

More Than Black and White: African American Appropriations of Hong Kong Martial Arts Films in the 1970s

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In the 1970s Bruce Lee films swept across the globe. Hong Kong productions had appealed to international audiences since the end of the Second World War, mainly in Southeast and Far East Asia. But with Bruce Lee, the kung fu film became a truly global phenomenon, capturing audiences even in the United States, which has been notoriously resistant to foreign films. These films found a particularly receptive and creative audience in the African American community. Young black men flocked to these movies, incorporating martial arts iconography into their own performances of racial and gender identities. Several blaxploitation films entered into dialogue with the tropes of the Hong Kong martial arts film. William Tennant, an American producer, collaborated with the famed Hong Kong film executive, Run Run Shaw, to make a black-focused feature, *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold*¹. Hong Kong martial arts films, particularly those of Bruce Lee offered an anti-imperialist vision that young black men of the 1970s found attractive. These films, like many blaxploitation films, offered a venue for black audiences to enjoy entertaining, action movies, while resisting the hegemony of Hollywood cinema; they provided a way out of the binary view of race that proliferated in Hollywood films.

In the early 1970s, Hong Kong films enjoyed a sudden surge of popularity in the United States. Variety's weekly list

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1 Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold. Dir. Charles Bail. 1975.

of top box-office drawn on May 16, 1973, ranked *Fists of Fury*², *Deep Thrust*³—*The Hand of Death*⁴ and *Five Fingers of Death*⁵ one, two and three for ticket sales. From the beginning, distributors recognized the important role black youth had in sustaining these high box-office returns for martial arts films. David Desser, in his article on the kung fu craze in the United States, claims, “the martial arts’ appeal to black youth audiences in the inner city and in the rural South, as well as to drive-in audiences, was a major factor both in keeping the kung fu craze alive as well as leading to its rather precipitous decline.”⁶ Warner Brothers, the studio most involved in the distribution of Hong Kong films in the United States, concentrated martial arts films in downtown theaters and double-billed them with blaxploitation films. As Desser puts it, “Warner Brothers realized with particular clarity that the blaxploitation audience and the emerging martial arts audience were rather consonant.” Distributors, led by Warner Brothers, recognized that Hong Kong martial arts films could appeal to largely the same audience as blaxploitation films.⁷

From 1972 to 1973, *Black Belt* magazine, which touts itself as the “world’s leading magazine of self-defense,” evinces an increasingly multi-racial perspective. The *Black Belt* issue from April 1972 shows almost exclusively Asian faces. The magazine prominently displays only one picture of a non-Asian. It is the picture of a white doctor, next to an open letter he wrote to practitioners of martial arts on weight loss regimes. Dr. R. B. Jack, the white doctor, implies that he does not practice martial arts himself, is an outsider to the sport. In a scientific tone, he explains, “by comparing karate exercises to others whose consumption rate has been established, I have prepared rough guidelines for karateka.” In the November 1973 issue of *Black Belt*, many non-Asians appear in the magazine, and they are all practicing martial arts. The cover shows two men aggressively punching the air. One appears to be white; the other appears to be black. This issue also includes a feature article on a promising young African American karate competitor, Wayne Booth.

It is difficult to identify a discreet set of reasons, explaining why *Black Belt* magazine broadened its focus, to include a wide variety of racial identities. But this shift certainly suggests that interest in the martial arts was becoming more diverse

2 *Fists of Fury*. Dir. Lo Wei. 1971

3 *Deep Thrust—The Hand of Death*. Dir. Huang Feng. 1972.

4 *Five Fingers of Death*. Jeong Chang-hwa. 1972

5 David Desser, “The Kung Fu Craze: Hong Kong Cinema’s First American Reception,” *The Cinema of Hong Kong*, ed. Poshek Fu and David Desser (Cambridge: Cambridge,

6 Desser 25.

7 Desser 25.

during these years. As audiences flocked to movies like *Fists of Fury* and *Five Fingers of Death*, *Black Belt* magazine may have realized that it could access a much broader readership than it had originally targeted. This increase in diversity probably either reflected that *Black Belt* magazine's readers were actually becoming more diverse, or that the magazine's aspirational readership was growing in diversity.

