

Martial Arts Cinema: Fighting and the Cultural Heritage

To this day the martial arts cinema is the most popular of the film genres amongst the Chinese, be it produced in Hong Kong, Taiwan or the Mainland. It is the genre that has greatly helped the Chinese language cinemas to find their audience in the western countries as well. Considering its great importance, it is no surprise that the martial arts cinema also plays a huge role in introducing the various elements of the Chinese culture to the viewers quite ignorant of the history and the traditions of China and its neighbours. However, different films have very diverse connections to their cultural heritage. The analysis of the two of them – Robert Clouse’s international production “Enter the Dragon” and a more recent Wong Kar-wai’s poetic martial arts flick “The Grandmaster” – should provide the apt level of examples on the matter.

“Enter the Dragon” (1973) is a milestone film in every sense of the word. It was the last finished film starring a kung fu legend Bruce Lee; furthermore, it was the one that finally managed to bring a considerable popularity to the Chinese martial arts genre in both USA and Japan (as the producer Paul Heller recalls, “[...] in the Chinese films, there was always a Japanese villain. [...] We didn’t have a Japanese villain, which is why Japan loved the movie¹”). However, was the image of the Chinese culture the film presented to the world a genuine one or only superficial? A closer look to its main characters should already indicate the answer.

The film’s story revolves around the Shaolin martial artist Lee² (Bruce Lee) and the two Americans – a gambler named Roper (John Saxon) and a womaniser Williams (Jim Kelly) – entering the secret kung fu tournament held by a villainous criminal mastermind Han (Shih Kien). The fact that the film was created with the western audiences in mind is already apparent by having two of the three main leads being the westerners. Furthermore, all three of them possess only one (two at the most) characteristics each. Roper is a gambler. His motivation of entering the tournament is just his money problems and the passion for the high

¹ Gilchrist, Todd *Enter the Dragon Filmmakers Reflect on Bruce Lee’s Most Famous Role* (2013) [Online] Available from: <http://spinoff.comicbookresources.com/2013/06/27/enter-the-dragon-filmmakers-reflect-on-bruce-lees-most-famous-role/> [Accessed on: 1st May 2014].

² From this point onwards ‘Lee’ will refer to the character, while ‘Bruce Lee’ will be used to describe the actor.

stakes games. Williams is a one-note womanizer, a quality of his which is blown out of proportion by having him to sleep with numerous women at the same time during the various plot points throughout the movie. Lee is an action hero and a spy – he is sent on the mission by the British intelligence to uncover Han’s activities and put the stop to them. If one should combine all of the singular characteristics of the three main leads into one character, the result would become eerily similar to the main character of another box office hit made almost a decade before “Enter the Dragon” – James Bond in the British spy film “Dr. No.” Even the villain Mr. Han is incredibly similar to the James Bond villain-type in general and Dr. Julius No in particular: Han is sporting both an underground lair *and* a missing hand, which he replaces with various prosthetics. Another producer of the film Fred Weintraub has expressed, that the main ambition of his while making “Enter the Dragon” was “To make money”³. Thus it is hardly surprising, that instead of focusing on the Chinese specific elements, the movie features the narrative and the characters heavily influenced by one of the most popular western films at the time.

When embarking to make “Enter the Dragon” Bruce Lee intended for it to portray both physical and the philosophical sides of the kung fu. During the film’s introduction, Lee is instructed by his teacher of ‘the enemy’ being just an illusion. The scene sets the tone for the exploration of the philosophical aspects of the martial arts; however, they are never *truly* explored. Even during the film’s climatic fight between Lee and Han, in which Lee remembers his teacher’s words (through the audio flashback), the hero applies them in the purely physical sense: Han is hiding between the endless reflections of mirrors, hence, Lee smashes them to get to him. A very abstract idea therefore is transformed into a literal and unsubtle application. The film celebrates and focuses on the physical side of the martial arts, however; the sheer novelty of an Asian martial arts hero combined with the more familiar narrative and the character no doubt greatly contributed to the film’s success in the west.

Even though Lee is the main hero, throughout most of the film its focal characters are actually Roper and Williams; right after their introductions the audience is meant to see the events unfold through their eyes. During the welcoming feast on the Han’s island it is Roper who gets the most close ups; the shot – reverse shot technique is used between him and Han, while Lee is forgotten in the background. The major plot points are also being revealed to

³ Gilchrist, Todd *Enter the Dragon Filmmakers Reflect on Bruce Lee’s Most Famous Role* (2013) [Online] Available from: <http://spinoff.comicbookresources.com/2013/06/27/enter-the-dragon-filmmakers-reflect-on-bruce-lees-most-famous-role/> [Accessed on: 1st May 2014].

