

Revisiting the Cinematic Value of Bruce Lee's Martial Arts Films through the Lens of Physical Artistry

Xiaohan Zhang¹, Boyu Wang^{2*}

¹School of Literature and Communication, Quanzhou Normal University, Quanzhou 362000, Fujian, China

²School of Physical Education, Quanzhou Normal University, Quanzhou 362000, Fujian, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: This study employs body aesthetics and semiotic theories to analyze Bruce Lee's martial arts films, revealing how the cinematic body transforms from traditional ethical symbols to vehicles of national identity. Through multidimensional encoding of corporeal forms, kinetic grammar, and audiovisual rhetoric, Lee's muscular physique evolves into a "poetic symbol" of anti-colonial resistance. The iconic scene of shattering the "Sick Man of East Asia" plaque functions as a performative act of symbolic healing for national trauma while establishing new paradigms for global action cinema. The generational shift from "externalized power" to "internalized cultivation" in martial arts narratives demonstrates how body imagery facilitates cross-media dissemination of physical aesthetics, providing innovative frameworks for traditional martial arts revitalization and digital-era cultural soft power construction.

Keywords: Bruce Lee; Martial arts films; Chinese cinema

Online publication: June 6, 2025

1. Introduction

When Bruce Lee's foot shattered the "Sick Man of East Asia" plaque, the onscreen violence transcended cinematic boundaries to become a spiritual totem for Third World anti-colonial struggles. As a 1970s cultural phenomenon, Lee reconstructed global action cinema through four-and-a-half martial arts films, transforming the martial artist's body from an ethical appendage in traditional wuxia films into a concrete symbol of national awakening. This corporeal-mediated cultural breakthrough subverted Western Orientalist fantasies epitomized by the "Fu Manchu" stereotype, leaving an indelible imprint on global film and cultural history.

This transformation reflects historical inevitability. Modern Chinese history constitutes both a chronicle of national survival and a process of corporeal consciousness awakening. Early 20th-century Chinese cinema, constrained between traditional cultural norms and Orientalist gazes, manifested collective bodily anxiety

through fantastical wire-fu spectacles that evaded physical reality. By the 1970s, Lee and contemporaries confronted the body directly, transforming fleshly violence into discursive weapons against Orientalism while reconstructing the political subjectivity of national bodies.

2. Constructing body imagery: The historical context of Bruce Lee's martial arts cinema

2.1. Technological revolution and the awakening of modern body consciousness

The technological innovations in photographic processes since 1839 have enabled the precise replication of bodily imagery through physical and chemical reactions. Represented by advancements in photosensitive materials, optical lens design, and camera manufacturing, these technical iterations not only enhanced the efficiency of photographic reproduction while reducing costs but also transformed bodily imagery from static portraits into dynamic narrative vehicles. Such technological progress compelled creators to explore new artistic techniques for expressing their visions. Pioneers across generations expanded the boundaries of photography, culminating in the Lumière brothers' public film screening in 1895—an event that mechanized visual perception, astonished global audiences, and inspired waves of filmmakers. Walter Benjamin affirmed cinema's universal value as mechanically reproduced art, emphasizing its capacity for leisurely reception, collective catharsis, and resistance to modern alienation ^[1].

Filmmakers reconstructed diverse creative motifs through cinema's audiovisual medium, forming distinct genre branches. In the context of Chinese cinematic practice, the integration of martial chivalry (wuxia) culture and martial arts birthed wuxia cinema—a quintessentially Chinese film genre. Wang Xiaohua posits: “The body is simultaneously the author, protagonist, and spectator of cinema. As a reinterpretation of reality, film embodies a complete corporeal schema: performed by bodies for bodily observation. The cinematic body perpetually constructs its own world, which constitutes the very enterprise of subjectivity” ^[2]. By equating cinema with dance as embodiments of physical artistry, he affirms the body's central agency in artistic creation.

