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The Gongfu of Kung Fu Hustle

by Gary Xu



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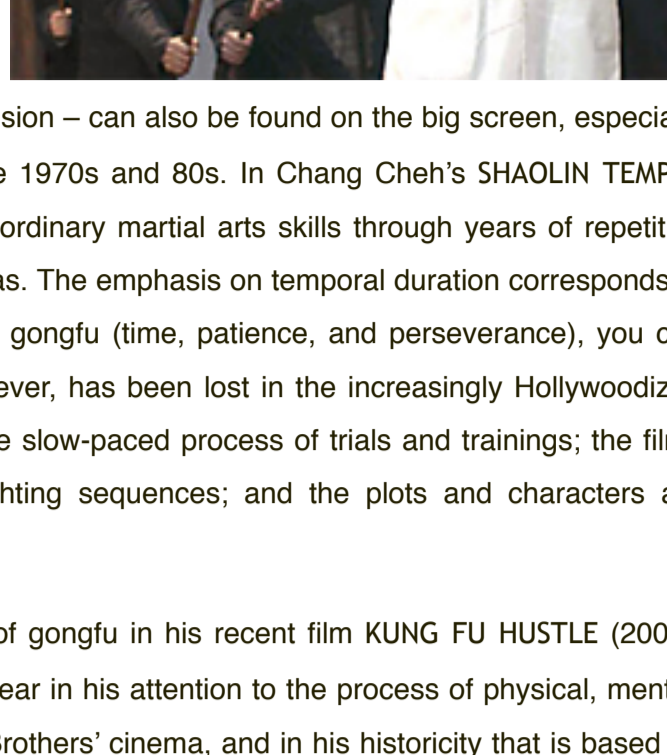
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Stephen Chow's KUNG FU HUSTLE is a fast-paced slapstick action/comedy, but it is also a study in modernization, exploitation, and redemption. Gary Xu reads KUNG FU HUSTLE through history and the history of film, discovering an indirect, subversive strategy influenced by the tenets of the martial arts.

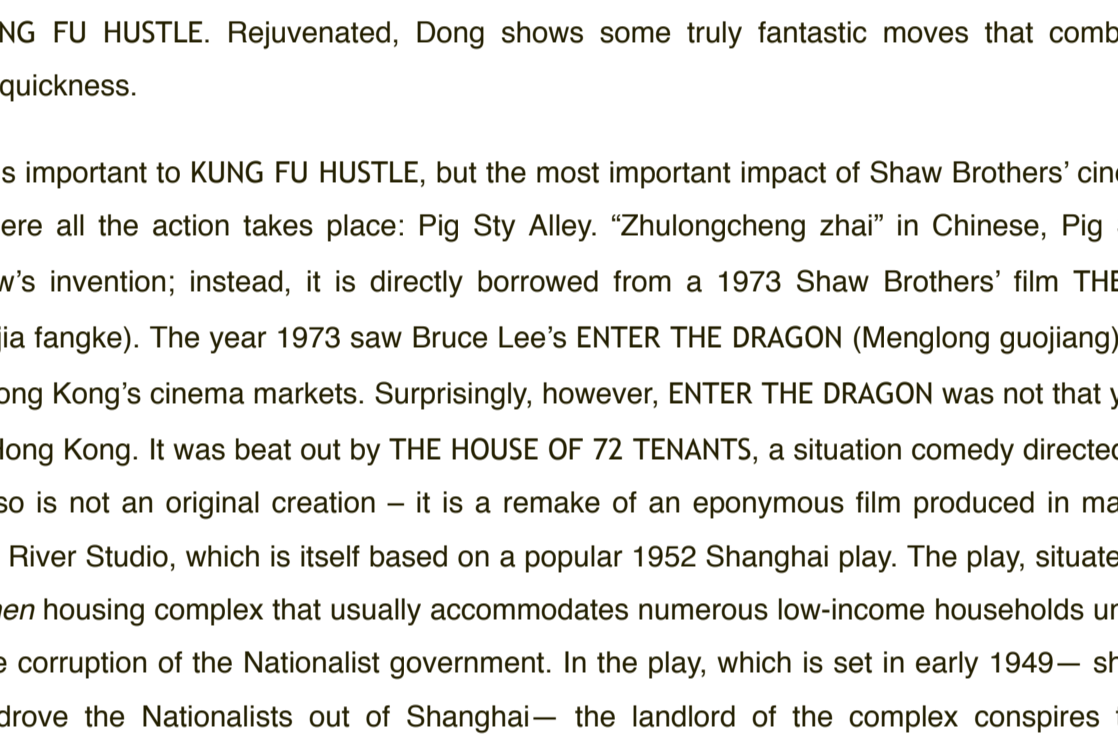
Gongfu, the Chinese word made known to the West by Bruce Lee as kung fu — Chinese martial arts, originally had two related meanings: talents/skills acquired over a long period of time and the time needed for completing a task. Bruce Lee's gongfu apparently stemmed from the first semantic meaning of this word, referring to both the skills of fighting and the senses of justice and righteousness that require arduous training and careful fostering. The skill aspects of gongfu have been spectacularly displayed on the big screen by Bruce Lee and other masters of kung fu cinema. The second meaning of gongfu — the temporal dimension — can also be found on the big screen, especially in many productions of the Shaw Brothers Studio during the 1970s and 80s. In Chang Cheh's SHAOLIN TEMPLE (1976), for instance, the disciples unknowingly acquire extraordinary martial arts skills through years of repetitive daily labors such as cooking and taking care of Buddhist sutras. The emphasis on temporal duration corresponds to the well known Chinese saying about gongfu: "With enough gongfu (time, patience, and perseverance), you can sand even an iron anvil into a needle." This emphasis, however, has been lost in the increasingly Hollywoodized kung fu cinema. The audience no longer has patience for the slow-paced process of trials and trainings; the films "cut right to the chase" and are filled with spectacular fighting sequences; and the plots and characters are weakened due to the sole focus on spectacles.



