THE BRUCE LEE FILM IMAGE AND
ITS SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

A Thesis

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by

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The intent of this thesis is to place in a social context the films featuring the martial arts film actor Bruce Lee. The thesis will examine the effect of these films on: 1) the film-going public in the U.S. and Asia, but will primarily concentrate on the U.S. audience; and 2) the film industry in the U.S. and Asia, particularly those involved in the production of martial arts films.

The goal of this thesis is to enumerate and examine the various social effects of Lee's films. This study will concern itself with the social changes that occurred, and the types of needs these films seem to have satisfied.

This thesis assumption is that Lee's films changed audience perceptions of Asians in general, and that these films also provided a unique form of entertainment.

This thesis will also attempt to demonstrate that although these films have mass appeal, their popularity among minority audiences is especially strong; attempts will be made to discern why this is so.

Finally, it will be demonstrated that Lee's films have both 1) influenced the martial arts films that have been produced in Asia, and 2) have generated production of martial arts films in the U.S.
CHAPTER I

THE MARTIAL ARTS STYLE AND PHILOSOPHY OF BRUCE LEE:
APPLICATIONS TO FILM-MAKING

On July 20, 1973, martial arts film actor Bruce Lee died in Hong Kong under mysterious circumstances. For several years prior to his death, Lee had become a controversial figure. He had introduced a style of hand-to-hand combat called Jeet Kune Do. Lee's martial art was an eclectic blend of technique and philosophy. Lee explained that it had no set forms or techniques, but developed uniquely in each individual who practiced Jeet Kune Do.\(^1\) Jeet Kune Do was considered to be unique, because it went against thousands of years of martial arts tradition. The controversy surrounding Lee's conception continues, but the fact remains that Lee sparked an intense interest in martial arts through his films because of his use of Jeet Kune Do.

I. The Martial Arts Film

Lee's films were part of a wave of martial arts films that began to be shown in theaters around the world in the early 70's. These films broke box office records the world over, yet their popularity waned soon after the death of Bruce Lee. The low budgets of these films made the box-office profits even more
spectacular. American film distributors, in particular, flew to the orient, bought several films, then had them dubbed into English. Soon after the films were released the distributors received box-office returns far in excess of their initial investment.²

The means by which these films were marketed, however, caused skepticism among critics of the genre. The term "chop sockey" soon became the critics convenient label for martial arts films.³

While Japanese sword films had been in release for years, the Chinese martial arts films presented a new form of cinematic violence. Swordplay was at a minimum, and hand-to-hand fighting (as well as weapons other than swords) was highlighted. The seminal martial arts film of the 70's was *Five Fingers of Death*. Bruce Lee did not star in this film, but it was a box-office smash and started the influx of "chop sockeys" into the American theatres.⁴

With the popularity of martial arts films preceeding Lee, the question arises as to how Lee had such widespread effects on the genre within a period of about two years. On a larger scale, how and why did Lee's films effect his viewers and the Kung-Fu film producers?

II. Lee's Career: An Overview

During his adult film career (1969-73), Bruce Lee starred in five martial arts oriented films, but completed only
four of them before his death. Lee's film career began at the age of six months, in Hong Kong. Both of Lee's parents were involved in the Chinese theatre, and following tradition, Lee began life as an actor—following in his parents' footsteps. In his early films, made mainly during the 50's in Hong Kong, Lee played a troubled adolescent; quite similar to what he was experiencing in his own life. Lee was a street gang member, and had at first taken up Kung-Fu as a means of fighting effectively in the streets. In 1959, he came to America, primarily to escape the tension between himself, his parents, the law, and rival gangs. Lee also needed to return to claim his U.S. citizenship, for he was originally born in San Francisco in 1940.

In the U.S., Lee's luck improved somewhat. In 1964, he was spotted at the Long Beach karate championships during a Jeet Kune Do demonstration. As a result, he was eventually cast as Kato in The Green Hornet television series, but the show was cancelled after only one season. He then only did several guest appearances on other television series. Dissatisfied, he returned to Hong Kong in 1970, and made the first of his Kung-Fu films. Lee was contacted by Raymond Chow, president of Golden Harvest films, after seeing Lee on a Hong Kong talk show:

The demonstration Bruce gave on the T.V. show was very impressive... but what impressed me more was when I talked to him on the long distance call. He picked the most popular Hong Kong made action picture of that time, and asked a very blunt question; he asked me whether that was the best we could do. I had to say yes. He then assured me, with sincerity and confidence that he could do much better. How could I doubt this man? 
Running through all of Lee's films is the use of the lone hero. In each film, he resorts to violence to resolve conflicts. Lee always avoids the use of force until he decides that violence is the only method of solving his problems.

The "stranger in the strange land" motif appears in all of Lee's films except Enter the Dragon and Game of Death. In each instance, the main thrust of the film is action oriented and set in Hong Kong or nearby.

Lee defends the oppressed in all of his films, except the two just mentioned films (Enter the Dragon and Game of Death). In both, the defense of the oppressed is not as well delineated as in his other films. Lee fights more for his own purposes in these.

The defense of the oppressed theme is strongest in his three earliest efforts. In The Big Boss, he fights for his fellow workers who are not only exploited, but some who are actually killed. The film Fist of Fury exhibits the most apparent defense of the oppressed. Lee defends his school, its honor—and that of the Chinese nation against the Japanese. Way of the Dragon demonstrates Lee's use of Chinese Kung-Fu to defend the restaurant workers from foreigners. The workers are, of course, all Chinese. The "bad guys," for the most part, are not.

The highlight of each of Lee's films is the "man vs. man" duel. While Lee has scenes where he combats several men at a time, he notably uses highly choreographed "one-on-one" duels
as the highlight of all of his movies. In The Big Boss, he fights "the big boss." In Fist of Fury, he has several one-on-one duels, including the fight with Petrov the Russian, and Suzuki. In Way of the Dragon, Lee fights Norris in his most highly stylized one-on-one confrontation. In Enter the Dragon, Lee fights O'Harras and Han. The final film, Game of Death focuses on man vs. man, especially the three main duels in the Red Pepper Inn.

Bruce Lee's producer, Raymond Chow, also became Lee's production partner and Lee and Chow planned to do more films for the Western film market, but Lee died after Enter the Dragon, so these plans came to an end.

III. The Kung-Fu Film Boom

During the Kung-Fu film boom of the 70's, many Chinese film studios were involved with martial arts films, in one form or another. Also during this period, there was more concentration on quantity, and less on quality. The success of martial arts films during this time indicates that audiences were not overly concerned with the quality of these first "chopsockeys." This intense interest in martial arts films--even those of inferior quality, caused some interested parties to wonder just why audiences were attracted to even the worst "chop-sockeys"? A disgruntled public relations man stated his confusion thus: "I don't believe it. They keep paying money to
see it. They stand in line. And it's garbage. What does it all mean?"\(^6\)

What is the most surprising is that with cultural differences between Eastern films and Western audiences, the films still managed to be successful at Western box offices. The producer of the first successful martial arts film, *Five Fingers of Death*, was Run Run Shaw. This man was originally Raymond Chow's boss, but artistic differences forced Chow to leave. They immediately became rivals.\(^7\) It was Shaw's reputation and stature that helped him beat Chow to the market—but Shaw's shrewdness caused him to pass up the opportunity to sign Bruce Lee, the man who would become the box-office king of Kung-Fu films.

In May of 1972, the Warner Bros. foreign department approached Run Run Shaw the multimillionaire king of Asian films, and asked him to send them a half dozen of the best of the karate films he had been churning out ... Shaw had been trying unsuccessfully for 30 years to break into the international film market ... From the six films ... Warner Brothers ... chose *Five Fingers of Death* ... the seminal karate film ... that ended the week of March 28, 1973, as the top grossing film in America.\(^8\)

Many similar martial arts films appeared in theaters, one after the other. In fact, Shaw's studio produced about forty films a year.\(^9\) The fact is, most of the films were shot on low budgets.