Roper and Williams, when Han tries to convince each of them to join him. Even the exposition in the beginning of the film is related to the audience by the British man – Lee’s role is solely action-based. Thus, even the small amount of the elements of the Chinese culture that are introduced in “Enter the Dragon” are made to be looked to from afar; after all, the audience are only able to identify themselves with the outsiders and not the actual members of the said culture.

All in all, “Enter the Dragon”, despite it being a martial arts movie, is more a western film with the Chinese elements than the actual Chinese one. That serves as both its shortcoming and the greatest strength: while being quite unrepresentative of the traditions of kung fu and failing to connect audiences with the uniqueness of the Chinese culture, it did open a way in the west for the films that actually do. “The Grandmaster” is definitely one of those films.

“The Grandmaster” (2013), a historical martial arts drama by Wong Kar-wai, while belonging to the same genre as “Enter the Dragon” is a very different movie. Its story focuses on three plotlines and the four main characters: an ambitious Ma San (Zhang Jin), a vengeful Gong Er (Zhang Ziyi), a pragmatic Yixiantian the ‘Razor’ (Cheng Chen) and the Wing Chun grandmaster Ip Man (Tony Leung Chiu-Wai), an actual historical figure and the teacher of “Enter the Dragon’s” star Bruce Lee. By analyzing the film’s formal characteristics as well as its treatment of the martial arts one could conclude that “The Grandmaster’s” connection to the Chinese culture is different as well.

At this point a usage of the low frame rate has already become one of Wong Kar-wai’s signature techniques. According to the director himself, the choppy feeling of the lower frame rate creates a sense of the things moving faster than they actually are (even though the illusion of movement is being slowed down)⁴ and gives the particular shots in which they are used either a feeling of passing time or a flair of the importance. However, while the same technique is used in “The Grandmaster” from time to time, it also works to present the film as a historical one. Various non-diegetic stock footage clips are inserted throughout the movie. Notably all of these clips are presented with the low, choppy frame rate. While they do on their own lend “The Grandmaster” a historical feel, the lower frame rate used in the film’s

⁴ Deadline Hollywood *Martin Scorsese and Kar Wai Wong Interview* (2014) [Online] Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=xB9JvRbBZRM [Accessed on: 2nd May 2014].

diagetic sequences correspond to the frame rate in the stock footage and in this way legitimizes “The Grandmaster’s” perceived historical accuracy.

As in most of the Wong Kar-wai’s films, the usage of colour in “The Grandmaster” plays an important role in establishing a certain tone as well. However, unlike in “Chunking Express” or “Happy Together”, colour palette does highlight not only the characters’ emotions or the tone of the particular scene, but also the film’s overall atmosphere. The striking gold, black and brown tints are used in “The Grandmaster” – the colours which invoke a nostalgic feeling of the old photographs. It certainly makes sense considering that the film tries to present itself as belonging to the historical genre: the warm tints create a bittersweet impression of ‘the days gone by.’ Yet they serve quite different, more literal purpose as well.

The photographs play a prominent role in the film. In the four distinct (yet similar) scenes throughout the story various characters gather together to make the group photos: Ip Man and his family; Ip Man along his fellow southern martial artists; Razor with his students in a barbershop; and yet again Ip Man, now with the pupils of his own. These old monochrome pictures suggest the importance of belonging, of creating continuity (be it continuity through blood or continuity through knowledge). It is notable, that the other two of the four principal characters (Gong Er and Ma San) never make similar photographs of their own: focusing only on the past and the future (respectively) they neither belong nor leave their own legacies.

The way of how the photographs are integrated into the film is also important. During the scenes in which the characters are taking their group pictures, Wong Kar-wai progressively lowers “The Grandmaster’s” frame rate and washes out the colours until the scenes end with the still black and white image. The smooth transition between the film’s diegesis and the photographs combined with the film’s old photography-like colour scheme could be interpreted as “The Grandmaster” itself possessing qualities similar to the old photographs.