Stephen Chow intended to restore the temporal dimension of gongfu in his recent film KUNG FU HUSTLE (2005), whose original Chinese title is GONGFU. His intent is made clear in his attention to the process of physical, mental, and moral growth, in his incorporation of elements of Shaw Brothers' cinema, and in his historicity that is based on not only the history of cinema but also a strong sense of historical justice, which, in the film's fable-like setting, points to contemporary China's political and economic situations. Advertising his film as the "ultimate kung fu film" that consummates and concludes the kung fu cinema tradition, Stephen Chow manifests his real gongfu — cinematic craftsmanship (auteur-ship) and social concerns based on deep knowledge of tradition and spirit of renovation.

The first aspect of Chow's gongfu is growth over time. Unlike in many contemporary action films, Chow's heroes are not born overnight. In contemporary action or martial arts films, the temporal duration is usually short — only a segment or a moment of the hero's life is of cinematic importance. In Chow's films, the entire life of the protagonist matters. Chow's heroes must endure a long process of physical tortures and psychological humiliations before turning into shining "needles" or "butterflies." Ah Sing's growth from a good-for-nothing weakling to a Bruce Lee-like superhero gives the film a happy ending. Sing's path, however, is not free of obstacles or pitfalls. As a bullied child, he spends his piggybank savings on a "Buddha's palm" training manual. Believing that he has mastered the ultimate form of gongfu from the manual, Sing challenges the bullies when they beat on a girl. His heroics, however, incur further humiliations since the manual is a worthless fake. Defeats and failures follow Sing into adulthood. To change his fate, Sing decides to join the evil Axe Gang. His inner goodness, however, prevents him from becoming an evildoer and eventually uplifts him into a superhero. Sing's physical and moral growth gives meaning — belief that perseverance and kindness will prevail — to Stephen Chow's seemingly meaningless "mo lei tou" comedy style — nonsense that comes from nowhere and seems irrelevant to the film's story.

Western critics and audiences consider Chow "lowbrow" because of his dizzying mixture of pop culture and his jokes that mostly focus on the lower part of the human body. It is true that Chow's cinematic language — both the words spoken in his films and the composition of his films — are always mediated, full of puns, allusions, references, and tributes to previous films in particular and to pop culture in general. Some of the references are easily recognizable. As A. O. Scott points out in his review of KUNG FU HUSTLE for the New York Times on April 8, 2005: "The movie snatches tasty morsels of international pop culture, ranging from Looney Tunes to Sergio Leone to 'AIRPLANE!,' and tosses them into a fast-moving blender." The rest of the references can be difficult to detect, requiring knowledge of the history of cinema. The mixing, however, can be cinematically significant if it is consistent with Stephen Chow's fundamental stance — to laugh at himself as a social underdog is for exposing social injustices to the underprivileged. It is especially interesting when the history of cinema is used by Chow not only for paying tribute but also for criticizing contemporary social problems. Chow's mediated cinematic language thus turns his *mo lei tou* upside down, revealing serious, "highbrow," and tragic sides reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin. To add meaning to the meaningless, to trace the origin of the abrupt and context-less *mo lei tou* — this is the most important aspect of the gongfu in KUNG FU HUSTLE.