*The Big Boss* ... cost a mere $100,000, yet took half a million in its home market before even beginning to count the profits raked in from abroad. ... Films could, and still can be made in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Thailand for budgets that ... still do not come even kneehigh to those in Europe and America.\(^10\)
IV. Comparison of Lee's Films and Other Martial Arts

Cinema of the 1970's

After years of Confucian morality and bloodless, unconvincing, stagy fights, [chop sockeys] showed . . . a tortured [man] . . . who thought nothing of slaughtering his enemies. And after all the abuse he had taken, the viewers went along with the slaughter--in fact, cheered it. And the slaughter was realistic. None of this swinging a sword and having the opponent fall down. Here things were chopped off, blood spurted, and victims fell writhing . . . The filmmakers had found a formula: Take a quiet, unassuming hero, heap incredible abuse on him, then have him fight back with equally incredible rage and bloodlust.11

This formula had a direct relation to the martial arts choreography in the Japanese cinema. The first Chinese "chop sockeys" of the 1970's demonstrate heavy use of swords and other traditional weaponry. Lee's films are an exception to this trend, brought about, in part, by his criticism of Chinese cinema as it existed at the time:

They [Kung-Fu films] were terrible . . . Everybody always fighting the same way, and fighting all the time. They were unrealistic, always a lot of overacting. I introduced some new elements, some subtlety, like when I kicked, I really kicked.12

A. Distinguishing Elements

The following elements are crucial in distinguishing Lee's film The Big Boss (as well as all his following films) from other Kung-Fu films released during the same period.

1. Graphic violence. The tremendous amount of "blood and guts" martial arts films make Lee's movies seem like brief respites from the gore of the "chop sockey" productions. The majority of these films produced during the early 70's used
between three and five percent of the budget to purchase fake blood. While The Big Boss used more blood than any of Lee's other films, it paled in comparison to the films of Wang Yu, another popular martial artist of the 70's. Not only were Wang Yu's fight scenes incredibly long (one scene in Beach of the War Gods lasted more than twenty minutes), but they were incredibly violent.

In one film he is virtually split open but wraps his escaping entrails around him and continues fighting. In the 'One armed' series he not only undergoes the pain involved in the loss of a limb, but also that torture attendant on building his remaining limb into a doubly strong instrument of revenge... eye-gouging (becomes) almost routine in the Chinese Boxer... along with beheadings and those knife-blade blows to the chest... quite apart from the normal repertory of more or less lethal kicks, chops, bone-crushing grips and groin-smashing stabs.

The violence in The Big Boss is simply not as graphic as Wang Yu's films--or other similar martial arts epics. However, even the most graphic films found an audience.

2. Special effects. The use of trampolines, pulleys, piano wires, frame editing to speed up action or slower film speed for faster on-screen action are all rampant in martial arts films. Lee insisted upon limited use of special effects, relying instead on his own unique abilities to present the action. His "do everything myself" attitude became a noticeable trademark in all his films.

3. Fight scenes. Lee's films move away from the classical "sword-play" and use of excessive weaponry. In The Big Boss, Lee used his body as his primary weapon, and
resorted to the use of knives only when he faced a multiple number of opponents:

Lee actually talked Chow into doing a martial arts film with only a minimum use of weapons. Up to then, the Chinese films attempted to emulate the Japanese samurai ... movies and the use of swords was heavily emphasized.\textsuperscript{16}

In all of his subsequent films, Lee favored hand-to-hand combat to the use of weapons. Lee's scenes were also shot in longer than usual takes; where another film might show a punch being thrown, then a cut to the reaction followed by another cut to the next technique, Lee's scenarios contain sections running upwards to twenty seconds in length. This enabled Lee to demonstrate his proficient skills as well as to make the point that no editing was used to speed up the action. In essence, Lee created the action without having to resort to undue use of film editing and other cinematic tricks.

4. Weapons. Most weapons used in Chinese martial arts films are unfamiliar to those not skilled in martial arts films, martial arts, or Chinese culture in general. The Western viewer is at a particular disadvantage, especially in the "period" films concerning martial arts in ancient China. But Lee uses relatively simple, yet effective, weapons. They not only consistently demonstrate his theory of the martial arts, but they are also familiar to Western viewers. In The Big Boss, Lee's secondary weapons include a staff (a stick) and several knives. In later films, he introduces the "nunchaku" which is two sticks connected by a length of chain or rope. The nunchaku became popular not only because of Lee's use of it, but also
because the weapon was compact, easy to hide or carry, and destructively effective.

V. The Star System in the Hong Kong Film Industry

In the early history of the American film industry, there was such a thing as the contract players system. This system insured a film company that it would have a dependable retinue of name stars, but eventually the actors were to demand more from their producers.

The Hong Kong film industry is still, for the most part, a producer controlled operation. The contracts given to actors virtually enslave them: there are only a few who can "write their own ticket." Bruce Lee was one who was able to do just that. The Shaw brothers exemplified the Hong Kong film industry and its practices. These practices, in part, kept Bruce Lee from signing a contract with Shaw studios:

To begin with, actors and actresses have no control whatsoever over scripts, directors or co-stars—what the company says, goes. With very few exceptions, the contract players live on the Movietown lost itself in high-rise dormitories which are run along the lines of a military boarding school . . . practically the only way [the contract] can be broken is by quitting the profession or the country.17

This type of system may seem unnecessarily cruel, but the Chinese Confucian tradition is based upon obedience to superiors. This, of course, carries over into all aspects of life—including movie production.

As earlier noted, Bruce Lee became known in the U.S. because of his role in The Green Hornet, but when he appeared in
1973 on movie screens as the hero of the martial arts films, many viewers didn't recognize him. However, Lee's role of Kato had given him a better chance of getting into the Hong Kong film industry. Contrary to popular belief, Lee had not simply accepted the first role he was offered in Hong Kong; he had received numerous offers before finally deciding to join Raymond Chow's Golden Harvest group.¹⁸

Lee's influence as a star, apparently stimulated the popularity of the Kung-Fu film genre. Even the Shaw brothers realized that the man they failed to sign to a contract was making all Chinese films popular—including their own. Lee had become associated with martial arts, and a film dealing with martial arts became easily associated with Bruce Lee. The reason could be as simple as Lee was oriental and he performed his own martial arts. The logic easily follows that as long as Lee produced successful films, any martial arts film stood a reasonably good chance of success. This is the same with any film trend that develops. Examples include the musicals of the 30's and 40's, or the more recent "Star Wars" trend, which spawned a number of films with closely associated subjects. The Hong Kong production system then went about the task of providing the "hungry" American audience with as many "chop sockey" features as possible. The dominating factor was quantity—not quality. Economically, it wasn't an unexpected course. However, the artistic aspects of the films suffered, followed by a reversal in the economic bonanza. It seems that
as long as the films featured a group of orientals beating each other with martial arts skills and weaponry, Chinese producers assumed they would be at least moderately successful. Luckily for Raymond Chow, Lee refused the many other offers he was receiving to do films outside of Chow's Golden Harvest productions. Because of the offers he was made, Lee could have not only have been financially successful, but could have appeared in at least ten films a year.

VI. Violence and the Martial Arts Film

The violent aspect of all martial arts films was seen as necessary by the producers of these films. Bruce Lee's films, however, contained fewer fighting scenes than most martial arts films. This fact alone, made his films more in some respects because they differed from the majority of the "chop sockeys." Commenting on Lee's Fist of Fury, a reviewer noted Lee's film differed from "... previous Mandarin movies which were ninety-seven percent action, three percent dead air."19

Raymond Chow's rivals, the Shaw brothers, were noted for their extremely violent films, like those of Wang Yu, cited earlier in this chapter. With their heavy production schedule, and insistence on graphic violence, the Shaw films glutted the market. Film critic Pauline Kael observed that such films conditioned the audience to accept higher levels of violence.20 The release of the more graphic films had two effects: 1) it distinguished Bruce Lee's films from the deluge of the
explicitly violent martial arts films; 2) it resulted in the audience's rejection of inferior quality, mass produced martial arts films which most often contained graphic violence. As noted earlier, a mainstay of the genre was the "man versus the gang" theme. The fantasy of this theme appeals to large numbers of people who are willing to pay to see it depicted; it is a theme that is essential to the genre. Unfortunately, cultural differences created difficulties in some viewer's perceptions of this theme. In a society that emphasizes quick solutions to violence in the form of the gun, as here in the United States, hand-to-hand combat could be seen as obsolete and useless. In martial arts films, however, the "man versus the gang" theme parallels the showdown in the western "Hollywood" film:

It is the big fights that are different--not one against one but one against 30. And there is not the distance--both intellectual and physical--that guns provide . . . Part of the reason that the Chinese films have been able to move beyond the typical action film market is the emotional satisfaction to be derived from the newness and gracefulness of their violence. Part, also, is the reason for all the eye-gouging and bone-breaking acrobatics.\(^{21}\)

Another distinction between Lee's films and other martial arts films, is the style of martial choreography. Where the majority of "chop sockey" films use long-winded "Sloppy-Fu" battles, Lee's scenes are more precise in terms of the distance between the object striking and the object being struck. Again, this is the display of Lee's theory behind Jeet Kune Do. It is quicker than traditional martial arts, in that Lee eschews formal postures and techniques, favoring instead direct action. And, although Bruce Lee may have wanted to educate the public
with his theories about martial arts, it was also apparent he wanted to entertain them. His cinematic Jeet Kune Do was not the same as that which he used off screen. In fact, in all the martial arts films, the violence is deliberately exaggerated to create excitement. Because of this, the term "balletic violence" was applied to martial arts fights. Fred Weintraub, Lee's produce for *Enter the Dragon*, says the reason Chinese producers have problems with some American audiences and many critics of the genre is that "Kung-Fu ... is fantasy ... you never see that in life ... What you see is people shot and run over. When you're working in martial arts ... you're working with ballet."  

