulted from his deep contemplation of the inadequacy or imperfection he observed in the teachings of his martial arts predecessors. The essence of his *Jeet Kune Do* lies in the pursuit and expression of the true spirit of freedom. A martial artist should not be confined or framed by any forms set by his or her predecessors. The highest level of thinking is embodied by the spirit of negation. This is not about being positive or negative, good or bad, but is a condition of mental emptiness. This is reflected by Lee's epitaph: "Limitlessness fights beyond any limitation; the one true rule is to be ruleless in mind" (Kuan 139). Lee theorized that martial arts are the total expression of an artist. True martial art lies in the emancipation of oneself through physical immediacy and mental spontaneity. In a real combat, there is no time to think. Only when the body and mind are completely free is it possible for fighters to express themselves entirely. If Lee's *Jeet Kune Do* is a ground-breaking martial theory, this is because at its core it is formless. It is formless in spirit, therefore it fits any form; it is sectless by nature, therefore it suits any sect. It exploits all fighting methods to reach the highest level of martial arts. Lee also drew on ancient Chinese philosophical canons, such as *Lao Tzu* (《老子》) and *The Book*

of *Change* (《易經》), to enrich and enhance his theory of *kung fu*. Examining the fundamental concepts of these texts, he understood the indispensability of both masculinity and femininity, namely both *yang* (陽) and *yin* (陰), a profound Taoist philosophizing which he creatively applied to his *kung fu* theorization. More often than not, he even went so far as to emphasize the unfailing prevalence of the soft, water-like *yin* (陰) over the hard, fire-like *yang* (陽) when occasions required him to explain his neologism *Jeet Kune Do*. The fans of Bruce Lee must be familiar with this renowned powerful sentence: “Be water, my friends” (*Bruce Lee: 31<sup>st</sup> Anniversary Edition DVD*). When asked by an American TV host to distinguish Chinese *kung fu* from Japanese martial arts, Lee compared the former to an iron bar with a chained iron ball attached to it and the latter to simply an iron bar itself. For him, a true marital artist has to be as adaptive and flexible as water and react according to his/her enemy’s ever-changing condition and the specific surrounding in which the duel is launched.

The following section focuses on cinematic textual analysis based on the perspectives of Gramsci’s hegemonic formation and Hall’s discourse of the encoding-decoding model. *The Way of the Dragon*, Lee’s *kung fu* film shot in Italy, is summarized as follows. Tang Lung (唐龍), which means the dragon of China, is a young man living in New Territories (新界), Hong Kong. A friend invites Tang Lung to Rome, Italy, to help a relative, Miss Chen, who runs a Chinese restaurant with her Uncle Wang. As the family begins to prosper in Rome, local gangsters threaten Miss Chen and want her to stop running the restaurant. As a young *kung fu* expert from China, Tang Lung fights off the bullying gangsters. But the head of the underground organization sends his men to kidnap Miss Chen. After Tang Lung rescues Miss Chen, the head of the gangsters hires the American international karate champion (played by the actual champion of that time—Chuck Norris) to kill Tang Lung (played by Lee) at the Colosseum, as if they were two gladiators fighting to death for sheer survival.

When Tang Lung arrives at the restaurant, the Chinese waiters antagonize the new arrival. Because they have been practicing karate and judo to fend off the gangsters, they do not think the clumsy newcomer can do better. Living a life between two cultures, they admire the strength of Western martial arts, but seem unable or reluctant to forget their own cultural heritage of *kung fu*. The four male Chinese characters in Rome are Tony, Jimmy, Thomas, and A Chiang (阿強). When Tang Lung is introduced to them, he offers a friendly hand to A Chiang and ignores the others. This emphasizes the recognition of Chinese culture through the use of and identification with names. The animosity between the newcomer and the Chinese emigrants continues until Tang Lung defeats a group of Italian gangsters by himself. After Tang Lung dominates the fight, the male Chinese waiters ask Tang Lung to accept them as pupils and teach them Chinese *kung fu*. Thus, his personal martial hegemony has been

formed within the restaurant itself on a very small scale.