Stephen Chow's fascination with the history of cinema begins with Bruce Lee as well as with Chang Cheh, Shaw Brothers' greatest martial arts film director. Chang Cheh's impact on KUNG FU HUSTLE is not only highly visible in the action and in the mise-en-scene, but also more deeply hidden in Stephen Chow's casting. The choice of Dong Zhihua to perform the role of "Doughnut" (the breakfast shop proprietor/spear expert) is significant in itself — Dong was Chang Cheh's preferred actor at the last stage of Chang's creative burst. A Beijing Opera actor who migrated to Hong Kong in the 1980s, Dong performed the lead role in all of Chang's last six films: GREAT SHANGHAI IN 1937 (1986), LAUGHTER IN XI'AN (1987), ACROSS THE RIVER (1988), NINJA IN ANCIENT CHINA (1989), HIDDEN HERO (1993), and SHEN TONG (1993). Dong was silent for a long period of time before Stephen Chow invited him to appear in KUNG FU HUSTLE. Rejuvenated, Dong shows some truly fantastic moves that combine power with precision and quickness.

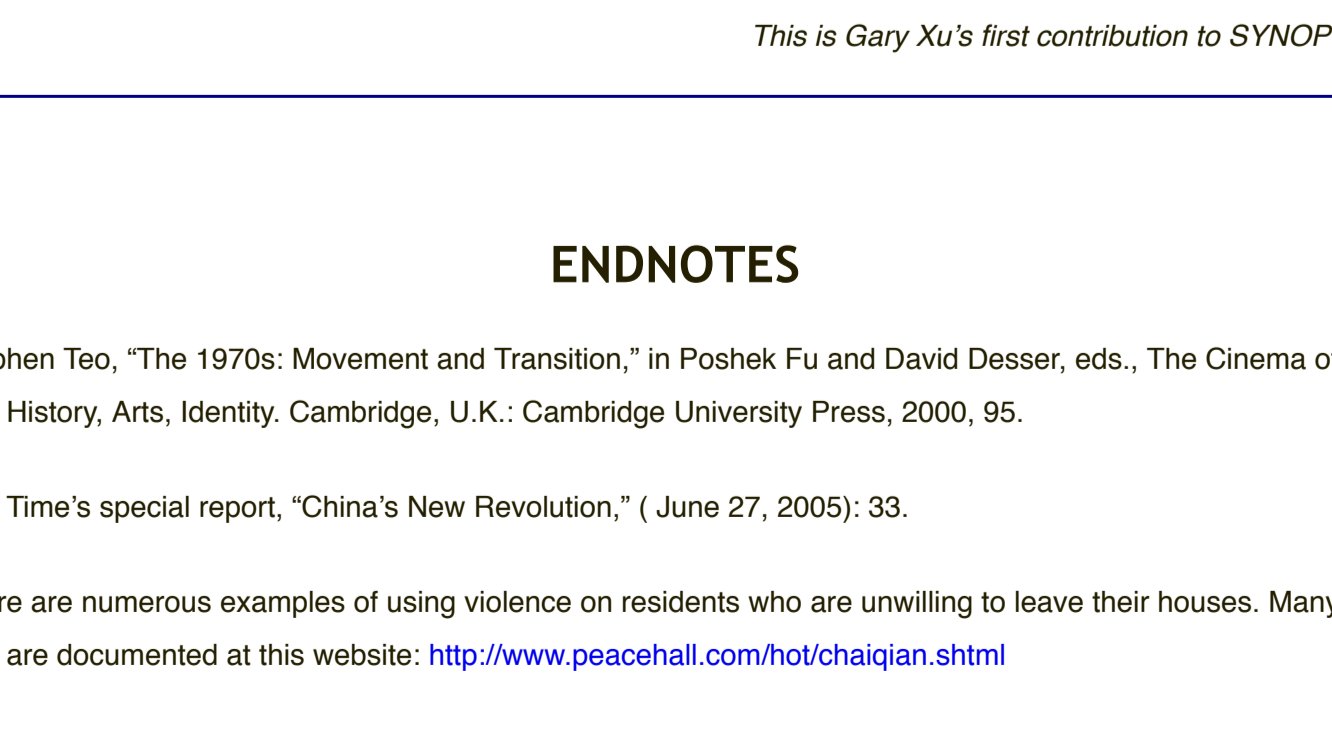
Dong Zhihua is important to KUNG FU HUSTLE, but the most important impact of Shaw Brothers' cinema on this film is the site where all the action takes place: Pig Sty Alley. "Zhulongcheng zhai" in Chinese, Pig Sty Alley is not Stephen Chow's invention; instead, it is directly borrowed from a 1973 Shaw Brothers' film THE HOUSE OF 72 TENANTS (72 jia fangke). The year 1973 saw Bruce Lee's ENTER THE DRAGON (Menglong guojiang) dominating the world's and Hong Kong's cinema markets. Surprisingly, however, ENTER THE DRAGON was not that year's box office champion in Hong Kong. It was beat out by THE HOUSE OF 72 TENANTS, a situation comedy directed by Chor Yuen. Chor's film also is not an original creation — it is a remake of an eponymous film produced in mainland China in 1963 by Pearl River Studio, which is itself based on a popular 1952 Shanghai play. The play, situated in Shanghai's typical *shikumen* housing complex that usually accommodates numerous low-income households under one roof, is a satire on the corruption of the Nationalist government. In the play, which is set in early 1949 — shortly before the Communists drove the Nationalists out of Shanghai — the landlord of the complex conspires to sell his own stepdaughter to a corrupted policeman. The policeman can force the 72 tenants out so that the landlord can sell his house for a hefty profit. The plan, however, is defeated by the tenants, who help the stepdaughter and her real lover escape. Despite its overt leftist ideology, the play is full of funny moments due to its witty use of the Shanghai dialect and its attention to the unexpected in the tight living space. Transplanting the Shanghai play and the mainland film to 1970s' Hong Kong, Chor Yuen created the unforgettable slum "Pig Sty Alley" to replace Shanghai's *shikumen* house. Chor's film is a poignant satire on the bureaucracy of Hong Kong's colonial government and shows tremendous sympathy to the folks struggling on the bottom of the deeply divided society.