This study proposes an extended perspective: the martial arts depicted on screen—performative rather than authentic, aestheticized rather than combative—should be recognized as a form of physical artistry parallel to dance and cinema. It manifests as an intercorporeal technique where the subjective body, simultaneously serving as medium and object, engages in adversarial performance—an art form preserved through technological mediation.

2.2. From wuxia to kung fu: Origins, constraints, and divergence

It is imperative to first clarify that wuxia (martial chivalry) cinema and kung fu (martial arts) cinema represent distinct film genres, though the latter is often regarded as an extension of the former in Chinese cinematic practice. During the formative era, directors adapted chivalric legends and Jianghu (martial underworld) narratives into visual spectacles rooted in traditional culture, thereby establishing wuxia cinema. Scholar Jia Leilei identifies *The Car Thief* (1919), directed by Ren Pengnian, as the earliest prototype of Chinese wuxia cinema. Though adapted from an American detective film, it pioneered action elements such as chases and combat while incorporating quintessential wuxia motifs—chivalric codes, martial ethics, and martial arts duels ^[3]. Subsequent works like *Burning of the Red Lotus Monastery* (China, 1928) and *The Hero of the East* (China, 1933) achieved widespread popularity, with specialized martial artists and stunt performers rising to prominence alongside the genre's maturation.

By the mid-20th century, wuxia cinema entered a formulaic phase. Narratives prioritized historical figures and chivalric archetypes, emphasizing traditional ethics and moral edification while remaining detached from contemporary realities. Action choreography adhered to classical martial techniques and bladed combat, with actors clad in flowing robes concealing both their physiques and wirework rigging to achieve superhuman feats like “scaling walls and leaping rooftops.” The wuxia world thus persisted as a heterotopia—a fantastical escape from mundane struggles.

As creative practices deepened, filmmakers grew dissatisfied with the genre’s stagnant conventions. Departing from established traditions, they began foregrounding corporeal realism and kinetic syntax, shifting narratives from mytho-historical realms to contemporary settings while reimagining Chinese martial heroism. This divergence birthed kung fu cinema—a new genre distinct from wuxia in both aesthetics and execution. Early works like Wang Yu’s *The Chinese Boxer* (1970) and Chang Cheh’s *Vengeance* (1970) exemplified this emergent form, showcasing novel characteristics absent in classical wuxia ^[4].

3. Corporeal-centric narratives and innovative paradigms in Bruce Lee’s films

Films like *The Chinese Boxer* (龙虎斗) and *Vengeance* (报仇), while signaling the embryonic stage of kung fu cinema as a new genre, remained limited in influence. They failed to fully liberate martial arts cinema from formulaic conventions or achieve profound semiotic transformation in character representation, particularly in advancing from signifier (surface iconography) to signifier (ideological depth). The paradigm shift arrived with Bruce Lee’s return to Hong Kong and his debut lead role in *The Big Boss* (唐山大兄 , Hong Kong, 1971), which catalyzed the genre’s metamorphosis. During this era, Lee’s groundbreaking physicality—muscular definition, scarred flesh, and visceral violence—transformed the martial arts body from a fantastical appendage of wuxia mythos into a corporeal subject of the material world, cementing his status as a global kung fu icon.

3.1. The body’s dominance: A case study of Bruce Lee

The formation of kung fu cinema resulted from multiple synergistic factors. While its predecessor, wuxia cinema, faced stagnation through formulaic conventions, decades of creative practice had objectively cultivated professional expertise, established creative paradigms, and generated momentum for innovative reform.

Distinct from wuxia’s mythic escapism, kung fu cinema concentrated its narrative space within the material world, privileging the agentive body and martial technique as dominant forces. *The Big Boss* (Hong Kong, 1971) exemplified this through its Hong Kong-style corporeal documentation—muscular physiques, bruised flesh, bloodstains, and primal vocalizations collided with modern cinematic technologies. Cinematographic techniques and post-production sound design collaborated to engineer visceral body-to-body confrontations, excavating and cathartically channeling audiences’ subconscious desires and collective anxieties, thereby achieving profound socio-cultural resonance.