The *Black Belt* issues from 1972 and 1973 suggest that at least some African Americans had been interested in the martial arts for a long time before the kung fu craze. But, with the incredible financial success that Bruce Lee was having with African Americans, *Black Belt* magazine finally began to recognize this audience. The article on Wayne Booth, "Far from the Maddening Crowd," suggests the discomfort many in the Karate community were feeling with the changing popularity of the sport. Jack Kelso, the author of the article, writes, "in the frequently flamboyant world of the martial arts, rising karate star Wayne Booth of Lanham, Maryland is a reflection of the contemplative past—soft-spoken, logical, analytical and controlled." This article registers a belief that the sport of karate is experiencing a radical change, and suggests discomfort with this change. Upon close reading, the article expresses many ideological assumptions about the increasing racial integration of karate. The article bolsters its multicultural angle, by focusing on a black martial artist. But "Far From the Maddening Crowd" also implies a conservative discomfort with the sport's changing culture. Kelso connotes his admiration of Booth, suggesting that Booth is not like the other new athletes entering the sport (many of them African American men). Praising Booth, Kelso writes, "he is startlingly clean-cut for this era, the sort of 20-year-old who actually says 'gee whiz.'" Kelso congratulates Booth for choosing not to affiliate himself with the radical changes of the time. The article focuses on Booth's own complaints about the changing complexion of the sport. The sub-title to the article reads, "A promising young Karate competitor turns away from a decaying tournament scene and finds refuge in his deep thoughts about other things in life." The article quotes Booth as saying, "I could make time for tournaments, but they've changed so. Everybody seems to have lost interest. A lot of respect is gone, something to do with present-day morals." In 1973, *Black Belt* magazine was simultaneously trying to recognize the popularity of martial arts among African Americans, while still expressing its discomfort with these rapid changes.

Several black-focused films from the 1970s incorporate martial arts into their plots and fight scenes. But they reinvent the meaning of the sport, appropriating it for the needs of African-American Cinema. Blaxploitation's ability to reshape the meaning of martial arts in American culture may explain some of the discomfort institutions like *Black Belt* magazine felt with the sport's growing popularity. In a politically bombastic move, Joseph D. Won in his dissertation on

the subject, invents a term for the appropriation of martial arts by non-Asians in American cinema. He calls this phenomenon “yellowface minstrelsy.” He explains, “‘yellowface minstrelsy’ refers to the use of Asian martial arts, artists and artifacts by non-ethnic Asians in the United States for fun and profit.” Won obviously designs the term to bring to mind the idea of blackface minstrelsy, conjuring images of white exploitation of black cultural forms. Won frames yellowface minstrelsy as another case of cultural exploitation, suggesting that this phenomenon is “produced, performed and consumed by non-ethnic Asians, more specifically by people who would probably self-identify as Caucasian.” He believes that yellowface minstrelsy “supports, replicates and extends the conservative white patriarchal system out of which the expropriation arises.” However, as I will soon show, appropriation of Asian cultural images was not an exclusively white patriarchal phenomenon in the 1970s and early 1980s; it produced a far more complex set of race relations than Won suggests.

Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold was the only case in which an American filmmaker collaborated with Run Run Shaw, the Hong Kong film mogul, to create a black-focused film. Cleopatra Jones, played by Tamara Dobson, takes pride in her African-American identity. At a roulette table in a casino, Cleo playfully remarks, as she pushes her chips forward, “All on the black, baby. It’s my favorite color.” Her blackness clearly fascinates the Chinese characters in the film. As she rides in a taxi through Hong Kong, Chinese bystanders gawk into the cab, responding with admiration and shock to her blackness. Cleo notices the gaping pedestrians, and allows herself a tiny, satisfied smile. The film constantly reminds the viewer of Cleopatra’s blackness, by contrasting her with the Asian faces that surround her. Near the beginning of the film, there is high angle long shot of a crowded market in Hong Kong. Such shots ordinarily allow the viewer to see a congested mass of humanity, without focusing on a single individual. But this shot creates the opposite effect. In this multitude, Cleo stands out; she is a head taller than most of the people in her vicinity (Tamara Dobson was 6’2”) and significantly darker complexioned. In this shot, the film polemically constructs Cleo’s blackness as contrasting with Asian racial identities.

Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold does not simply create binary oppositions between blackness and Asianess. The complex racial dynamics of the film finds expression in the relationship Cleo develops with a female Chinese detective, Mi Ling Fong. Both characters gently refer to their experiences as marginalized, colonized people, and also suggest the possibility of empowerment by appropriating other identities. In the middle of the film, Cleo tells Mi Ling to take a back-up role in their upcoming fight. Mi Ling responds, “Ok. But next time I’m the Lone Ranger and you be Tonto.” In this moment, Mi Ling recognizes that the cultural

icons both she and Cleo idolize, like the Lone Ranger, are almost exclusively white men. Yet she also suggests the possibility of identity swapping and fluidity. As a Chinese woman, she can still take on the identity of the Lone Ranger and Tonto. Not only that, but she can swap identities over the course of a single narrative. In this scene she agrees to be Tonto, but at the end of the film she embodies the Lone Ranger, as she shouts to Cleo, "Follow me, Tonto!"

In several martial arts films, which feature African-American characters, martial arts become a tool for the construction of a masculinity that sutures together racial identities. Jim Kelly, an African American martial arts star from the era, created a particularly interesting version of African American masculinity in his films. *Black Belt Jones 2: The Tattoo Connection* offers a clear example of this. In this film, Jim Kelly, uses martial arts as an expression of his virility; an exotic dancer in the film rejects Lucas—Jim Kelly's character—explaining the rejection by saying it is because "I don't know you and because you are black." Lucas then restores his manhood by using his bare hands and feet to beat up six men who accost him on the street. Of course Kelly's use of martial arts directly references a specifically Asian iconography of masculinity. But by integrating martial arts into his identity as black man, Jim Kelly constructs a masculinity that draws on hybridized notions of race. In martial arts films, African-Americans did not have to define themselves in opposition to dominant white society. Instead they could define their racial identities both against and through the alternative of Asianess.

As Vijay Prashad points out, in *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting*, the African American community of the late 1960s and early 1970s was seeking images of power and masculinity that originated outside mainstream, white media. According to Prashad, "from 1968 until the late 1970s, the terrain of left political struggle in the U.S. was populated by energetic organizations formed to combat the problem of racism and its effect on communities." Many communities of people of color, including African-American communities, were organizing around resistance to the oppressions caused by mainstream, white-dominated society. In the late 1960s, the Black Panther Party identified their fight against oppression with the anti-colonial battles in the third world. Prashad asserts that "inspired in part by the struggles of others in China, Vietnam, and Africa, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, formed in 1967." In the political sphere, some African Americans identified the connections between their own struggles, and those of people living in the third world. This made it possible, when Hong Kong martial arts films began to infiltrate the American market, for African Americans to identify with the struggle against the colonialism portrayed in many of these films. Desser agrees that Hong Kong kung fu films appealed to African American audiences because "this was the genre of the underdog, the underdog of color, often fighting against colonialist

enemies, white culture, or the Japanese.” The radical leftist movements of the 1960s prepared some members of the African American community to identify with these anti-colonial efforts.

Bruce Lee’s films offer a particularly anti-imperialist perspective. Lee himself was very clear about the ideology behind his practice of Kung Fu. Prashad, in *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting*, explains, “Kung Fu, in Bruce’s vision, revoked the habit of hierarchy that swept up most institutions.” In *The Way of the Dragon* Lee transports his character to Western Europe, where he expresses his resistance to hierarchy, particularly those hierarchies that base their authority on the force of Western culture. *The Way of the Dragon* is set in Rome and takes advantage of the iconic images of Western civilization that Rome possesses. *The Way of the Dragon* portrays these symbols of Western civilization as bankrupt. The film ends with Bruce fighting Chuck Norris in the coliseum. This scene showcases the coliseum’s nature as a ruin. It is empty and crumbling. Most of the scene is framed by broken pillars with bricks falling off of them. The grunts and cries of Bruce and Chuck Norris are the only sounds that echo in the vacant ruin.