Some critics would hesitate to call martial arts films balletic, expressing concerns over the potential effects of violent media images on the viewer:

Our experience of violent films, viewed in relation to the findings of experimental psychologists, casts doubt on the idea of purging by entertainment. It is the movies' sustained energy as an indigenous popular art that has revealed the weakness of our usual explanations for liking the spectacle of violence. The movies, as they have exceeded classical and genteel restraints, have gradually forced recognition of the inadequacy of catharsis theory by their status as a post-Aristotelian form, an insight that has implications for all the arts.

Perhaps the biggest concern among critics is the violence in martial arts films. It seems true that audiences leave martial arts films influenced by what they have seen. There are viewpoints pro and con on this subject. A critic discussing *Five Fingers of Death* said this: "... The picture is harmless fun, and the violence seems no more real or scary
than the POWS and WHAMS in a Tom and Jerry cartoon.  

Conversely, in his book I Know It When I See It, Michael Leach cites several studies which claim that media violence has a definite detrimental effect on viewers: 

... what is obvious to me about the popularity of such films is their appeal to the audiences via the belief that you can have your cake and eat it. Indignation is all right so long as it is righteous. Killing is fine if the slaughter is committed in the name of honor ... it implies ... a smudging of values which I find most unpleasant; a witness to the cynical way in which the producers of these movies believe that audiences can be manipulated. 

There is no denying that Lee's films are violent. Whether they were manipulative in a detrimental sense as the above quotation implies, is arguable. What is apparent is that films are a form of visual communication—a mode of transmission and whether the creator of the film wants his film to transmit a specific message or not, a viewer will surely have some reaction to the images he or she has just seen. Critically, it is violent images which are most often debated, simply because there is no unanimity of opinion on the effects of media presentations of violence. Even reports like that filed by the surgeon general in 1969, do not cover all aspects of the issue; indeed, it may be an impossible task. 

This thesis does make this definitive statement on the matter; as long as there are martial arts films featuring martial arts as the core of the film, the use of violence will be a necessary dramatic technique. The debate on violence will continue as well—at least until violence disappears from these films which seems unlikely. Author Michael Leach says that
violence in films is a reflection of society itself. "Violence in movies will not vanish until it begins to diminish in our own lives . . . [Movies] will change as we change." 28

It was Bruce Lee's opinion that his film violence was not violence—-but "action":

I didn't create . . . all this gore in the Mandarin films. It was there before I came. At least I don't spread violence . . . I . . . call the fighting in my films . . . action. An action film borders somewhere between reality and fantasy. 29

This distinction is, of course, Lee's defense against critics of his films; however, his statement that the film is partially fantasy has some validity. Evidence of this can be seen in some of the supernatural feats carried out by the characters in his films. In Fist of Fury, Lee lifts two men up (one in each hand simultaneously), then throws them both several feet across the floor. Later, he lifts a rickshaw and its passengers several feet into the air. It is this type of imagery that causes a unique audience response—-laughter. However, this laughter also occurs during somewhat less spectacular feats. The reaction usually occurs when Lee has landed a particularly devastating blow. In this moment of apparent agony for the opponent, laughter seems peculiar to say the least, but, it seems to be a combination of disbelief ("I don't believe he did that") and awe ("Wow! How he did that!").

[It is] as though this were truly a kind of slapstick, a sophisticated slipping on a banana peel. In other intentionally comedic films, usually the one who slips gets a little ruffled and walks on. In the martial arts films, however, the ones who get knocked or cut are often maimed or murdered. 30
Another source attributes the laughter not to some morbid tendency, but rather to pleasure derived from seeing the hero triumph:

The traditional appeal of violence in popular arts has to do with excitement and shock. To witness the cruelty of villains arousing reciprocal action, to see the power of recovery of brutalized victims to trace the protracted pattern of stress is certainly a form of pleasure.31

There will be a further examination of violence in the section on escapism, in order to define more clearly the role violence plays in the escapist aspects of the martial arts film.
CHAPTER II

EXAMINATION OF SUBJECT GROUPS

The 1970's were a time of tremendous social unrest in the United States. The Vietnam War was in its final stages. The civil rights movement was still active as minority groups protested the racist policies of a supposedly democratic government. The possibility of space travel was now a reality. It was in this setting that Bruce Lee's films made their debut.

I. The Mass Audience: Changes in Perception

To the largely white American film audiences who viewed Lee's films in the early 1970's, a new Chinese image was presented. Lee's image was that of a "warrior," to whom fighting was a science. Here was a minority member as hero, and although America is termed a "democratic" society, this representation of a non-white leading male was uncommon. Especially important is the fact that Lee's characters fought back with ferocity and instant action. This was perhaps shocking to those who has previously viewed the typical cinematic portrayals of Asians. Indeed, the American film industry has rarely given a positive image and balanced representation of ethnic minorities. Mainstream American cinema has largely ignored its minority members or in many cases,
relegated them to second-class status. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to define exactly what social upheavals were taking place in terms of race relations— including all decades of American/film history—at the time any particular group of films was being produced.

For example, it was not until the 60's and 70's that blacks were allowed to contribute to mainstream American cinema in any way. Prior to this time, social problems of the day were rarely dealt with except by blacks themselves—by blacks themselves—at least not in a positive way. The Chinese image followed in the aftermath of the "ethnic awareness" produced by the "Blaxploitation" films. Indeed, the Chinese race has undergone the same type of racial stereotyping that blacks had suffered since the inception of the film industry in the U.S.

On the whole, Whites have been depicted as representing the entire spectrum of social and human types. Asians, contrarily, have been depicted in much more limited terms . . . What the Asians presented to the American film audience are largely a patchwork of traditionally inaccurate images and cliches, totally the products of White society, is generally in no way conveyed to the audience . . . those roles which Asians do secure often call for stylized and patterned displays, requiring less in the way of acting than a series of directed Oriental affectations, which satisfy the institutional demands of the industry.

It was this kind of dilemma that prompted Lee to make films in Hong Kong. He couldn't find the types of roles he wanted: that of the male lead. As the above quote indicates, American films traditionally presented the Chinese in a cliched manner.
Perhaps the most well-known Chinese character was Charlie Chan of the 1930's film series. In the case of Chan, here was a relatively intelligent Chinese man, however, he was a docile, harmless detective. For all of Chan's supposed "China-ness" he was portrayed by several non-oriental actors, including Warner Oland, Sidney Toler and Roland Winters. These three portrayed the Chan character in the film series that ran from 1931 through the mid-1940's. Lee himself commented that "Charlie himself is always played by a round eye wearing six pounds of make-up." Ironically, the producer of The Green Hornet had originally planned to use Lee in a T.V. series to be called Charlie Chan's Number One Son. The original Chan series, featured Charlie in somewhat complicated mystery/adventures, stories that implied solution of the mystery required a great deal of intelligence to solve it. Even so, Chan is still only a public servant. He doesn't complain or fight, he simply performs his duties. Chan perpetuates the status quo by not appearing aggressive or threatening. Chan's only reward is usually being called "honorable Charlie." Chan is always spewing Confucian philosophy—or at least, that's what the script implies. This story device unfortunately inspired one of the traditional racial slurs: "Confucius says . . .". While this philosophy of filial piety and obedience suited the Chan character, and the Western culture's relations and attitudes toward orientals. Lee's warrior character is a radical change. Lee's philosophy is that of his martial art; a
mixture of Zen and Taoism. Lee constantly quoted or paraphrased Zen and Taoist texts when talking about his art. Lee's character, instead of maintaining the status quo, was openly violent and rebellious. The greatest example may be Fist of Fury, where Lee was the only Chinese in the film who resisted the oppression by means of violent physical action.