3.1.1. “Martial artist first” philosophy

Bruce Lee revolutionized cinematic combat choreography with his distinct personal style that diverged fundamentally from traditional wuxia conventions. Prioritizing his identity as a martial artist over that of a performer, Lee’s approach to screen combat, as analyzed by Dai Guobin, manifested as “authentic fighting” that

constructed the image of “kung fu chivalry”^[5-6]. Drawing from extensive combat experience, Lee emphasized martial arts’ practical efficacy, systematically developing Jeet Kune Do—a combat philosophy prioritizing swift neutralization of opponents. This philosophy directly shaped the signature characteristics of Lee’s on-screen combat: speed, precision, and lethal efficiency.

In contrast to the deliberately mythologized and obscured corporeality in conventional wuxia cinema, Lee’s martial arts films pursued liberation of the physical form from subjective and objective constraints, showcasing progressively enhanced physical prowess through cinematic representation. His lifelong martial arts training and practical combat experience informed a unique combat philosophy grounded in biomechanical efficiency and physiological optimization.

Lee’s dual background as a child star and U.S.-educated filmmaker endowed him with a sophisticated understanding of Western cinematic mechanisms. This enabled innovative synthesis of traditional Chinese martial arts and chivalric ethos with modern filmmaking techniques. Through this intercultural cinematic praxis, Lee subverted Orientalist stereotypes of Chinese masculinity while facilitating global dissemination of Chinese cultural values.

Wang Xiaohua’s theory of somaesthetics posits the body as a unified entity of materiality and consciousness. Drawing parallels to dance, where the body functions simultaneously as creative subject, expressive medium, and symbolic communicator through movement and gesture, martial arts in cinema similarly transform physical combat into symbolic body art. The cinematic body becomes both a performative agent and a semiotic medium, transmuting combative actions into aesthetic signs that ritualize violence, akin to dance or ceremonial reenactments, while transcending practical functions of offense and defense.

3.1.2. Multilayered corporeal semiotics

Bruce Lee’s martial choreography in his cinematic oeuvre delivered visceral audiovisual impact while constructing multi-layered corporeal narratives through three-dimensional somatosemiotics.

Under his “martial artist first, filmmaker second” philosophy, Lee foregrounded the authentic physical body’s cinematic materiality. Contrasting with wuxia’s metaphysical paradigm, where bodies serve as vessels for invisible gongfu cultivation, Lee’s physiological paradigm rooted combat efficacy in tangible muscular power and mental fortitude. This re-semiotized the martial body from transcendental poetic symbolism to concrete visual semiosis grounded in biomechanical reality.

In *The Big Boss* (Hong Kong, 1971), Lee’s character Cheng Chao-an demonstrates this paradigm through ice factory combat sequences. Confronted with multiple attackers, Cheng employs environmental improvisation—hurling flashlights, scattering dust, and utilizing spatial obstacles—while executing reactive grappling and counterstrikes. This dynamic combat methodology, emphasizing situational adaptability over preset routines, established enduring action cinema principles still prevalent across genres.

Technologically, Lee leveraged emerging cinematographic capabilities to enhance kinetic realism. Through close-range multi-camera setups, alternating between tight close-ups and subjective camera angles, he intensified combat sequences’ spatial immediacy and psychological tension. The technical apparatus became co-constitutive in crafting what Deleuze might term “affection-images” of corporeal struggle.

Symbolically, Lee’s martial archetype descended from wuxia’s heterotopic fantasy to urban reality. While preserving chivalric ethos, he dispensed with jianghu code formalism, instead pioneering complex combat geometries mirroring street brawl dynamics. By replacing conventional one-on-one duels with asymmetrical

one-against-many and multi-directional engagements, Lee's choreography demanded: Spatial cognition of opponent positioning; Fluid mobility across combat zones; Tactical modulation between offensive; defensive modes.