The interpretation may certainly be valid, seeing that the preservation was one of the main themes on the director’s mind while making the movie. One of the screenwriters during an interview relates Wong Kar-wai’s thoughts on the matter: “Even if good things are gone, it

may only be temporary. If they worth to be preserved, some day they will come back”⁵. The old Chinese kung-fu traditions indeed come back to life in the film similarly how the old photographs can preserve and bring back the long-lost knowledge. But the analogy does not end here. The photos’ could have also been used in “The Grandmaster” as the means to visually underline the film’s historical legitimacy (similarly how the stock footage was used for this very same purpose). Yet the narrative makes this notion paradoxical: only one of the storylines presented in the film relates the real world events. Razor’s storyline (along with Gong Er’s) is completely fictional. Thus, would not legitimizing both the real and the fictional via the same technique actually undermine film’s historical feel rather than highlighting it?

The old photographs preserve knowledge in a very peculiar way – they do invoke a general atmosphere of the past and their beholders become aware of the existence of the variety of stories hidden behind a single still image. Yet without any other historical evidence those stories remain just that – the hidden possibilities. “The Grandmaster” works in a similar fashion: the biographical details of Ip Man are surrounded by the stories of other people, who, albeit fictional, could have very well lived in that particular period of the Chinese history. Therefore, if one should consider the entire film being a kind of an ‘old photo’, they would most likely conclude that by treating both the fictional and the factual data on the equal terms, “The Grandmaster” hardly suffers: after all, a still image does not tell a cohesive story; it does create a general feeling, it invokes a memory.

“The Grandmaster’s” narrative certainly supports this notion. As in most of Wong Kar-wai’s films, the syuzhet is very fragmented, focusing more on the certain ideas or the emotions of the characters rather than on the story (much of the major events of the film’s fabula are told through the short inter-titles). The battles of the different ideologies and even the development of various relationships are related through the kung-fu itself. Wong Kar-wai’s focus on the kung-fu techniques as the major driving force of the film is very clear while listening to his interview with Martin Scorsese: in it the director of “The Grandmaster” reveals that the authenticity and the realism of the kung-fu fighting was one of his primary concerns; so much so that most of the time actors were more advised to listen to the hired kung-fu masters (who served as the consultants) than to the director himself. No wires and

⁵ *Meanings of the Grandmaster (2013): Interview Answers from director Wong Kar Wai and the Screenwriters (2013)* [Online] Available from: <http://moonlightknightk.wordpress.com/2013/01/24/meanings-of-the-grandmaster/> [Accessed on: 2nd May 2014].

almost no CGI were used in “The Grandmaster’s” action scenes: Wong wanted them to be as genuine as the emotions of the characters.⁶ The beautiful fight scene between the characters of Ip Man and Gong Er serves as a great example to reveal the reason behind that.

After Ip Man defeats her father Gong Yutian in the battle of wits and skill, Gong Er is furious; she cannot admit the loss of her family, even though Yutian himself is more than happy to pass a torch to the new talent. Gong Er challenges Ip Man for a re-match; at this point in the plot she holds no positive feelings for him. When their fight commences, it feels more like a dance than the battle: hardly a surprise knowing that Wong Kar-wai played the musical tracks while filming these kinds of scenes (according to him, the rhythm is incredibly important)⁷. During the section of the fight when Ip Man lifts Gong Er into the air, the notable shot featuring a close up of both of their faces is used – while being suspended in the air and looking into each other’s eyes the two main characters look more like the lovers than the adversaries. After the fight is over, Gong Er starts treating Ip Man in an extremely friendly manner; at the end of the film she even admits that despite their very limited interactions she has fallen in love with him. The turn in their relationship could only have happened during their fight; Ip Man reveals that himself while affectionately expressing his interest of seeing Gong Er’s 64 Hands style again in a manner of a lover yearning to get back together with the love of his life. Hence, the match between Gong Er and Ip Man transcends the physical action of fighting – it is actually their most intimate moment during which both of them manage to understand each other better than anybody else. Ip Man and Gong Er relate to one another the knowledge and the way of thought that was passed to them through generations and they are doing it not through words, but through actions, through repetition; a ritual in a way. Kung Fu becomes their means of communication: it takes the central stage in “The Grandmaster” because it is the living memory rather than the recorded history. The facts of the film’s story might be fictionalized, but the general feeling of the era is preserved by kung fu as a philosophy rather than just the collection of the fighting techniques (like it was presented in “Enter the Dragon”).