Another traditional Chinese stereotype was Fu Manchu. His moral code was based on "evil," and he perpetrated the other side of the Chinese myth, that of a cunning, deceitful individual. In fact, the creator of Fu Manchu was not Chinese, but a man of Irish decent who revealed the basis for his character of Fu Manchu was fictitious. Sax Rohmer stated: "I made my name on Fu Manchu because I know nothing about the Chinese . . . I know something about Chinatown, but that is a different matter." 37

The martial arts films changed the Chinese image somewhat in the American media. Bruce Lee was in part responsible for some of these changes. While some Chinese saw Lee's role as another stereotyped image, it was an improvement in that the Chinese character was now presented as a positive image, rather than a negative stereotype. Lee's film characters were capable of handling problems in an authoritative manner.

To the American viewer, the change from "servant" to "master" was a cinematic step that literally destroyed decades of image racism. This is not to imply that Lee "stopped" racism. It is a fact that racism still exists, it may never
vanish. This was simply one man's attempt to present a new view on an old subject, the Asian community. It is interesting to note that it took members of this same Asian community to depict themselves in a positive manner on film. This facet of the study will be closely observed in the Asian reaction to the Lee film image.

A. The Mass Audience: Merchandising of the Lee Image

In the terms of marketing, any fad or popular cultural movement is usually open to exploitation. Lee was no exception. He became a marketable commodity. Products bearing Lee's name, image or reasonable facsimile thereof appeared with increasing regularity as his films became more popular. Identification with the Lee image simply followed a long line of the "idol worship" phenomena:

To be a 'movie star' is still a position of considerable status in our society . . . Clearly, one major element in movie star appeal is identification with the star . . . there are many firsthand accounts of how strongly the identification with a movie star can be . . . in the absence of competing role models, the movie and the movie star provide a powerful and convenient symbol for adolescents . . . Whatever the characterization the 'star system' is a conscious attempt to manufacture an image which will correspond to certain public needs at specific points in time. The social and cultural tensions dictate the nature of the star, but it is . . . the studio system and all its publicity apparatus which deliberately created and promoted the image of the star as a primary means of selling the studio product.38

Lee inspired a craze that had far reaching ramifications:

Adults as well as youngsters left movie houses shouting strange martial arts yells they'd heard inside, and innocent bystanders dodged amateurish, unaimed punches and kicks thrown by imitators of the great Bruce Lee.39
Throughout 1973 and 1974, reports like these were common:

... along came Fist of Fury, which went into the Rialto to break all box-office records at that cinema ... With a seating capacity of 580, 21,200 people crowded in during the first fortnight to sample the camp fun. 40

In the Orient and the Middle East, the exhibition of Bruce Lee's first two films caused riots. Crowds tried to force their way into theaters even though no seats were left. 41

On opening night in Singapore, Fist of Fury caused the country's first film traffic jam, as excited fans choked the streets outside the cinemas. 42

Three of this action-packed films emerged in Paris. Special metal barriers were erected, and boxers hired to back up the police contingent controlling crowds who became over-excited by the action on the screen. 43

One important point must be stressed at this time, Bruce Lee did not introduce Americans to martial arts. In fact, several forms of martial arts, primarily judo and karate, were already present in the United States, before martial arts films appeared. For example, karate was introduced in the United States by servicemen returning home after World War II from the Asiatic theater of war. Further exposure to martial arts to U.S. soldiers took place during the Korean War. 44

What Lee and the martial arts boom did, however, was inspire a renewed interest in martial arts such as karate, and a new interest in other lesser known martial arts such as Kung-Fu:

Like an exploding volcano spewing forth molten streams of lava, the boom hemorrhaged. Everyone recognized it and wanted to be part of it. Would be actors ... studied (several) forms of martial arts, many never before heard of. Dojo, kwoon and karate gymnasiums, as some were called, sprang up all over the western world. 45
The new martial arts fans seemed to be particularly interested in Lee's use of the nunchaku. This weapon (described earlier) was dangerous in untrained hands, but because many novice nunchakuists had not seen or heard of the nunchaku prior to Lee's use of it, they knew little about its dangerous capabilities; injuries were common, among those attempting to use it for the first time and there was concern about the use of the "nunchaku" in violent crimes. The weapon, thus, was banned in many countries, but even this did not stop the sale of nunchakus by businesses eager to provide buyers with their own piece of "Bruce Lee" novelty. As Hortence Powdormaker noted, Hollywood bolsters idol worship through this type of merchandising:

The relationship of fans to their stars is not limited to seeing them in movies, any more than primitive people's relationship to their totemic heroes is limited to hearing a myth told occasionally... In our society, the identification of fans with their movie heroes may be equally intimate, but for different reasons.

True to form, Lee's fans emulated everything from his manner of dressing to facial expressions and even his unique battle yell or "kiai." Bruce Lee posters and books were sold, along with numerous other martial arts items. Lee's items were particularly popular, as most martial arts supply houses that sprang up during the boom found it necessary to stock some Bruce Lee items, or risk losing a segment of the sales to other companies with Lee-oriented memorabilia.

Recognising [sic] that Lee was a cut above the other Kung-Fu entertainers, Western film fans transformed him into an international star virtually overnight. Hong Kong
manufacturers stamped out thousands of Bruce Lee key chains, badges, and pendants and shipped them off to America at a vast profit. Lee's face was plastered over cinema and martial arts magazines; someone even dreamed up the idea of Bruce Lee glove puppets with a mechanical punch. To the Occidental world, gullible public and smart businessmen alike, Bruce Lee was Kung-Fu.49

B. The Mass Audience: Generic Labeling/Stereotyping

Lee's popularity made him the sole superstar of the Kung-Fu film boom. Obviously, this was beneficial in some respects, harmful in others. Particularly unfortunate was that Lee's name became a generic term for all martial arts films. In effect, while Lee presented a new Chinese image, it was his image that became associated with this unfamiliar genre. This had two major effects on the mass American audience:

1. Those not familiar with Lee, but aware of his popularity, may have viewed films which they assumed Lee was in, simply because of its martial arts content. This mistake was apparent even in critical reviews, in which Lee was credited with appearing in films he never made.50 This displeased many because of the basic rule of expectations not being met.

2. To those aware of the difference, films without Lee's actual presence were either ignored or considered inferior. This effect became apparent when martial arts films released after Lee's death began to do poorly at the box-office.

Unfortunately, Lee's films dictated the success—or failure—of the martial arts genre. Lee was synonymous with Kung-Fu films. As with other stars, success had typecast him. The American audience typically uses a star to symbolize a
trend, and in Lee's case visibility and monetary success made him the martial arts star.

This thesis does not attempt to equate this type of labeling with racist stereotyping. Indeed, the association of John Wayne with the western, James Cagney with the gangster film or Jerry Lewis with the comedy, has very little to do with racism. It may also be argued that Lee had done previous work in American T.V. (The Green Hornet, Blondie, Ironsides, Here Come the Brides and Longstreet) and that he was already a recognizable face; i.e., he was a known commodity. Lee had also performed in the film "Marlowe," with James Garner in 1970.

Stereotyping is not just a 'bad thing' which somehow inflicted itself on less enlightened ages. Were it that, it would be easy to get rid of it. Stereotyping is a special case of the phenomenon . . . 'conventions'--on which all popular art relies heavily. The difference is that 'stereotyping' and 'racism' are prejorative words, whereas 'convention' is neutral.51

C. The Mass Audience: Reception of Cultural Transmission

It is an assumption of this thesis that Bruce Lee's films were successful in America because they seem to have been able to cross cultural lines. Lee's Hong Kong films appealed to a Western audience in several respects. The cultural parallels are important in understanding what Lee transmitted. His appeal to the western audience relied heavily on his use of Jeet Kune Do.