Chor's film is a milestone in Hong Kong cinema history. First of all, its dialogues are predominantly in Cantonese. The Hong Kong cinema of the 1960s and early 70s was dominated by Mandarin films, most of which were produced by Shaw Brothers with the aid of talent emigrating from Shanghai. But, in 1973, it is noted that "...after a year in which no Cantonese pictures were produced, Shaw Brothers, which was still regarded as the king of the Mandarin film studios, took the lead in the revival of Cantonese by making and releasing THE HOUSE OF 72 TENANTS." [1] This was the beginning of the revival of Cantonese films in Hong Kong. Before long, Mandarin films faded into obscurity and Cantonese became the only dominant language in the Hong Kong film industry.

THE HOUSE OF 72 TENANTS is thus important to Stephen Chow for several reasons: 1) It revived the Cantonese films that Chow was accustomed to watching when he grew up; 2) It was the best of the situation comedy or neighborhood dramas, a genre from which Chow learned his comic expressions and perfected his *mo lei tou* skills; 3) It focuses on the underprivileged, the socially injured, and the abject, people to whom Stephen Chow pours all his sympathy and from whom Chow finds his laughs; 4) It deliberately preserved the stage-style in the original play and made the film's indoor studio set an aesthetic choice, similar to Hitchcock's theatrical nuances originated from his insistence on shooting in studio sets; 5) It has created a most unforgettable site/sight of urban dwelling in Pig Sty Alley: the pigeonhole-like co-inhabitation, the everyday trifles, the laughter amidst hardships, the unexpected out of banalities and routines, and the extraordinary among the most ordinary.

All these motifs in THE HOUSE OF 72 TENANTS are present in KUNG FU HUSTLE. There is the clearly artificial stage setting in the murder scene that opens the film; the attention to the ordinary life in the slum; the most extraordinary growing out of the ordinary; and, of course, the archetypal site of slum life in Pig Sty Alley. Setting this film in pre-revolutionary period Shanghai, Stephen Chow also pays tribute to the original Shanghai play, although he does not forget Chor's satire. The unlawfulness of the Axe Gang, as well as the corruption of the police and of the entire city bureaucratic system, makes us wonder if these are well-disguised references to contemporary China's political and economic reality.