Similarly, at the beginning of the film Miss Chen does not talk to Tang Lung because of his strange manners that are regarded as foolish in the West. Because of his poor English and Italian, the way he orders his first meal at the Italian airport is as awkward as the meal itself is comically terrible. And when they meet at the airport, Tang Lung keeps asking Miss Chen where the public bathroom is. This clumsy behavior bothers the young restaurateur. After seeing Miss Chen's fancy car, a symbol of the superiority of Western civilization at the time, Tang Lung attempts to guess its make. This country bumpkin reaction is even more embarrassing for the young lady. When she accompanies Tang Lung to deposit his money at a bank, he mistakes the bank manager for a robber. When he hands his money to the manager, the latter gives him a belittling, strange look at the little folded thing that he uses to protect his limited funds. Outside the bank, Tang Lung argues that it is much safer to keep money in your own pocket where it is in your power. Only after a series of fighting scenes does Miss Chen begin to see him as a hero. His naked fists represent his transformation from awkwardness into heroic simplicity, which appeals to Miss Chen and the audience. In the beginning, Miss Chen complains that, "I just can't figure out why my uncle sends a man like you to help us. You can't even speak English!" This discontent and disbelief gradually changes as the story unfolds and he triumphs time and again in all sorts of physical combats. Later, Miss Chen even volunteers to make breakfast for Tang Lung and invites him to see famous historic sites in Rome with her. While exploring the King's Garden, Miss Chen mentions that the queen must be the most blessed woman in the world, because the king was so generous as to build her a big garden. While she is contemplating such a happy marriage, Tang Lung replies that it was a waste of fortune. All these interactions between Tang Lung and Miss Chen contribute to encoding a hidden confrontation between the male and the female, the Oriental and the Occidental. As a Chinese immigrant, Miss Chen is accustomed to Western values and to the Western way of seeing things. Her changing attitude toward Tang Lung seems logically concomitant with his subversion of the feminized stereotype of Eastern men, a stereotype constructed by the history of Western Orientalist discourses.

In other words, Miss Chen's attitude change toward the native Chinese man reflects the attitude change in the Western audience after watching *The Way of the Dragon*. The dragon, a symbol of mysterious China, is no longer a feminized dwarf, but an Oriental cavalier, whose chopstick-made darts fly at times faster and are always proved more effective than Occidental bullets. As expected, Miss Chen falls in love with the young *kung fu* master, but he seems to be infatuated only with martial arts. This reversal of the heroine's psychological evolution represents the development of

the hero's *kung fu* dominance. The formation process and all-inclusive character of this dominance in a sense reflects the process of hegemonic formation as proposed by Gramsci.

Apart from the above-analyzed subtly-encoded characterization as well as scenario of the film, Lee's cinematic art also places great importance on the choice of the film's symbolic setting, a dramatic well-encoded setting that not only arouses audiences' memory of the far-gone Roman times, but it also functions to foreground the physical confrontation between two greatest fighters, one from the West and the other the East. After the oriental protagonist easily wins a series of physical combat against clusters of occidental rivals, the film finally climaxes when Tang Lung fights the international professional karate champion, played by Chuck Norris, (the actual karate champion in the real world of marital arts), in the Colosseum in Rome, Italy— a legendary and mythic historical monument to human physical combat. As a well wrought literary allusion serves to enrich the interpretation of a belletristic work of our time so a well chosen historical background serves as an architectural allusion to uplift the loftiness of marital arts of today. The subtly designed and encoded fighting scene functions as an interwoven metaphor that places essential elements of martial arts between the East and the West on trial. The martial artists are engaged in a deadly combat at this celebrated spot, which reminds the audiences across the world of ancient Roman gladiators, as lamented and glorified by Byron:

A grove which springs through leveled battlements  
And twines its roots with the imperial hearths,  
Ivy usurps the laurel's place of growth—  
But the gladiators' bloody Circus stands,  
A noble wreck in ruinous perfection! (Byron 569)

Whether they are gladiators or actors, they must fight to death because their only duty is to entertain and their sole goal to survive. The gladiators of old times fought fierce beasts and strong human opponents against all odds to entertain the general audience as well as the royal family; the gladiators of our time fight their adequate counterpart who belongs to a different marital arts school to entertain the movie goers and martial artists. The former involves the survival of the gladiators' lives whereas the latter concerns the survival, if not legacy, of the gladiators' theories or schools of marital arts. Because the classic scene and the storyline of the film are so richly encoded, various interpretations of the film among the audiences are possible, including the struggles between the strong and the weak, between the dominant and the marginal, between the colonizer and the colonized, between the exploiter and the exploited,

between the invader and the invaded, between the capitalist and the laborer, and so forth. Hall makes this clear in his analysis: "It is this set of decoded meanings which 'have an effect,' influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences" (Hall 1980: 130).