Lee's direct action of Jeet Kune Do seemed to appeal to western audiences because it wasn't as exotic as traditional Kung-Fu films. In the traditional Kung-Fu films, the emphasis
on Chinese historical traditions undoubtedly confused many western viewers. Lee's style of fighting (although Chinese) was more westernized and cinematically, less complicated than the traditional films. This was cinematic Jeet Kune Do. Simple plot lines and direct action seem to be the key to Lee's films.

1. Examination of Cultural Elements Within the Films

A case in point is The Big Boss. The story remains simple, it is enlivened only by the fight scenes. It simply takes a long time for Lee to go into action. So long, in fact, that it might be called Lee's most mundane work. As Time magazine commented:

The hero, Bruce Lee, may be furious at first, but he is decidedly slow on the uptake. He spends an extraordinary amount of time tracking down the arch-villain.52

When the fighting starts, the story takes a backseat. Lee's charisma is notable, but the fight scenes do not make the non-fight scenes better.

Fighting, not acting is what the 'Boss' is all about. Take out the fight scenes and what do you have left? A grade B picture with a rather contrived plot, poor continuity and editing, mediocre production values, four German Shepards, and an abrupt, unsatisfying ending.53

Some critics consider this to be Lee's best work, reasoning that he was "uncontaminated" by the gloss of the Hollywood film system he would encounter in Enter the Dragon.

The Big Boss . . . can still lay claim to being his best both from the point of view of street-fighting heroism and of the very straight-forward way the plot . . . unfolds.54
The film follows the pattern of other films of the genre; maximum action, minimum story. It appeals to its audience in a very direct, uncomplicated manner. The film makes no reference to Chinese customs and rituals other than fighting and eating. So, instead of becoming a document for cultural transmission, the film presents a conflict involving individuals who, in this case, happen to be oriental.

_Fist of Fury_, on the other hand, is the most traditional of all of Lee's roles. Here, the oppression is by the Japanese who are opposed by Lee. It is a struggle against racism, in one sense appealing to other Chinese, and at the same time appealing to all minorities. Even Japanese audiences cheered Lee's onscreen battles. The film drives home the point by using such cinematic devices as a sign reading "SICK MAN OF ASIA," a direct insult to the Chinese. Later in the film, Lee smashes a sign reading "NO DOGS AND CHINESE ALLOWED," bringing to mind the oppression all minorities have faced at one time or another.

_Way of the Dragon_ again featured a seemingly simple plot, with the fight scenes becoming the focus of the action. What is transmitted in terms of cultural aspects is questionable. Outside of Lee's inability to translate English to Russian, references to Chinese boxing, and eating and working in a Chinese restaurant, there is again not much more than a simple story line combined with martial arts.

One critic agreed that _Way of the Dragon_ was a film composed of a weak story structure, but he did not lay the fault
with Lee. His views pointed to Lee as a "victim" of a mediocre movie machine:

... there was plenty of commotion around (Way of the Dragon)... what accounts for all this hullabaloo is certainly not... the incredibly inane plot involving an imperial Chinese restaurant improbably located in Rome (to facilitate a final fight to the death on the floor of—you guessed it—the Coliseum). Yet somehow, there is a refreshing, youthful, invigorating quality about this film, a quality that flows directly from Bruce Lee... For a few minutes I allowed myself to speculate about the fine films Lee might have made if he had collaborated with some competent Hollywood filmmakers. And then I thought... Perhaps we are lucky that Bruce Lee is not around to be put into a big, glossy production, some superslick vehicle in which he would be pasteurized and homogenized to obscure the special qualities that shine through even in the amiable dress of (Way of the Dragon). That old cliche, 'ruined in Hollywood' is not always a myth.56

Lee's next film was a big-budget Hollywood film which in some ways bore out his prophetic statements.

While **Enter the Dragon** was more readily accepted by western eyes, it was by far the most unimaginative in terms of story content.

The fights... [keep] the movie racing blindly along, [leaving] little room for plot, and only a minimum is supplied... a sort of made-in-Hong Kong version of Dr. No.57

**Enter the Dragon** was successful in the west, basically because the western story line, the western co-stars and the western method of production provide the western viewer with familiar filmic elements. Variety called **Enter the Dragon** the "climax" of the martial arts film genre.58
2. Conclusions of the Examination

It is thus apparent that Lee's films fail to transmit much of traditional Chinese culture. Action films are "entertainment for the masses," and, as such, cross cultural boundaries; but although the films were not American in origin, they fit into the American film circle quite well:

Hollywood's self-description as 'the entertainment capital of the world' and its happy acceptance of its goal of producing 'escapist entertainment' acknowledge that its function was to amuse and distract ... Individual films were simply the principal manifestation of the mode in which it provided entertainment, but show business embraced ... fan magazines, fashion ... as well as promoting consumerism and offering stars as celebrities for public consumption. 59

While many viewers were inspired to learn martial arts, few were inspired to learn the historical background of the Chinese, and even fewer were interested in discovering trends in Chinese literature that lead to the martial arts film:

Chinese playwrights introduced a multiplicity of historical personages from three distinct epochs of Chinese history: (1) the Warring States period (2) the Southern Ming period and (3) the T'ai-P'ing Rebellion. Amidst the political intrigues and military conflicts of the Warring States period there appeared heroic martyrs and brave assassins ... The continued resistance ... of Ming ... Loyalists ... in the 1650's provides parallels (to recent Chinese history) ... in the face of increasing Japanese aggression of that time, the dramatist historian saw a repetition of the split in the ranks of the T'ai-P'ing Kingdom (closely paralleled by the Nationalist-Communist split of the 40's) ... The writing of historical plays, therefore was not an escape from the realities of the present but a meaningful and subtle reminder of the moral and political lessons that could be learned from China's vast and rich history. 60

Lee's films contained images that presented the Chinese in a new light, but Lee was not charged with the responsibility of educating the American public about China. He was an actor,
whose purpose was first to provide entertainment. Education was not one of the strong points of these films.

D. The Mass Audience: Escapism

All arguments about violence aside, Lee's films were escapist entertainment and the martial arts film basically encourages the viewer to indulge in fantasy. One person single-handedly defeating legions of opponents is beyond most individuals' capabilities, but, in martial arts films, this scenario occurs with regularity. The physical actions are impressive, in the sense that strikes and blocks are executed with precision and power, rarely missing the mark. This "choreography of violence" (discussed in detail later) exists against a backdrop of everyday situations. Lee's characters use superhuman abilities to battle opponents and disdain the use of guns, even at the risk of life. For some, the fantasy became reality. Many confused Lee's onscreen cinematic feats with his actual abilities. Others enrolled in martial arts schools trying in vain to achieve Lee's proficiency in a short period of time, only realizing such proficiency was a life-long endeavor, or movie construed illusion. Martial arts films became a new version of the familiar fantasy film:

According to Freud ... fantasy is compensation ... compensation because physically all human life consists of sublimation, repression and frustration ... might it not be that there is a human need to fantasize in the same way that there is a need to sleep or a need to dream; that coping with reality can only go on if occasionally there is
a respite from it, a respite where we imagine a world where other problems, or no problems, and where the childish fantasy of omnipotence can prevail?61

The other end of the spectrum brought a totally opposite and rather aggressive reaction. The implausibility of an unarmed man winning against all odds brought vehement criticism from martial artists who objected to such an apparent exaggeration of martial arts ability, as well as from those who simply did not enjoy these films. As mentioned previously, Lee's real life was constantly associated with his screen persona, primarily because Lee's use of his body as a weapon precluded the use of special effects. In a sense, because his films were realistic in comparison to other fantasy films, there was some correlation between Lee on film and Lee in life.

To Bruce Lee's fans, he was an ideal hero. He never smoked nor drank. His was obsessed with physical fitness. But there is a controversy over just how good a martial artist Lee was off-screen. He may have been the most famous martial arts film star, but was is Kung-Fu genuine or just made for the movies? One of Lee's students, Jesse Glover, personally trained with Lee very early in Lee's career and is of the opinion that what Lee did on the screen reflected his abilities off-screen:

Bruce could move faster and hit harder than any martial artist . . . in the world. For those among you who have doubts about Bruce's speed I would suggest that you review his movements on film and videotape. Some of these movements are so fast they can only be seen by viewing the film one frame at a time.62
Lee himself maintained that what he did on the screen was cinematie Jeet Kune Do--not what he would use on the street. In fact, it was during an encounter with screaming fans who excitedly clawed and grabbed for Lee, that he realized he was just as vulnerable as anyone else. Because of his image, many people who doubted Lee's off-screen ability challenged him in hopes that victory would make them famous. Here, escapism was taken to the extreme by the viewer:

Lee sometimes encounters karate whiz kids who would like to make their reputation by pounding his. Challenges pour in to mail and phone calls. Hot youngsters in modern karate competition are sort of up-to-date Billy the Kids, to be tracked down, challenged and beaten. But Lee, the most visible karate champ in the world, doesn't enter tournaments, so the hot punks come looking for him; he never know when some hatchet-handed mini-gangster will step next to him in the bakery line and begin stalking.

