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Nomad of the Transpacific: Bruce Lee as Method

Daryl Joji Maeda

The life of the nomad is the intermezzo.

—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

Be formless, shapeless, like water.

—Bruce Lee

The transpacific nomad Bruce Lee was born in San Francisco, raised in Hong Kong until the age of eighteen, came of age in Seattle, had his hopes of movie stardom extinguished in Hollywood, and returned to Hong Kong to rekindle his dreams. In 1971 he made his first martial arts film, *Tang Shan Daxiong*, in which he played a Chinese immigrant to Thailand who discovers that his boss is a drug-smuggling kingpin. The following year, he starred in *Jing Wu Men* as a martial artist who defends Chinese pride against Japanese imperialists in the International Settlement of early twentieth-century Shanghai. Because of the overwhelming popularity of both films in Hong Kong and throughout Asia, National General Pictures selected them for distribution in the United States in 1973. *Tang Shan Daxiong* was supposed to be released as *The Chinese Connection* to associate it with *The French Connection*, a mainstream hit about heroin trafficking; the title of *Jing Wu Men* was translated as *Fist of Fury*. However, the cartons containing the films were inadvertently switched during shipping across the Pacific: the drug picture was released as *Fists of Fury* (*sic*) and the Shanghai movie was released as *The Chinese Connection*.¹ Just as the titling mishap interweaves travel, changes in transit, identities, nationalism, and colonialism, Lee's life and career illustrate the connections and entanglements that have characterized the relationship between the United States and China.

I have subtitled this essay “Bruce Lee as Method” in the spirit of Kuan-Hsing Chen's influential call to use “Asia as method” to transform the study of Asia. Chen calls on scholars to wrest the production of knowledge about Asia away from European and North American universities and frames of thought, arguing that Asian studies must be centered in Asian institutions, foreground

inter-Asian comparativities, and apply Asian theorizing in order to decolonize, deimperialize, and “de-cold war” Asian studies.² Like Chen, I am inspired by social, cultural, and political decolonization movements in Asia and acknowledge the significant extent to which the provinciality of Western theory has remained underexamined when applied to Asian subjects.³ However, delimiting the production of knowledge about Asia to one region risks obscuring how Asia and the West are mutually constituted, in part, by movements of people, aesthetics, and ideologies across and between regions.

The notion of entanglement provides a key metaphor for “Bruce Lee as method” in two senses. First, I follow Rey Chow, who calls entanglement “a topological looping together that is at the same time an enmeshment of topics” and uses it to reveal connections “across a number of medial and cultural forms.” In addition, I invoke entanglement to reference the phenomenon known in physics as quantum entanglement. According to quantum theory, particles (like electrons or photons) occupy ambiguous states (such as positive or negative) until they are observed. Pairs of entangled particles occupy the same state or opposite state, retaining their relationship no matter how distantly they are separated. Observing the state of one entangled particle reveals the state of its far-away partner instantaneously, seemingly exceeding the speed of light. Although Albert Einstein abjured entanglement as “spooky actions at a distance,” physicists have recently verified its existence experimentally. Chow describes entanglement’s quality of connecting sameness and/or oppositeness as “the linkages and enmeshments that keep things apart; the voidings and uncoverings that hold things together”—a concept I use to explain how Bruce Lee’s “spooky actions” effected changes in aesthetics and ideologies across vast, even transoceanic, “distance.”⁴

The emerging fields of Pacific history and transpacific studies provide frameworks that illuminate how studying Bruce Lee can reveal the entangled constructions of China and the United States. Pacific history bridges the discrepant, yet overlapping, histories of Asia, the Americas, Oceania, and Europe to theorize and historicize the Pacific as a far-flung and diverse entity that is nevertheless worth considering in synthesis. David Armitage and Alison Bashford’s important overview, *Pacific Histories: Ocean, Land, People*, characterizes the Pacific as a zone defined by “currents, flows and markers of adjacent, intersection, colliding cultures.”⁵ Armitage and Bashford embrace the messiness of putting Asian, Western, and Oceanic historians and historiographies into conversation, and eschew attempting to create a unified vision of the Pacific. In contrast, recent monographs by the American historians Matt Matsuda and David Iglar tackle the Herculean task of envisioning narratives of the Pacific

centered on environments, explorations, passages, and exchanges. The Hong Kong scholar Elizabeth Sinn has similarly shown how the growths of Hong Kong and California—which she conceives of as “translocalities”—were mutually constituted by the increasing flows of people, goods, and capital impelled by gold rush.⁶

