Representations of Physical Prowess,
the Body, and National Identity
in Selected Bruce Lee Films

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When Bruce Lee began his acting career, the kung fu film was primarily enacted
for and enjoyed by Chinese audiences. Admittedly, the Hong Kong “kung fu”
movie, as a genre, flourished as a fairly isolationist cinema, until Bruce Lee, with
the peak reaching critical mass in the early 1970s, brought these films to a larger
audience.1 Initially, the kung fu film was largely a cultural performance by and for
Chinese, until Lee—through an amalgamated nationalistic, visual, and imaginary
reconceptualization of the (Chinese) body, bodily practices, and physical prowess,
and from a position of power and status within the vast Chinese audiences—brought
kung fu and martial arts to western and non-Chinese eastern audiences. This popular
culture renewal, of course, resulted in a reinvigoration of nationalistic pride for
many groups.2 Hong Kong Chinese; émigré Chinese; expatriate Chinese; and, later,
mainland Chinese all related back to different varieties of body imaginaries which
served to engage with forms of national pride in being Chinese.3

However, Lee emerged from somewhere: his biography clearly shaped his
later accomplishments. In 1970, Bruce Lee Jun Fan (李振藩)4 and his young son
walked through customs in Kai Tak Airport in Hong Kong, returning to visit his
family. He last had visited in 1965, when Bruce had attended his father’s funeral.
His father, Lee Hoi Chuen, who had been a prominent Cantonese opera and film
actor, had influenced Bruce’s life trajectory: in fact, with his father’s contacts, Lee
first appeared in film as a baby. Unlike the 1965 trip, when sadness had shrouded
the family, this time Lee found himself the new celebrity of the colony because
of his role as Kato, the servant5 of the titular head of the comic-book adaptation/
television show, the Green Hornet. While the Green Hornet had limited success
among American television audiences—lasting only one season—it was a huge
hit in Hong Kong and throughout Southeast Asia.6 Although Kato, like Robin in
the much more popular Batman series (in America), was a sidekick of the main
hero of the show, Lee became the first ethnic Chinese actor who assumed an
important role in an American television program. Past “oriental”7 characters were
often portrayed as servisent and received little screen time, such as Hop Sing

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in the long-running Western Bonanza, or in a “Yellow Peril” stereotype, such as Dr. Fu Manchu, whose various enactments received more exposure but depended upon negatively stereotypical and sinister roles. Kato had a heroic role that was indispensable to the missions of his “master,” even though Lee did not receive star status in the show. Beside the appearance of an ethnic Chinese actor on American television in a slightly atypical role, Lee’s demonstration of physical prowess in the show also earned him admiration from the Chinese audience, who recognized and appreciated Lee’s martial arts skills even though the fight sequences were staged. Important is the fact that Lee fought villains, who themselves were stereotypical “enemies” of Chinese and more particularly Hong Kong audiences, and who more often than not were Caucasians. In Lee’s moral battles with Japanese and Westerners he always won, particularly making Lee popular among many people who had been subjugated under colonial rule.

In this article, we intend to interrogate not only how Lee portrayed a new conception of the male (Chinese) body and physical prowess to Chinese, but also to North American audiences. We see the use of popular culture—in this case, film—as our markers for situating and contextualizing historical and cultural attitudes. While this cannot be seen as a traditional history, it does interrogate several of the possible forces that came to result in an “opening up of China” to the West, but, more importantly for this project, this article examines affective responses to the oeuvre of Bruce Lee films because, as Franklin Fearing argues, “films have content which is related to the underlying needs of mass audiences.” As most readers know, the action sequences have been carefully choreographed, not unlike those within many sport films. Except for documentaries of sports, fictionalized sport films—like The Natural, Slap Shot, Bull Durham, Bend It Like Beckham, Eight Men Out, The Fighter, Rocky, Raging Bull, Field of Dreams—are all highly choreographed. Yet they have an impact on sport history, as they change the way audiences view their heroes and heroines, and, in a few cases, they can influence affective attitudes: for example, the father-son relationship in Field of Dreams, in a very small way, opened up new ways of fathers relating to sons through baseball while reproducing the mythic of father-son bonding.

From an Eastern perspective, Lee’s films speak to generations of Hong Kong, Chinese expatriates, and, later, People’s Republic of China residents. Lee consciously worked to create a sense of pride, and, through the action sequences, his films work holistically to balance the physical with the cognitive or spiritual. In our analyses of Lee’s films, we argue that the plots themselves are fairly formulaic. It was Lee’s demonstration of physical prowess via a combative art form, kung fu, that captivated a large audience (Chinese and non-Chinese alike) and made inroads to a new perception of Chinese identity through the use of Lee’s body. While they are not “sport history” in the sense of a contest, they are physical performances, and they deserve a place in the pantheon of contemporary critical sport histories that examine sport as not only reflective of society, but also as a producer of society.

We primarily examine the initial three films that Lee made—the Big Boss, Fist of Fury, and Way of the Dragon. Because Lee’s fourth film, Enter the Dragon, a coproduction between Lee and Warner Brothers, was aimed at the North American market, the first three Hong Kong productions more aptly conveyed Lee’s construction of the male body and physical prowess to a very focused audience. By examining this form of celluloid embodiment, during a curious period of