The notions of the living memory and the importance of the connection to the past (and the future) are evident from the title of the film as well. The original title - *Yi Dai Zong Shi* – while translated into English could mean either “The Grandmaster of That Era” or “The

⁶ Deadline Hollywood *Martin Scorsese and Kar Wai Wong Interview* (2014) [Online] Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=xB9JvRbBZRM [Accessed on: 2nd May 2014].

⁷ Deadline Hollywood *Martin Scorsese and Kar Wai Wong Interview* (2014) [Online] Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=xB9JvRbBZRM [Accessed on: 2nd May 2014].

Grandmasters of That Era.”⁸ Seeing how the movie does not focus solely on Ip Man, but rather tells a story of the four different kung fu masters, the second version of the title seems more appropriate. However, Wong Kar-wai himself chose “The Grandmaster” as an official title for the English language release. His reasoning for that is as follows: “In the end of the movie many people could have become a grandmaster, 宮若梅 Gong Er could, 一線天 Razor / Yixiantian could, and even 馬三 Ma San, too. However, only 葉問 Ip Man could reach the finish line, and preserve the precious skills taught by ancestors.”⁹ In the film’s narrative Gong Er is stuck in the past – she dedicates her life avenging Gong Yutian (who in the course of the film is killed by Ma San) and is unable to continue the existence of her unique kung fu style through teaching it to others. She loses the connection between past and the present and is thus unworthy of the ‘Grandmaster’ title. Ma San, on the other hand, sees only the future – he sacrifices the Chinese traditions and his heritage by collaborating with Japanese occupants. The loss of his identity leads to Ma San’s downfall. Razor continues in the footsteps of his ancestors, yet he lacks the ambition and the prestige required for the kung fu grandmaster; instead of opening his own school he teaches his skill in the barbershop. Thus, despite having the least interesting character arc in the film, Ip Man is the only one worthy to be called the grandmaster: he continues the living memory that is Wing Chun style by teaching the ancient Chinese art to his students and in this way spreading it throughout the world. After all, one of his pupils was Bruce Lee, a man who greatly helped to popularize the martial arts in the west.

Overall, even though the story of “The Grandmaster” is partly based on the biographical details of Ip Man, it is a film of memory rather than that of history. As written by Maurice Halbwachs in his essay “From the Collective Memory”: “General history starts only when tradition ends and the social memory is fading or breaking up.”¹⁰ The film’s depiction of the martial arts is all about the preservation of the tradition; therefore, similarly to a photographic image, “The Grandmaster” itself is presented more like something that continues the tradition by invoking the memories of the times gone by rather than fixing the factual history in time. A sense of an almost direct connection to the past is reinforced

⁸ Thompson, Kristin & Bordwell, David *The Grandmaster: Moving Forward, Turning Back* (2013) [Online] Available from: <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2013/09/23/the-grandmaster-moving-forward-turning-back/> [Accessed on: 1st May 2014].

⁹ *Meanings of the Grandmaster (2013): Interview Answers from director Wong Kar Wai and the Screenwriters* (2013) [Online] Available from: <http://moonlightknighthk.wordpress.com/2013/01/24/meanings-of-the-grandmaster/> [Accessed on: 2nd May 2014].

¹⁰ Halbwachs, Maurice *From the Collective Memory in Theories of Memory, a Reader* (edited by Rossington and Whitehead), 2008, Edinburgh, p. 139.

through the opening and the closing sequences of the film: both of them feature surfaces and other details of a Buddhist temple, a place for prayers and rituals, with the film's narrative sandwiched in between. An argument could be made that "The Grandmaster" itself is indeed a part of a ritual – the kung fu styles which connect the film's characters to the Chinese culture are now repeated on screen for the movie's viewers, who, in turn become the part of that connection as well. And what is the better way to preserve cultural memory than the ritual?

Thus, if "Enter the Dragon" focuses solely on the physical aspects of the martial arts, "The Grandmaster" shows their philosophical and emotional sides. If the main purpose behind "Enter the Dragon" was the future, i.e., martial arts popularization in the west, "The Grandmaster" is firmly looking into the past, preserving its traditions. While both films are about kung fu they could not be more different. And yet they also perfectly complement each other: Bruce Lee, the pupil of Ip Man, has indeed advertised the martial arts genre so much that the film which explores the philosophical nature of kung fu ("The Grandmaster") can not only be accepted, but celebrated throughout the world as well. Small steps lead far and one hardly can walk forwards without relying on the road already taken – and vice versa.

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