II. Minority Audiences

The above concerns were addressed to a similar degree by the minority community. However, there are major differences in the needs Lee's films fulfilled in the minority groups.

People who never knew him personally had a lot of respect for him; a lot of people, especially black people. "Bruce Lee is my idol." They see two movies of Bruce Lee and this guy is their idol.

The above statement comes from Lee's black co-star in Enter the Dragon, Jim Kelly. Perhaps it is appropriate that a black man should say this in light of the fact that Lee's films have had an important impact on minority audiences. There seems to be a combination of factors involved in Lee's appeal to black
audiences. The most obvious is that Lee was a member of a minority group. The minority members could identify with a non-white hero. Eventually, the audience that went to see martial arts films became a predominantly minority audience. This did not take place overnight. There was, of course, a predominantly white audience that went to see martial arts films during the initial stages of Kung-Fu boom:

There is a large segment of the public, the black jacket crowd, that goes 100% for the action picture .... That audience packed the downtown Los Angeles Theater on Broadway on a recent rainy Saturday afternoon. Black adolescents wandered the aisles announcing their antagonism toward the whites in the audience, using the crudest language they could muster ... [a] boy in[a] camel's hair coat planted himself on the arm of a seat in front of an elderly white man and asked, "Honky, what you going to do about it?"

Perhaps it was incidents such as those that transformed the composition of the "chop-sockey" audiences from predominantly white, to predominantly minority. Another factor was the glut of quickly produced "chop-sockey" films which hit the American market during the height of the boom. It seems the loss of quality forced the more discriminating viewers to believe the best of the films had been seen. A report in February '79 stated the position from Hong Kong like this:

Hong Kong has reached a saturation point with mediocre kung-fu films. The result--damage to the industry--film companies in Hong Kong have always had the habit of producing movies in the shortest periods possible. The head of Shaw Brothers once claimed he could have a film completed in ten days ... Technically speaking, it is possible.

As the fad waned, and interest died in the largely white audiences, the appeal for minority audiences remained the same
(or near the same) level as that at the height of the boom. Minority audiences were also exposed to more martial arts films than the rest of the public, simply because theaters in low-income neighborhoods could only afford the cheapest films. As the mass public lost interest in these films, their prices dropped as demand dropped. Add to that the large quantity of films that flooded the market, and the law of supply and demand goes to work:

... film makers noted two salient facts: first whites had begun to flee the inner city areas, leaving a vacuum in many of the big downtown movie houses which the burgeoning number of black moviegoers could fill; and second, black audiences would turn out in far greater numbers for films which featured black heroes and heroines, and were liberally sprinkled with sex and violence, than they would for white adventure movies.69

This interest in non-white heroes and their films was not relegated to the so-called blaxploitation films. While the black cinema experienced a renaissance during the 70s, blaxploitation films seemed to be a short-lived escape vehicle which did little to improve the black image. The frustration, rage and disillusion of inner city life, and the black film of the 70's (which failed to address blacks in a consistent and positive manner) provided the Chinese martial arts cinema--and Bruce Lee--with an assured audience.

The young black audiences who had originally supported blaxploitation films soon lost interest and shifted their allegiance to other genres including science fiction or martial arts films, which traded on violent revenge themes set in oriental locales. Black youth, then, recoiled from fantasies of lust and power, choosing instead symbols from another culture that provided metaphors for Afro-American experience despite their oriental settings. Martial arts
films offered blacks comic strips of pure revenge
dramatized in a choreography of violence unobtainable within
the literal context of American social realism. In an
effort to recapture the youth market, black actors began to
imitate without success, the film style of Run Run Shaw,
Raymond Chow and other Asians. 70

This trend was noticed by many people including Serafim
Karalexis, the man responsible for distributing the second
martial arts film released in America. His awareness of the
change in the martial arts audiences affected his perception of
how martial arts films would have to be made in the future.

Six months after the opening of Five Fingers, I saw that the
typical film audience at the first films had converted to a
minority audience—Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos and
Orientals. The whites were no longer there. 71

Lee appealed to minority audiences because the
excitement he created gave their troubled lives some meaning.
He demonstrated that fighting back was a last resort, but also
that one should never put aside pride. This concern for pride
was seemingly instilled into the minority audiences who watched
Lee. He taught the audience his philosophy even without their
knowledge. Lee demonstrated that guns weren't always the answer
for conflicts. Lee never used a gun as defense in any of his
films, preferring instead to use his own martial arts skills.

A recent phenomenon has been Lee's effect on the
contemporary New York City street culture of "hop hop," which
encompasses graffiti, rap music, hip hop fashions and
breakdancing. Of all of these, fashion and dancing continue to
be affected by Bruce Lee and martial arts films. Martial arts
pants are worn by breakdancers. Several movements performed by
these dancers are patterned after movements in martial arts films. The term "Grandmaster," used by many rap artists, is also used for masters of martial arts. 72

III. The Lee Image and Chinese Tradition

Bruce Lee's film image was that of a fighter. In particular, he was constantly involved in protecting his fellow Chinese, as well as himself, from foreigners.

In The Big Boss, he is involved in conflict with a Thai foreman. In Fist of Fury, Lee defends a Chinese school against the occupation forces of the Japanese. In Way of the Dragon, he battles against Europeans determined to take over a Chinese restaurant. With these three films, Lee became a national hero and idol to his Chinese fans. Obviously, films that are sympathetic to the wishes of their viewers are appealing for they can identify with the hero. Lee demonstrates the effectiveness of Chinese martial arts. On another level, he symbolically reacts to racism. On a more literal plane, Lee's films are in opposition to the more familiar Chinese/Asian stereotypes presented previously in the visual media.

And the acceptance of Lee as a national hero came at a time in which great social changes were taking place, not only in the U.S. but in China--old barriers were coming down.

Bruce Lee, for example, personified a dynamic, universally recognizable hero. His technique and magnetism as well as his film sense helped establish the Chinese martial arts film in the west as an exciting style that provides
extraordinary possibilities in movement. The overwhelming international acceptance of the films came at a time of increasing East-West understanding and cultural exchange.  

A. **Lee and the New Stereotype**

The new Lee image was not one that all Asians could adhere to. While the image was that of a strong-willed, authoritative individual, the perception that all Asians knew Kung-Fu was wholly false. However, the effect of the films was strong. Asians now had their own stereotype: the Bruce Lee-Chinese/Asian image. "Motion pictures have combined visual-auditory stimulation (and) produced an overwhelming impression and image-creating force."  

Many Asians accepted the advent of this "new" Chinese image, preferring the Lee character to the docile, feeble images of the Chinese and other Asians presented in the American cinema. But what this group found difficult to understand was why Lee would make his most widely distributed film feature the image of a Chinese "henchman." The film was **Enter the Dragon**, and it proved to create a crucial point of distinction between eastern (Asian) audiences and western (non-Asian/American) audiences. The Chinese saw Lee now sharing the screen with American actors. Instead of **Enter the Dragon** being a "Bruce Lee" movie, it was an American martial arts film with Bruce Lee as co-star. Since this film had the lowest budget/box office ratio of any of Lee's films released in Hong Kong, we may assume much of the Chinese audience was not happy with what they saw. In this film, Lee
fought for no oppressed parties. He was a secret agent on a mission. Practically the only thing oriental about the film was his use of martial arts:

The Chinese audiences in Hong Kong... found [it] hard to forgive... the unconscious devaluation of Lee's screen image from cultural savior to just another Chink... a Kung-Fu hatchet man, a fighting gadget to Saxon's James Bond... Lee lurks in the background scowling. 76

*Game of Death* received a similar lukewarm reaction from Asians. The film has little to do with anything even remotely concerning the Chinese/Asian image. It is, literally, a Hollywood patchwork of Lee's original concept. His two final films had the effect of tarnishing Lee's image somewhat within the Asian community.