This paradigm shift amplified both technical complexity and spectatorial immersion. The chaotic multi-vector combat necessitated precise inter-performer coordination while heightening narrative stakes through realistic tactical progression^[7-12]. Cinematically, this transformed martial sequences into hyper-kinetic spatial puzzles where bodies became tactical signifiers negotiating three-dimensional battlegrounds.

3.1.3. The spatial transformation of the modern martial world and the rise of the commoner hero

In traditional martial arts films, the "jianghu" (martial world) is often depicted as a closed, self-contained heterotopia, where major sects exist as isolated powers engaged in perpetual rivalry, detached from the constraints of time, space, and the mundane world. This portrayal reflects a deliberate evasion of real-life societal issues. In contrast, Bruce Lee's martial arts films recenter the narrative within the modern world, reimagining the streets as the new "jianghu." By focusing on the realities of everyday life and the struggles of "living people", Lee employs the language of spatial politics to critique issues of race, class, and colonialism.

In his films, Lee often portrays protagonists from the working class—ordinary individuals who labor physically to survive. These characters are neither saints nor invincible warriors; they grapple with basic needs, desires, and moral dilemmas, yet retain the simplicity and integrity idealized in traditional martial culture. Through personal trials and conflicts, they undergo transformative arcs, awakening to confront oppression and injustice. These "tragic heroes" or "commoner heroes", flawed yet fiercely righteous, resonate more deeply with audiences than idealized paragons. Their imperfections and grounded humanity invite viewers to project their own struggles onto the characters, fostering emotional connection. This theme of righteous violence, rooted in traditional chivalric values, taps into the audience's yearning for fairness and catharsis, allowing them to vicariously experience triumph through the hero's journey.

In *The Big Boss* (Hong Kong, 1971), the protagonist Cheng Chao-an is a Chinese immigrant laborer forced into grueling work under a criminal syndicate. After enduring personal loss and inner turmoil, he ultimately rises to challenge and defeat the gang's leader, avenging his friends and reclaiming justice.

Fist of Fury (Hong Kong, 1972) serves as Lee's bold declaration against colonialism and a rallying cry for national dignity. The film's hero, Chen Zhen, seeks vengeance for his mentor Huo Yuanjia's murder, storming a Japanese martial arts dojo to smash the infamous plaque labeling Chinese as the "Sick Men of East Asia." His iconic roar—"We Chinese are not the 'Sick Men of East Asia'!"—resonates as both a personal and collective defiance. Lee's choreography often culminates in visceral moments where he strips to the waist, revealing a body glistening with sweat, muscle, and scars. This deliberate exposure contrasts his lean, clothed silhouette, transforming his physique into a visual metaphor for resilience.

Here, the body transcends its physicality to become a political symbol. On one level, it resists external forces that seek to dominate individual autonomy; on another, it embodies a nation's struggle against colonial subjugation. Lee's glorification of the martial body—unified in spirit and flesh—elevates it into a symbolic totem of national identity. His films thus visually dismantle the Orientalist myth of the "Sick Man," replacing it with an unapologetic celebration of strength and resistance.

Amid the 1970s backdrop of Third World national liberation movements and countercultural upheavals like the hippie movement, Lee's cinematic ethos mirrored China's own quest for rejuvenation and independence.

His characters' defiance and triumph offered hope to global audiences fighting oppression, democratizing the appeal of martial arts cinema, and cementing Lee's legacy as a transnational icon of liberation.

3.2. The evolution and global integration of martial arts cinema aesthetics

Bruce Lee and his martial arts films marked the definitive birth of the martial arts genre as a new cinematic category through their distinctive narrative structures, choreography, and technical innovations. These works not only established a blueprint for action cinema worldwide but also reinvigorated traditional wuxia (martial chivalry) narratives by breaking creative stagnation and fostering cross-genre integration. The genre's techniques—such as dynamic fight sequences and environmental storytelling—have been widely adopted by other film genres to enhance visual impact and narrative depth.