Contrasts or contrastive juxtapositions account for another cinematographic art employed by Lee in *The Way of the Dragon*. For one thing, the physical confrontation between Tang Lung and Chuck Norris starts with their professional warm-up at the Colosseum, where none but a serene and peaceful kitty sitting on the ancient wall happens to be the only witness of such an unprecedented duel between the East and the West in the whole surrounding. The symbolic peace and quietness of the cat is contrasted with the combative action and potentially fatal violence, which arouses a great tension in the film spectators. For another, in light of physiognomy, physique, as well as battle, there exist a number of striking contrasts between the two marital artists: the karate champion in real life and in the film vs. the *kung fu* master in real life and in the movie, the white karate robe vs. the black Chinese-styled jacket, the white man vs. the yellow man, the tall challenger vs. the short defender, the massive body vs. the lean body, the one who sticks to his professional karate moves vs. the one who reacts with intuitive instincts and grasps a tuft of his opponent's chest hair, the one who takes up the central position vs. the one who moves around his opponent, the one who adheres to his orthodox karate fighting techniques vs. the one who reflects upon new strategic moves and adopts dancing steps in the second half of the fight, the one who fights quietly vs. the one who fights with wolfish yells to distract and disturb his opponent's attention, the one who has an upper hand on the duel at the early stage vs. the one who prevails over the combat in the long run, the one who falls as a contemporary gladiator to entertain the audiences vs. the one who stands for the new cinematographic gladiator of a brand new era of martial arts known as *kung fu*.

As far as cinematic art is concerned, Lee also heavily relies on his particular employment of shooting techniques. In this first self-directed film, Lee discards the shooting techniques favored by his previous director Lo Wei. To represent fighting scenes more objectively, he avoids montages, editing, and close-ups, because these techniques involve directorial subjectivity, especially to the audience of martial expertise. Instead, he uses medium and long shots to show the whole scene and the complete process of the duel between the two masters of martial arts. Lee's subtle cinematographic device represents Eastern and Western fighters equally and fairly on the stage, as if in the ring of professional boxing competition. This filming technique makes the scene look as objective as a theatrical performance or martial contest, which contributes largely to the persuasive power as well as objective atmosphere of the film.



After reluctantly killing his antagonist, Tang Lung covers Norris' body with his karate suit and black belt (symbols of his opponent's rare martial achievement) and shows sorrowful respect before he leaves the legendary Colosseum. Thus, if we draw on Steve Neale's "Masculinity as Spectacle," which analyzes mainly white male gaze at white male bodies, for the present cinematic analysis, we may say that Lee to a certain extent satisfies the audience's "fetishistic scopophilia" (Neale 13) with the fight between two topless male bodies as a spectacle. In the mean time, Lee manages to avoid sacrificing the sense of reality by rendering the gladiatorial combat "stylised and fragmented by close-ups" (Mulvey 14), which Laura Mulvey, in her "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," regards as a cinematic feature as far as white male gaze at white female bodies is concerned. Through his strategic appropriation of physiognomy as cinematographic signifiers, Lee arouses the audience's identification which

involves both the recognition of self in the image on the screen, a narcissistic identification, and the identification of self with the various positions that are involved in the fictional narration. . . . Identification is therefore multiple and fractured, a sense of seeing the constituent parts of the spectator's own psyche paraded before her or him. (Mulvey 14)

No wonder the Chinese people hail Lee as an anti-racial and anti-colonial hero. A Western cartoonist drew a comically distorted portrait of Lee as a representative figure of the Chinese people as a whole. By contrast, famous martial masters of different nationalities, including Chinese and Japanese, continuously invited Lee to engage in combat with them. The three major types of audience perception and reception of Lee's cultural representation through cinematographic art correspond to Hall's discourse on the three dimensions of audience decoding, namely preferred, negotiated, and oppositional (Hall 1980:136-138).