Asian actors were also affected by Lee's film image. Perhaps the greatest consequence was the typecasting syndrome which went far beyond Lee himself. The new "Asian image" now relegated Asians to playing martial arts oriented roles. The T.V. series *Kung-Fu* became popular, featuring mostly Asian actors—many as martial arts experts. More recently, television programs such as *Magnum P.I.*, *The A-Team*, and *Knight Rider* have all featured orientals as "martial arts experts." Films such as *American Ninja* (1985) have also featured orientals as highly skilled martial artists, leaving the non-fighting roles to non-Asians. Asian actor Benson Fong comments on the dilemma;

*We are Americans...* no longer the ching-chong Chinamen who sat on the fence. I don't want to be told I'm Chinese. I know that I'm Chinese. You resent the fact that when you work for the film industry and right away the Director of assistant Director treats you like a Chinese (and not like an American). 77
Thus Lee's films served up the next in an age-old series of racial minority stereotypes, a major facet of our media.

Stereotypes are socially supported, continually revived and hammered in, by our media of mass communication--by novels, short stories, newspaper items, movies, stage, radio and television.
CHAPTER III

THE EFFECT OF THE LEE IMAGE ON THE FILM INDUSTRY

IN HONG KONG AND THE UNITED STATES

Lee's films elicited a full range of response from his peers in the film industry for there were those who sought to duplicate his successes, and those who did not. This study will conclude by examining those who did.

I. The Effect of Lee's Films on the Kung-Fu Boom

Financial considerations have always been paramount in the film business, as in most businesses, and Lee's films did well at the box office, but they also appeared at a time when American-made films were experiencing something of a slump:

The global market for films was experiencing a metamorphosis, with the budding of national film industries outside the Western world... suddenly... the less affluent countries of the world were... developing their own industries... South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, [and] The Phillipines were in the movie business... The trend was disastrous for what remained of Hollywood's one-time-great motion picture studios, because the trend meant nothing less than the fast erosion of their last base of strength, distribution. 79

For Asian film-makers, success was not guaranteed unless their product (martial arts films) appealed to a world-wide market. Lee's films demonstrated that a familiar plot-line, taking place in a relatively modern setting could appeal to a
Western audience. The majority of Asian film-makers, however, failed to take these factors into consideration.

In the martial art industry there is never an actual script to follow precisely—in kung-fu movies, scripts are even less of a necessity. The producer has a general story outline and perhaps several pieces of major conversations. The director employs these as guidelines, then tells the performers how he wants the scene played. The director decides which take he likes best, and within days a movie is made. The demonstrations of the martial arts—not the dialogue—are emphasized. 80

In terms of demonstrations of martial arts, it is Lee's choreography that made cinematic violence look new.

Lee's insistence on "realistic" fight scenes affected the choreography of violence as presented by other martial arts film-makers. Prior to Lee's films, Chinese film-makers used mythical beings as heroes and heroines:

The Chinese swordplay movies also display blood . . . but violence is not only from physical contact; mystical priests conjure flames and seas to thwart their opponent. The elemental special effects spectacularly overshadow the actual man to man clashes. They are used as supernatural weapons. 81

Lee's highly stylized yet realistic choreography of fight scenes influenced the Hong Kong film-makers, and transmitted this Chinese perception of conflict to American audiences and film-makers.

In contrast to the "Sloppy-Fu" or chaotic, unstylized and seemingly disoriented scenarios of other martial arts films, Lee's almost balletic scenarios appealed to the aesthetic sense of his viewers. To the Western audience, it became an exotic display because it combined traditional Kung-Fu with the more familiar aspects of American boxing. Thus, Lee was able to use
violence artistically, by foregoing the use of graphic violence and by emphasizing graceful body movement instead. His scenes became not only life and death conflicts but a complex filmic image. The non-violent aspects of battle--his eye movements, facial expressions, and feints--all combine to give his characters an appearance of being more than just fighting machines. He becomes, in a sense, an artist of motion.

Lee's choreography also influenced the fight scenes in American productions. Hong Kong is governed by laws which prohibit the possession of firearms. Conversely, the U.S. is the land of the gun; American hand-to-hand combat was relegated to the "barroom brawl." While some audiences clearly maintained the superiority of the gun to hand-to-hand combat, Lee's films (as well as other martial arts films) demonstrated that martial arts were an exciting new way of presenting on-screen conflict. Lee's character made moral statements each film, because he always preferred the use of Kung-Fu to guns. The American cinema eventually followed Lee's lead by featuring him in Enter the Dragon (1973) the first joint production between East and West. It was a film that totally ruled out the use of guns within the body of the film. Other such films were to follow, and oriental martial arts also became a prominent feature of fist fights in a number of non-Kung-Fu motion pictures and television programs. Lee's choreography easternized the western portray of unarmed combat. A skilled fighter in a film was just not simply a "boxer" or "bouncer," he became a "karate expert."
II. Kung-Fu Film-Making after Lee's Death

In the wake of Bruce Lee's death, the only man having any original Bruce Lee material was Raymond Chow. The Kung-Fu film industry was in turmoil. Hundreds of martial arts films were shelved or stopped in mid-production. It was apparent that Lee's effect on the martial arts boom was widespread. This is not to say martial arts films simply stopped altogether—they did not. However, the box-office success of martial arts films waned, and certainly none approached the popularity of Lee's films in the west. This had many repercussions. Instead of inspiring Chinese film-makers to improve quality, Lee's films inspired imitation. There soon followed a deluge of Bruce Lee "sound-alikes," actors who had stage names which resembled Lee's: "Bruce," "Lee," or "Dragon." A number of stars, most of whom resembled Lee in some way, appeared. Ho Tsung Tao became "Bruce Li" (Li being the easternized way of spelling "Lee"), then went on to star in such films as The Dragon Dies Hard (1974), Bruce Lee Superdragon (1974), Goodbye Bruce Lee: His Last Game Of Death (1975) (another use of Lee's name: inclusion in film titles), as well as numerous other films.

The Chinese producers now attempted to recreate the Kung-Fu boom—without Bruce Lee's physical presence. Their answer was imitation, and with a vengeance. Other "renamed" stars appeared. Dragon Lee, Bruce Le (using only one "e" in the last name), Rocky Lee, Bronson Lee, Conan Lee, Bruce Lei, and other stars who used Bruce Lee's Chinese names of Li Siu Lung
(Little Dragon Lee), Li Yuen Kam (Protector of San Francisco), or Jun Fan (approximates "Bruce Lee" in English). The intended effect was to arouse curiosity in those martial arts fans who wanted to see more of Bruce Lee. Bringing Lee back from the dead, so to speak. "Was Bruce Lee alive? Did he have 'secret films' shot before his death but still unreleased?" These are the questions the producers apparently hoped the fans of Lee would be asking.

Perhaps the saying, "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery," ought to be altered for the Bruce Lee "exploitation" films. Some of them are neither sincere nor flattering. They are often untrue, and poorly photographed, directed, produced, acted, and dubbed--in short, poor films by any standard. On the other hand, some of the films are of high quality, attesting to the ingenuity of some Hong Kong film-makers. One thing is certain: these films left a mass of confusing information about Bruce Lee. The biggest concern to be addressed is that many of these films claimed to be "true stories," or even films with the "real" Bruce Lee. For example, the film The Dragon Dies Hard (1974) includes the following promotional lines:

NOW THE KING OF KUNG-FU COMES BACK TO LIFE
The BRUCE LEE Story
how he LIVED!
how he LOVED!
how he FOUGHT!
how he DIED!
ALL NEW!!
SEE the truth explode in . . .
the DRAGON DIES HARD
Upon viewing the film, the only truth is that this is a wholly false, unauthorized film on the life of Bruce Lee. There is no mention of the star, though a photograph of Lee appears in the advertisement, implying Lee's presence in the film. This is common in these types of film. The producers of these films often featured publicity material that failed to mention any production information besides the title and running time of the film. Films are a business, and apparently these producers believed the selling of the fake Bruce Lee image was good business.

All of this is not to imply that these films fooled everyone. Those who were unfamiliar with Lee's original films were fooled more easily than those who were fans of Lee. The false exploitation films undoubtedly caused some of Lee's fans to look unfavorably on the martial arts genre. (See appendix for a list of films that are labeled "Bruce Lee exploitation" films, because they were made after Lee's death, without his knowledge or approval.)