In the midst of unprecedented economic boom, China continues to rest its development on two pillars: public construction projects and exports. As part of the push for urbanization, China's real estate constructions are quickly transforming its landscape and social life. Shanghai in particular has become China's window for showcasing urban constructions that embody modernization — it has more than 300 skyscrapers in 2005, compared to only one in 1985. [2] Old *shikumen* slums are being demolished everywhere and replaced by fake *shikumen* structures such as the high scale entertainment district The New World ("Xin tiandi"). Old tenants are driven out of their dwellings by the corrupted bureaucrats, law-enforcement agents, and well-connected powerful real estate companies; they often receive little compensation when their houses are demolished. Gangsters are often hired to violently attack and force out these tenants. [3] I believe, to a great extent, KUNG FU HUSTLE implicitly criticizes this trend of urban demolition, tenant intimidation, and government corruption. The neat and artificial commercial street at the beginning and the end of the film is stunningly similar to The New World; the Axe Gang members, in their business suits and in their ubiquity and brutality, are reminiscent of today's real estate bosses who profit through bribery and violence; and the slum, juxtaposed with the new streets, is representative of the polarized Chinese city in which the poor have nothing except supports from each other.



I am usually against overtly politicized reading of literary texts and films. Readers and viewers often are so eager to look for political messages in foreign texts that they miss literary, aesthetic, or visual nuances. Censorships also rely on the reductionist reading to force linkages between texts and dissident political implications. In the case of KUNG FU HUSTLE, however, everyone expects it to be lowbrow comedy and fantastic action; no one suspects any political referencing. It is paradoxically at the most unexpected place that Chow hides his political criticism, which is also consistent with his concern over the powerless. The political references and the social satire are made possible by Chow's embedment of motifs from the play and the two films with the title THE HOUSE OF 72 TENANTS. One still may insist that Chow is merely paying homage without the intension to satirize the contemporary situation. But the embedment itself is what matters, since it registers and preserves the original's demands for social justice. Because of the demands, history — be it cinema history or social history — is evoked not merely for spectacle's sake, but on behalf of contemporary reality. This is what I mean by "historicity": history restaged in order to make implicit reference to reality, history is not a "mirror" of reality, but a part and parcel of reality — the temporal order does not have to be linear since what happened is what makes the world as it is today.

Justice is what Chow's ultimate gongfu strike is about. Martial arts films such as those by Chang Cheh and King Hu traditionally are known for conveying senses of justice and righteousness. But in recent films, such as CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON, HERO, and HOUSE OF FLYING DAGGERS, the focus shifts away from justice toward melodramatic and universal terms of love and revenge. Historical atrocity committed by the First Emperor of Qin can be rewritten into a tale of the wise leader and personal sacrifices; battles are no longer between good and evil, but between jealous lovers; the distinction between right and wrong is all relative; and the only thing matters is the staging of spectacles based on action and scenery. Stephen Chow returns the kung fu cinema to its fundamental moral basis: right vs. wrong, good vs. evil; in the meantime, he also discards the nationalist baggage (China vs. Japan, Han Chinese vs. Manchu, Chinese vs. white devil, etc.) in previous films. By making justice absolute and universal, Chow further reveals the serious side and contemporary relevance of his filmmaking.

This is Gary Xu's first contribution to SYNOPTIQUE.

ENDNOTES

- Stephen Teo, "The 1970s: Movement and Transition," in Poshek Fu and David Desser, eds., The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 95.
- See Time's special report, "China's New Revolution," (June 27, 2005): 33.
- There are numerous examples of using violence on residents who are unwilling to leave their houses. Many of cases are documented at this website: <http://www.peacehall.com/hot/chaigian.shtml>

Gary Xu teaches Chinese cinema and literature at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. He has written extensively on transnational Chinese cinema and global politics. His recent publications include "Remaking East Asia, Outsourcing Hollywood" (Senses of Cinema, no. 34), "The Pedagogical as the Political: A History of Globalization and Zhang Yimou's Not One Less" (The Communication Review, vol. 6, no. 4), and "Flowers of Shanghai: Visualizing Ellipses and (Colonial) Absence" (in Chris Berry, ed., Chinese Film in Focus: 25 New Takes. London: BFI, 2003).

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