In Hong Kong cinema, successors like Jackie Chan and Stephen Chow further expanded the genre's boundaries. Chan's films emphasize environmental interactivity, incorporating acrobatic stunts, improvised weaponry, and comedic timing in chaotic settings (e.g., *Drunken Master*), while Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) blended slapstick humor with stylized action, redefining martial arts comedy. Meanwhile, Donnie Yen's *Ip Man* series (2008–2019) elevated the genre by focusing on biographical depth and technical precision. The films' minimalist yet powerful Wing Chun choreography, combined with immersive sound design and CGI, showcased both the artistry and practicality of traditional Chinese martial arts.

Globally, Bruce Lee's influence permeates diverse cinematic traditions. Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* series (2003–2004) paid direct homage to Lee's iconic yellow jumpsuit and nunchaku, while amplifying “aestheticized violence” and dark humor through hyper-stylized, one-against-many combat sequences. In the U.S., the *John Wick* series (2013–2023) reimagined martial arts as “gun-fu”, merging close-quarters combat with tactical firearm use—a reflection of America's gun culture and action cinema's adaptability. Even Uganda's burgeoning “Wakaliwood” film movement draws inspiration from Lee's ethos, blending low-budget ingenuity with grassroots martial arts storytelling.

4. The influence and inspiration of Bruce Lee's “body consciousness” in martial arts cinema on contemporary film

As creative practices deepen, the economic, political, cultural, and social value of martial arts cinema as a genre continues to be explored. Operating within modern commercial film industries, creators innovate in themes and techniques to meet market demands, developing diverse styles to cater to audience preferences, thereby generating economic value and driving cultural consumption. Beyond commerce, martial arts cinema also holds enduring significance in shaping political and cultural narratives.

4.1. Horizontal exchange: Reconstructing global cultural landscapes through bodily narratives

Historically, Western-centric discourse dominated global narratives, marginalizing and distorting representations of Asian, African, and Latin American cultures. Stereotypes like the “Yellow Peril” and Orientalist caricatures such as “Fu Manchu” framed Western perceptions of Asians. The rise of 1970s Hong Kong martial arts cinema, led by Bruce Lee, challenged this hegemony. Films like *Fist of Fury* (1972) depicted oppressed Chinese characters using martial arts—a bodily art—to reclaim agency, crafting powerful, righteous Chinese heroes who resisted colonial narratives.

Cinema, as a reproducible audiovisual medium, became a potent tool for disseminating counter-narratives. Martial arts' visceral combat scenes tapped into primal instincts of survival and resistance, enabling the genre to transcend cultural and temporal barriers. These bodily confrontations were encoded as symbols of social and ethnic struggles, aligning with postcolonial "writing back" theories. For example, *Ip Man* (2008–2019) redefined Chinese identity through the titular master's unyielding dignity. By portraying resilient Asian heroes, these films disrupted Western monopolies on bodily representation, reclaiming narrative control and sparking global "kung fu fever." This shift not only reshaped Western action cinema but also repositioned Asia within global cultural hierarchies, fostering cross-civilizational dialogue.

4.2. Vertical integration: Film technology and the modern preservation of intangible heritage

Traditional martial arts, born from historical practice, now face existential threats as intangible cultural heritage. Their transmission—fragile, apprenticeship-dependent, and non-standardized—has struggled amid declining practical needs and external cultural influences. Modern preservation emphasizes cultivating martial virtue (*wude*) and physical discipline over combat utility.

Contemporary film technology offers innovative solutions. High-definition imaging and high-speed cinematography capture intricate techniques, aiding research and education. Digital archives and online platforms provide accessible preservation channels. Motion-capture data can animate martial arts in virtual reality games, inspire dance, or fuel cross-disciplinary creativity. Collaborations between filmmakers and martial artists, through roles as actors, choreographers, or consultants, create symbiotic opportunities. By digitizing and diversifying martial arts' expression, cinema helps secure its survival, fostering modernization and integration with modern sports.