Apparently, no American film has been able to find the chemistry that Bruce Lee had. The post-Lee American martial arts films are not the same type of film as the Bruce Lee exploitation movies. These films are made in America, with a predominantly American cast. Examples of the American made martial arts films include: Force: Five (1981), The Big Brawl (1980), Enter the Ninja (1982), Kentucky Fried Movie (1977), Silent Rage (1982), and Circle of Iron (1979).
While none is a true Bruce Lee exploitation film, Lee's influence is apparent in them as well as in many other American martial arts films: Force: Five uses virtually the same storyline as Enter the Dragon, and it is by the same producers; The Big Brawl was produced in cooperation with Raymond Chow, Lee's producer; Enter the Ninja uses phraseology similar to Enter the Dragon; Kentucky Fried Movie is not a martial arts film per se, but it does contain two martial arts sequences--one called A Fistful of Yen, a parody of Enter the Dragon; Silent Rage stars Chuck Norris, Lee's co-star from Way of the Dragon; Circle of Iron is based on a script that Lee wrote in conjunction with Sterling Silliphant in 1969. To date, no Hong Kong or American-made martial arts film has attained Lee's success, and no martial arts film star has achieved his prominence. The majority of these films feature an anglo-saxon star, chosen for his name rather than his martial arts ability. Conversely, some films have chosen martial artists who have no acting ability.

The dilemma facing the American martial arts film has been to find a person with characteristics similar to those of Bruce Lee. All of this is not to say that some of these films were not successful--they were. What is apparent is that the martial arts boom has not been repeated since Lee's death. The most successful of American martial arts film stars has been Chuck Norris. It was, however, not his martial arts films which were most successful. Norris has since abandoned martial arts
in favor of films like *Missing in Action* (1985) and *Code of Silence* (1985). The pattern was well established with *Silent Rage* in 1982:

Since Chuck Norris the premiere American martial arts movie star, a film starring Chuck Norris is ipso facto an American martial arts movie, right? Not necessarily. Norris' goal is to be a full-fledged action star; ... *Silent Rage* moves even further away from the 'pure' martial arts movie tradition ... Norris may well be establishing a new model for American martial arts film. While the Hong Kong Kung-Fu film typically focuses on the martial arts action ... the American martial arts movie may (have) ... martial arts scenes becoming more or less detachable vignettes.84

What is obvious is that all the attempts to duplicate Lee's success, result in stars, like Norris, changing course in cinematic direction. Mike Stone, a martial artist and one of Lee's friends, sums up Lee's effect on the American martial arts film:

Bruce Lee proved that someone from the ghetto or upstate New York, or Malibu, or wherever would accept a Chinese as a hero ... he proved that, through his ability. [His] standard of performance ... hasn't been met. ... as a result, no U.S. filmmaker feels comfortable making martial arts films. In many cases, we've taken a few paces back since his death.85

Surprisingly, there are still attempts to produce martial arts films in the United States. These attempts, while seemingly futile, are all influenced by the films of Bruce Lee. Film-makers are still looking to Lee for inspiration. In Hong Kong, on the other hand, traditional costume drama/martial arts film flourishes, as attempts to imitate Bruce Lee have fallen by the wayside and film-makers use more original concepts--and stars--in their productions.
Finally, Lee's films were a transition from the Japanese sword films of the 50's and 60's to the action/adventure films of the 80's. The effect Lee had on the film industry and society is unquestionable, and it can still be perceived in current films and in our society.

CONCLUSION

The films of Bruce Lee exerted (and still exert) their effects on that segment of society that directly viewed them, and to some extent on those who experienced the effects through the others who had. This thesis has observed and documented the following social effects of Lee's films:

1. They were a new and unique form of entertainment for the masses.

2. The familiar westernized story elements made the films acceptable to western audience, where films that did translate well into western life were not as accepted.

3. Lee's films were distinguished from the deluge of martial arts films of the 1970's by the use of less graphic violence. Altering some expectations of martial arts films. (The more graphically violent films maintained an audience as well.)

4. Lee presented a variation on the traditional Chinese image. His image was that of an authoritative leader, as opposed to the traditionally stereotyped image found in early American films like the Charlie Chan series. Lee's characters
became positive images for many ethnic groups, since they were able to relate to an oppressed minority member literally fighting back at this oppressors.

5. Lee's fame inspired a series of films, attempting to imitate his success.

Lee's films can basically be seen as a form of entertainment, a unique film genre that found a mass audience in its initial appearance, then became entertainment for certain specialized groups after Bruce Lee's death. These films maintain a cult following, attuned to the violent dynamics of the genre. Lee's influence on films and society can still be seen in the films of today, and the people who go to see them.
APPENDIX

The following is a partial listing of Bruce Lee "exploitation" films. The following reasons dominate this list:
1) The films use Lee's name in the title. 2) The words "Bruce," "Lee," or "Dragon" appear in the title or advertisement. 3) The film titles are variations of the titles of Lee's films. 4) The films appeared at or after the time of Lee's death, and were hastily produced to appeal to Lee's fans. 5) Fans unfamiliar with Lee, misidentify the film's star as Bruce Lee, because of advertisements or packaging. 6) Film clips featuring the real Bruce Lee are edited into the film. 7) Blatantly deceptive advertising suggests Lee's actual presence in the film. 8) Appearance of one or more co-stars from Lee's films in an attempt to imply an indirect connection between Lee and the "exploitation" film.

Bruce Lee: His Last Days, His Last Nights (1975),
Bruce Lee the Invincible (1977), Fist of Fear, Touch of Death (1980), Bruce Lee's Secret a.k.a. Bruce Lee's Deadly Kung Fu (1977), Bruce Lee Superdragon (1974), The True Game of Death (1980), and the following films with dates unknown:
Last Challenge of the Dragon, The Clones of Bruce Lee, Blind
Fist of Bruce, Bruce is Loose, Bruce the Superhero, Bruce Lee's Greatest Revenge, The Real Bruce Lee, The Treasure of Bruce Lee, Bruce vs. the Black Dragon, Bruce Lee: A Dragon's Store, Bruce Lee in New Guinea, Enter Three Dragons, The Black Dragon's Revenge of the Death of Bruce Lee, The Image of Bruce Lee.
FOOTNOTES


4 Los Angeles Times, 21 July 1973, p. 35.

5 Golden Harvest Films, "Bruce Lee the Legend," 1984, Raymond Chow, producer.


10 Glaessner, Kung Fu, p. 10.


12 Block, Legend, pp. 73-76.

13 Ibid., p. 56.

14 Glaessner, Kung Fu, pp. 97-98.

15 Meyers et al., Martial Arts, pp. 62-64.


18 Block, Legend, pp. 73-76.

53
19 Alex Ben Block, "The Hong Kong Style," Esquire, August 1973, p. 146.


22 Glaessner, Kung Fu, p. 33.


24 Time, 11 June 1973, p. 75.

25 Leach, I Know, p. 53.


27 Leach, I Know, p. 97.

28 Ibid.


31 Alloway, Violent, p. 37.


34 Ibid., p. 109.


36 Ibid., p. 122.


40 Stuart, "Chequers," p. 27.


42 Atyeo and Dennis, King, p. 56.

43 Hubert Van Es and Annie Cheng, "Notes from Hong Kong," Fighting Stars, February 1975, p. 53.


46 Ibid., p. 54.


49 Atyeo and Dennis, King, p. 61.

50 Kung Fu Monthly, Bruce Lee in Action, p. 30.


54 Glaessner, Kung Fu, p. 85.


57 Time, 1 October 1973, p. 35.


61 Jarvie, Social Criticism, p. 166.

62 Jesse Glover, Bruce Lee Between Wing Chun and Jeet Kune Do (Seattle: By the Author, 1976), p. 92.

63 Maxwell Pollard, "Is the Green Hornet's Version of Kung-Fu Genuine?" The Best of Bruce Lee, 1974, p. 10.

64 Lee, Man, p. 95.

65 Block, "The Hong Kong Style," p. 146.


74 Wong, On Visual, p. 249.


76 Atyeo and Dennis, King, pp. 64-65.

77 Wong, On Visual, p. 262.


82 Ibid., p. 38.


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