Transpacific studies shares with Pacific history an interest in mobility and flows, examining “the movements of people, culture, capital, or ideas within regions and between nations.”⁷ It draws from area studies, American studies, and Asian American studies, but critiques these fields for being overly bounded by nation-states. As Janet Hoskins and Viet Nguyen explain in the foreword to their pioneering collection, *Transpacific Studies*, the field is founded on an explicitly critical stance toward transnational capitalism, ongoing neo-imperialism and militarism, and the logics of racism, sexism, and nationalism that have created and continue to create systems of inequality in the Pacific. Despite its critical lens, transpacific studies emphasizes the “trans,” or crossing, at the expense of what is crossed over—specifically, Oceania. Hoskins and Nguyen’s volume elides Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia, all of which have been heavily affected by militarism and colonialism, and have dispersed diasporic populations across various Pacific regions. In contrast, Setsu Shigematsu and Keith Camacho’s anthology, *Militarized Currents*, understands “militarization as an *extension of colonialism*” that circulates through Asia, the United States, and Pacific islands including Hawai‘i, the Bikini Atoll, and Guam.⁸ In addition to making Oceania and Pacific Islanders central to its analysis, the militarized currents framework examines the racial, gender, and sexual effects of militarism. Lee’s corporeal presence and style of physical movement bore unmistakable traces of these effects, as I show.

Continuously riding the transpacific currents impelled by labor migration, capitalism, and militarism that Hoskins, Nguyen, Shigematsu, and Camacho emphasize made Bruce Lee a nomad in the literal sense, but he also embodied Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of the nomad. As “vectors of deterritorialization,” nomads destabilize borders and boundaries in opposition to the state’s will to territorialize.⁹ Putting Pacific history and transpacific studies in conversation with Deleuze and Guattari suggests that capitalism, imperialism, and nationalism are vectors of territorialization that impose racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies to delineate and regulate their subjects; nomads travel through the spaces striated by these ideologies, but defy and blur their demarcations. Lee’s most famous dictum, “Be formless, shapeless, like water,” argues that water pliantly takes on the form of its container—a teapot, a cup—but can also resist, like a river carving a canyon or ocean waves pounding cliffs to

sand. Like water, Lee refused to be captured by the East or West, but instead flowed between and shaped both. His peripatetic life and career contributed to the ongoing entanglement of China and the United States across great distances, interweaving and unraveling nationalisms, colonialisms, and racial and gender formations.

I set out to examine the figure of Bruce Lee as a method to entangle the relatively discrete bodies of scholarship in Asian studies, Asian American studies, and American studies. To speak of Lee is to speak of the interpreted, contested, and contingent assemblage of “Bruce Lee,” which oscillates between scholarly fields and images just as Lee shuttled nomadically across the Pacific.¹⁰ “Bruce Lee” entangles the individual—whose life has been elucidated by memoirs of those who encountered him and biographies ranging from hagiographies of an ever-devoted husband and father to hit pieces on a drug-addled egomaniac—with the on-screen figure interpreted variously as an “Oriental,” a Chinese nationalist, and a body devoid of race.¹¹ Bruce Lee as method is thus a practice of intellectual nomadicism that converges disparate bodies of scholarship and assesses the parallax distortions produced by differing perspectives.¹²

Asian American and American studies scholars focus on Lee’s racialization and gendering in the context of US culture and history. Jachinson Chan places Lee alongside the fictional characters Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan, arguing that Lee strove to overcome “the ways in which mainstream American society marginalized him because of his race” by constructing a “Chinese American masculinity” emphasizing physical domination over other men. However, Jachinson Chan alleges that Lee’s masculinity adheres to Western stereotypes of Chinese men by remaining “asexual.”¹³ Celine Parreñas Shimizu counters this representation of Lee as asexual, portraying his filmic sexuality as a non-patriarchal, “ethical masculinity” emblemized by his care for others and vulnerability amid violence.¹⁴ Sylvia Chong examines Lee’s enmeshed personhood and screen persona as emblems of the racial violence of the Vietnam War, arguing that his body plays contradictory roles as an exemplar of “the transcendence of racial categories and the epitome of racialized masculinity.”¹⁵ While Asian studies scholarship shares Asian American and American studies’ concern with Lee’s masculinity, it tends to locate Lee within the ambit of Asia and emphasize colonialism rather than race. David Desser traces the impact of samurai films and the Japanese film industry on Hong Kong cinema and sees Lee’s masculinity as an instance of the emergent “muscular Mandarin” genre of 1970s Hong Kong filmmaking.¹⁶ Stephen Teo emphasizes Lee’s status as a symbol of Chinese resistance to colonial degradation.¹⁷