For the audience of sensitive political awareness, *The Way of the Dragon* can be viewed as a symbol of original globalization in Asia (Kato 61). Such a globalization witnesses two predatory powers, namely American imperialism and Japanese imperialism, and a Chinese pan-patriotism as embodied by Tang Lung in the film who stands up against the joint imperialistic invasion with unexpected bravery and unique Chinese heritage, namely the Chinese martial arts known as *kung fu*. In the film, in order to defend the Chinese restaurant attacked by an Italian mafia, the hero Tang Lung has to fight both Japanese and American karate masters. In real history in the 1960s and 1970s, the U.S. and Japan signed the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the U.S. and Japan to govern and guard their mutual post-war interests in Asia. When American imperialism went hand in hand with the revival of Japanese

imperialism, they developed a new mode a predatory capitalism which led to the setting up of Asian Development Bank (ADB), an organization that functioned almost like a regional International Monetary Fund (IMF) or a regional World Bank (WB). In other words, the particular cinematic arrangement for an American karate master to cooperate with a Japanese karate master against a Chinese *kung fu* master reflects as well as represents a realistic historical condition in which imperialistic nations coordinated with each other in terms of cross-national capital flow to exploit a colony by means of a new colonial despotism (Constantino 32). Due to the political status as a colony of the United Kingdom, Hong Kong was particularly sensitive to such a political interpretation of *The Way of the Dragon*. In fact, Hong Kong was highly encouraged by Lee's previous film, *The Fist of Fury*, when the students in Hong Kong launched protests against Japanese occupation of the Senkaku Islands between Taiwan and Okinawa in 1971. Tang Lung's rise as a Chinese or Asian protagonist that prevails over his joint imperialistic invading powers added further excitement to the democratizing process in Eastern Asia as embodied in local student movement, labor movement, mass movement, farmer movement, and proletariat movement in Asian, especially in Hong Kong and Thailand (Kato 62). As one can see through the above analysis, the audiences' reception of Lee's film depends largely on the audiences' respective particular historical backgrounds, social strata, national statuses, and so forth, which appears by and large in line with Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication. His model claims that TV and other media audiences are presented with messages that are decoded, or interpreted in different ways depending on an individual's cultural background, economic standing, and personal experiences. In contrast to other media theories that disempower audiences, Hall advanced the idea that audience members can play an active role in decoding messages as they rely on their own social contexts, and might be capable of changing messages themselves through collective action (Hall 1980: 128-38).

To sum up, Lee's *The Way of the Dragon* as a cinematographic representation is inscribed with rich cultural elements. It appeals to Chinese specificity and Western civilization in a convincing and almost reciprocal manner. Based on his hegemonic, all-comprehensive theory of Chinese *kung fu*, he uses the power of the motion pictures to confront the overbearing, discursive phenomenon of Western Orientalism. Through Lee's brand new camera that brings together not only the Eastern and Western cultures but Eastern and Western martial arts as well, the audience is allowed to witness that to their surprise an Oriental manages to confront Orientalism and defy its sweeping generalizations of the Orient. The director and actor's cultural representation moves beyond repeating the oppression mechanism of the relentless desire to marginalize and

exclude what is different from oneself, that is, the Other. The sense of reality in the film results mainly from Lee's martial skills and shooting techniques, which altogether function to equip the devalued Oriental with confidence and self-esteem on the big screen. Paradoxically, the culturally peripheral are rendered symbolically central and dominant in the film. It thus rewrites the stereotypical discourse that envisages the so-called Chinaman without free will. With the filmic "sum of instances transformed into essences" (Ropars-Wuilleumier 260), the white American children's song, as quoted at the beginning of this article, does sound unjustly Eurocentric and by the same token Nevius' subjective depiction of the Chinese people, though he himself may consider it highly objective, remains a stale and stagnant white mythology. In brief, by presenting a firm Chinese subjectivity through spectacular on-screen *kung fu* fightings in *The Way of the Dragon*, Lee manages to assert himself as an important international cinematic figure who in one sense or another succeeds in uttering the unutterable suppressed inner voices for the Chinese people, the Oriental, and all those who belong to the marginal.

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