The Way of the Dragon follows Bruce Lee’s character, Dragon, as he overcomes the bureaucracy and power of the Italian mafia, merely with the power of his fists and feet. The antagonist in the film is a vague, but large and bureaucratic organized crime institution. Dragon arrives in Rome to help a friend save her restaurant. The friend explains to him that “a huge business syndicate” wants the land her restaurant stands on, and is making business impossible. This phrase, “a huge business syndicate,” suggests an institution whose authority depends on their money and their bureaucracy, their economic power. It quickly becomes clear that this “syndicate” is entirely amoral, and works with organized criminals. *The Way of the Dragon* suggests that Western civilization, represented by Rome, supports itself on greedy bureaucracies. But this is not an insurmountable problem in the world Bruce invents; merit wins out in the end. The gang of mafia-backed thugs that have been harassing the Chinese restaurant feel so threatened by Dragon’s Kung Fu skills that they refuse to fight him. The mafia boss then ships in the martial artist extraordinaire, Colt, played by Chuck Norris, to kill Dragon. Colt and Dragon fight in that great symbol of decayed Western power, the Coliseum. Dragon kills Colt, triumphing over the mafia boss’ power through nothing but his kung fu skills. In *The Way of the Dragon*, meritocracy conquers bureaucracy. In this film, Bruce takes a stance that staunchly undermines the authority and cultural imperialism of the West.

Through Hong Kong martial arts films, African-American audiences found concrete images for a possible transnational, and transracial, stance against the imperialism of mainstream white-dominated culture. By excelling at the martial arts,

performers like Jim Kelly constructed a new kind of masculinity that was hybridized, not deracinated. Jim Kelly's performances in films like *Black Belt Jones 2: The Tattoo Connection* and *Three the Hard Way* asserted Kelly's black identity, melding it with iconography of Asian culture. But the signification of black performers practicing Asian martial arts did not remain stable. In 1985, director Michael Schultz released his comedy, *The Last Dragon* about a young African American man who has perfected his martial arts skills. By the time Schultz's movie came out, African Americans practicing martial arts had taken on a very different set of meanings in film. In "The Kung Fu Craze," Desser writes, "*The Octagon* (1980) proved the viability of a less politically charged kung fu saga and thus solidified the place of a martial arts genre in the American cinema, a genre which is obviously owed to the kung fu craze that preceded it." In the 1980s the use of martial arts in black-focused films lost much of its political urgency. *The Last Dragon* uses martial arts for humor; it discourages the viewer from investing his racial or gender identity in the martial arts shown on screen. In fact the main character, Leroy, seems deracinated, unlike Jim Kelly's characters in the previous decade. Leroy whole-heartedly apes the Asianess he sees in Hong Kong films, without incorporating these into a separate identity as an African American. He walks the streets of New York in the outfit of Chinese peasant, complete with a straw hat. He speaks in wise sounding riddles, reminiscent of David Carradine's character on Kung Fu. He eats with chopsticks. By the 1980s, martial arts in black-focused films had taken on a new meaning. It no longer really stood for a radical hybridized, transracial allegiance. It had become either humorously deracinating, as in *The Last Dragon*, or had lost its connection altogether to the racial politics that originally defined it. Desser writes that "the rise of white male martial arts stars who, in a sense, co-opt the Asian martial arts for the American action hero, for the American movie star, for the American man" began in this period. The martial arts ceased to represent a resistant stance to mainstream American culture, and became a key part of mainstream movies. Martial arts in American films in the 1980s began to take on entirely new meanings, which also need examination, but are outside the scope of this paper.

In the early 1970s, Hong Kong martial arts movies gained a strong foothold in the American film market. A significant portion of the audience for these films consisted of African Americans. Film producers responded to the audience's interests by producing martial arts films that featured black performers like Tamara Dobson and Jim Kelly. These films actually took a radical stance towards race. They allowed black performers to step outside the black-white binary, and construct their racial identities through a relationship to Asianess. Joseph D. Won accuses this appropriation of being yellowface minstrelsy, which it may have sometimes been. Many of these films are painfully orientalisising. However they are more complicated

than simple cultural exploitation. They reflect the real desire in the African American community of the time to affect radical change in the United States by allying its cause with the cause of anti-colonialism throughout the third world. Performers like Jim Kelly strove to create a notion of blackness, and masculinity, that did not need to turn solely to whiteness for self-definition. Instead these martial artists used Asian iconography both as a contrast to their black identities, and as tools for creating new, hybridized black identities. As time went on, and the political landscape of the African American community changed, the meaning of martial arts in black-focused films also changed. But the 1970s kung fu craze remains a fascinating moment for the study of race relations and black identity on film in the United States. It was a time when some African Americans used film to consider the possibility of linking their political goals to international anti-colonial goals, a time when some black men explored models outside the black-white binary in an effort to create a new kind of black masculinity.

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