Using Lee as method entails incessant crossing of scholarly boundaries, just as he shuttled across the Pacific, entangling bodies of literature rather than proclaiming the supremacy of any one. Like a quantum particle whose state remains ambiguous until it becomes determined by an observer's act of measurement, Lee exists in multiple states—as person and film image, racial minority and colonial subject, artifact of Hollywood and product of Hong Kong—until critics fix him in place via interpretation. I aim to show how a transpacific lens attendant to multiple locations and literatures can reveal how militarism enabled Lee to synthesize martial arts and enmesh critiques of racism and colonialism.

Militarism and the Antiauthoritarian Transnationalism of Martial Arts

Although scholars agree on the hybridity of Lee's martial art, to date none have traced its intermixings to his engagement with circulating currents of people, cultures, and ideas caused by US military deployments throughout Asia during the Cold War. When he left Hong Kong at the age of eighteen, Lee had studied Wing Chun kung fu for about four years and had never engaged in serious cardiovascular or weight training. A decade later, he wrote a letter to a kung fu elder in Hong Kong, stating, "I've lost faith in the Chinese classical arts—though I still call mine Chinese—because basically all styles are products of land swimming, even the Wing Chun school."¹⁸ Lee's clever turn of phrase suggested that blind adherence to any single style is as ineffective as trying to breaststroke across a grassy field. I argue that Lee's remigration to the United States in 1959 immersed Lee in transpacific flows impelled by colonialism and militarism, absorbed him into the antiauthoritarian zeitgeist of the 1960s, and motivated him to pioneer the new martial arts practices and reconstruct the body that made him a legend.

Like countless Asian immigrants, Lee took his first job as a busboy at a Chinese restaurant. The headstrong young man was ill-suited to being a food-service worker, but enjoyed teaching kung fu to the other waiters and busboys in the alley behind the restaurant during their breaks. He also attended high school at Edison Technical School in Seattle, where he developed a reputation as a martial artist and began informally training a multiracial crew that included African American, Filipino American, Japanese American, and white fighters.

During the Cold War, multiple occupations and deployments spread US military personnel across Asia. Soldiers and sailors stationed abroad clearly affected Asian nations and cultures, but their return home had a reciprocal

impact on the United States. In 1974 *Black Belt* magazine stated, “No group of Americans has done more to promote the Oriental martial arts in the United States than Armed Forces personnel,” a keen observation of how militarism proliferated martial arts in the United States after World War II.¹⁹ But beyond popularizing the martial arts, militarism cross-pollinated them, too. In the United States, Lee encountered forms borne by military migrations throughout Asia and embraced all that they had to offer. The Wing Chun style that he had studied in Hong Kong emphasizes punches more than kicks, and generally kicks remain below the waist. Lee’s first student, Jesse Glover, recounts that one of the chief activities of the kung fu group in Seattle was preparing for martial arts exhibitions. Always proud of his Chinese culture, Lee sought to showcase kung fu as an effective fighting style, but he could not help being influenced by the other martial arts. Sometime around 1961, Bruce attended a karate demonstration at the Air Force judo championship held in Tacoma, Washington. He was particularly impressed by the kicking and leg control of a karate practitioner named Hidetaka Nishiyama. Lee talked about Nishiyama’s kicking all the way home from the tournament and bought all the karate books he could find on leg training and stretching.²⁰

Nishiyama’s presence in Tacoma was a direct result of the post–World War II American occupation of Japan and the continued deployment of military personnel throughout Asia during the Cold War. He had begun teaching karate to personnel of the US Strategic Air Command in Japan in 1952, and when those students returned to the United States, they invited him to continue training them. Nishiyama went on to become a leading figure in the establishment of American karate. Inspired by Nishiyama, Lee incorporated legwork into his workouts. At first, he was so inflexible that he could not even touch his toes. He also set his sights on mastering the high kick, but started from a low level of skill. At Edison Tech, he tried unsuccessfully to kick an air vent about seven feet off the ground; after several months of stretching and practicing, he could kick the vent “with ease.”²¹

Just as Lee encountered new martial arts forms in the United States, he also confronted bigger, stronger fighters and came to believe that his height (5’7”) and weight (135 pounds) placed him at a disadvantage. In 1964 he moved to Oakland, California, to open a kung fu school with his friend Jimmy Lee (no relation), an accomplished martial artist who was thoroughly invested in strength training. Jimmy introduced Bruce to rigorous weight training, putting him on a program of working out each muscle group for hours.²² During his time in Oakland, Bruce became winded while fighting a challenge match. He won, but vowed to increase his endurance, and began running at least three

miles every day.²³ Lee's famously lean, ripped physique was not something he brought with him from Hong Kong; rather, it was honed in the United States.