In summary, martial arts cinema bridges horizontal cultural exchange and vertical heritage preservation. Through bodily narratives and technological innovation, it challenges hegemonies, safeguards tradition, and redefines global cultural dynamics.

5. Conclusion

The awakening of bodily consciousness marked the beginning of the Chinese people's struggle for sovereignty and national independence, gradually reclaiming their place at the center of the global stage and regaining the right to narrate their own bodily experiences. Martial arts cinema, as an art form that synthesizes martial arts and film, embodies this return of the body to artistic prominence. Cinema, as a composite medium of bodily narratives, has become a powerful tool for the self-representation and expression of the body.

Bruce Lee's cinematic portrayal of the physical body elevated it to a position of profound significance. His films transformed the body from a mere individual entity into a symbol of the Chinese nation, breaking free from the allure of fantastical heterotopias and grounding itself in the real world. Through his imagery, Lee reshaped the global cultural positioning of Chinese people, giving voice to their stories. The "commoner hero" archetype in his films stirred audiences' emotions, encouraging self-reflection and affirming the centrality of the body and its agency.

Building on the legacy of *wuxia* (martial chivalry) cinema, Chinese filmmakers innovated within global cultural currents, advancing the international dissemination of Chinese culture. Re-examining this history

through the lens of bodily artistry reveals new dimensions of martial arts cinema's value. It reminds people to prioritize the body's subjective role in contemporary creative practices, leveraging advancements in both martial arts and filmmaking, through new technologies, ideas, and methodologies, to drive the inheritance and global communication of traditional Chinese culture. By fostering cultural confidence and consciousness, people can craft compelling Chinese narratives, showcase the richness of Chinese heritage, and strengthen cinema's role as a bridge for cross-cultural exchange and mutual understanding.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Benjamin W, 2003, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. China City Press, Beijing.
- [2] Wang XH, 2021, *The Paradox of the Body: Western Art Studies Through the Lens of Subjective Aesthetics*, 1st ed. People's Publishing House, Beijing, 207.
- [3] Jia LL, 2007, *Martial Dance Mythology: Chinese Wuxia Cinema and Its Cultural Spirit*, thesis, Nanjing Normal University.
- [4] Chen JL, 1999, Mythic Heroes: A Study of Bruce Lee's Films. *Journal of Beijing Film Academy*, 1999(3): 82–90.
- [5] Linda L, 2014, *Bruce Lee: The Tao of Jeet Kune Do*. Beijing United Publishing Co., Beijing.
- [6] Dai GB, 2011, A Study on the Developmental Characteristics of Martial Arts Film Stars Across Historical Periods: Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li as Case Studies. *Journal of Beijing Sport University*, 34(6): 37
- [7] Dai GB, 2011, A Study on the Developmental Characteristics of Martial Arts Film Stars Across Historical Periods: Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li as Case Studies. *Journal of Beijing Sport University*, 34(6): 37.
- [8] Wang DZ, 2024, Technological Subversion and Image Reinvention: A Brief Analysis of the “Deconstruction” and “Reconstruction” in Bruce Lee's Kung Fu Films. *Beauty & Times (Part 2)*, 2024(1): 151.
- [9] Guo YC, 2008, The Inheritance and Development of Traditional Martial Arts in Contemporary Society. *Journal of Shanghai Sport University*, 2008(2): 51–57.
- [10] Jiang X, 2022, *Earthly Salvation: Jiang Xun on Eastern and Western Body Cultures*, 1st ed. People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing, 188.
- [11] Yang YJ, Wang DB, 2019, Regulation of Civilian Weapons in the Tang Dynasty and Its Implications. *Journal of Hengshui University*, 21(5): 123–128.
- [12] Wang BY, 2011, A Brief Analysis of Sun Yat-sen's Martial Arts Values: Reading Preface to *Jingwu Chronicle*. *Journal of Quanzhou Normal University*, 29(2): 110–112.

Publisher's note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.