Lee's introduction on the national stage of martial arts further demonstrates the importance of colonization, labor migration, and militarism to his development. The 1964 International Karate Championship held in Long Beach, California, was organized by Ed Parker, a highly respected practitioner of kenpo karate. Parker had grown up in Hawai'i—a melting pot of Asian ethnic groups that had migrated to the islands to provide cheap labor on the sugar plantations—which became a territory of the United States after the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy by American businessmen with the tacit support of the US military. Kenpo emerged from the intermixture of Okinawan, Japanese, and Chinese fighting styles brought together by the forces of transnational capitalism and imperialism. Lee did not compete in the Long Beach tournament, but he put on a dazzling demonstration, doing two-finger pushups and sending a man flying with a punch to the chest from just one inch away. Parker asked one of his students, Dan Inosanto, to host Lee during the tournament.

Colonialism drove the Inosanto family's migration to the United States, and the Cold War shaped Dan's martial arts experience. His father, Sebastian Inosanto, was a *pensionado*—a Filipino student sent by the colonial government to be educated in the metropole, whose duty was to return home enlightened by American ideals. Rather than return to the Philippines upon completion of his studies, Sebastian married and raised a family in Stockton, California, worked as an agricultural laborer, and joined the Filipino labor union that preceded the United Farm Workers. Dan was a gifted but undersized athlete who ran track and played running back at Whitworth College at just 125 pounds. During the summers, he trained in judo, but his martial arts did not take off until after he graduated from college, enlisted in the US Army, and joined the elite 101st Airborne Division as a paratrooper. Stationed at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, he met and trained with soldiers returning from deployments throughout Asia. Fort Campbell's martial arts school centered on karate, but combined martial arts styles from across Asia, with lessons taught by instructors using Korean, Japanese, and Okinawan styles. Drawn to the United States by colonialism and schooled in a melting pot of martial arts stirred by the Cold War, Inosanto made a lifelong quest of exploring the multiplicity of fighting styles.²⁴

Inosanto and Lee bonded as devotees of martial arts heterodoxy. Inosanto introduced Lee to a Filipino weapon, the *tabak toyok*—composed of two short, hardened wood staffs connected by a rope or chain—which was unknown in the West. He recalls that at that time, Lee was not impressed with the Filipino stick-fighting art of *kali* or *escrima*, but later began to incorporate some of its

techniques. Years later, in *Fist of Fury*, Bruce unveiled an Okinawan version of the *tabak toyok*, known as the *nunchaku*. The most captivating sequences in the film occur when he sends the *nunchaku* twirling in rapid arcs through the air and striking opponents with lightning speed. Despite being viewed in the United States as an expression of traditional kung fu, Lee's use of the *nunchaku* bore the traces of the entanglement of martial arts techniques impelled by Cold War circulations across Asia and the Pacific.

Like Inosanto, Chuck Norris also learned martial arts in the military. He joined the judo club at Osan Air Base in Korea, but was sidelined by a broken collarbone. While wandering through the village of Osan, he was amazed and fascinated by seeing Koreans "jumping up in the air and executing spectacular kicks."²⁵ Norris learned that the Koreans were practicing a style called *tang soo do*, and he began studying kicking while his shoulder healed. By the time his Korean tour of duty ended, Norris had earned a black belt in the Korean style and a brown belt in the Japanese style.²⁶

After his discharge, Norris started a "karate" school (so called because no one would recognize the name of the Korean art he had learned) and began entering tournaments in hopes of winning the trophies that he knew would help attract students. He won many national championships, in part because his Korean style surprised American fighters trained in the Japanese manner. However, as opponents became more familiar with his moves, Norris studied more forms, including different variants of karate, *hapkido*, jujitsu, and judo.²⁷ Norris's tournament nemesis, the legendary Joe Lewis, provides another example of the military origins of postwar American martial arts. Lewis, who won multiple National Karate Championships, learned the art as a US Marine based in Okinawa.²⁸

In 1967 Norris earned the crown as grand champion of the All-American Karate Championship held in Madison Square Garden. Lee congratulated Norris and struck up a conversation, which soon devolved into a sparring match that lasted until 4 a.m. in the hallway of their hotel. Back home in Southern California, Lee invited Norris to work out in his backyard, where they trained twice a week for three or four hours at a time. They exchanged techniques, with Lee showing Norris kung fu moves and Norris teaching Lee high roundhouse kicks. Norris recalls that because of Lee's Wing Chun background, "Bruce had never believed in kicking above the waist, but when I demonstrated some high spinning heel kicks, he was intrigued. Within six months he could perform the high kicks as well as I could and added them to his repertoire with tremendous proficiency."²⁹

In addition to learning non-Chinese techniques from veterans like Inosanto and Norris, Lee also collected film of the boxing champion Cassius Clay (later Muhammad Ali), and shadowboxed with the images of Ali projected onto a mirror. His admiration for Ali becomes apparent in the iconic scene in Lee's third film, *Way of the Dragon*, when Lee (Tang) fights Norris (Colt) in the Colosseum. An orientalist reading of the encounter would focus on the pitting of an Asian protagonist against a white American fighter, with Lee's victory over Norris symbolizing the triumph of East over West in Rome, the heart of Western civilization. But the film entangles Asia and the West in intriguing ways: both Colt and Tang practice Asian martial arts. More important, Colt initially gets the better of Tang, forcing the latter to reconsider his tactics. As the music swells, Tang begins to bounce lightly on the balls of his feet, his arms loose and fists held low as he dances nimbly in and out of Colt's range, orbiting around the confused *karateka*. These movements are antithetical to Wing Chun practice, in which fighters maintain their balance and move by shuffling rather than hopping about, use their hands to guard the center line of their faces and chests rather than allow them to drop to the waist, and move forward to face their opponents rather than circle them. Tang's tactical switch resembles nothing more than Ali's famous "float like a butterfly" technique, which allowed him to wear down stronger boxers by making them chase him around the ring. Tang's tactical reconsideration changes the tide of the battle, and he eventually kills Colt. Far from being a simple victory of East over West, the fight demonstrates the impossibility of neat orientalist binaries: the Chinese Tang wins by imitating an African American boxer, defeating a white American fighter who is an expert in a Japanese style.

The United States was where Lee rejected martial arts purity in favor of entangling styles and techniques, incorporating high-kicking skills learned from Japanese karate and Korean *tang soo do*, the *tabak toyok* and stick work from Filipino *kali*, and the elusiveness and fluid movements of Muhammad Ali. Lee synthesized these techniques into a new style that he called Jeet Kune Do (Way of the Intercepting Fist), which he deemed a discipline that stipulates "no style," so that it can adapt to any other style.³⁰ But it was also "no style" because it was committed to incorporating every useful style. Lee's aphorism, "Be water," conveyed Jeet Kune Do's commitment to nondogmatic adaptation. When Lee opened a kung fu school in Los Angeles's Chinatown, he installed at the entrance of his *kwoon* (studio) a tombstone inscribed with the epitaph, "In Memory of a Once Fluid Man, Crammed and Distorted by the Classical Mess."³¹ The inscription encapsulated his conviction that doggedly reproducing

the classical forms of kung fu and karate would produce stiff, wooden fighters unable to meet new challenges, and signaled his dedication to finding innovative and adaptive means of fighting. The anti-authoritarian ethos Lee adopted in the 1960s enabled him to reject martial arts orthodoxy and syncretize forms adopted from across Asia and beyond. Ironically, the United States will to empire, expressed in occupations and military deployments throughout Asia, set in motion the migrations that enabled Lee to mobilize resistance to racism and colonialism.

Entangling Race and Colonialism

Just as Lee's martial arts style hybridized forms from around the globe, his show business career entangled race, colonialism, and aesthetics in transpacific ways. Scholars operating in the traditions of Asian American, American, and Asian studies agree that in his life and films, Lee resisted racism and colonialism, but place him within differing stands of liberation struggles. Asian American and American studies scholarship emphasizes Lee's resistance to US racism, contextualizing him within the racial turmoil of the late 1960s and early 1970s United States, employing the framework of Afro-Asian solidarity, and defining colonialism in terms of Third World solidarity. For example, Yuan Shu discusses Lee's rise alongside the 1974 publication of the landmark Asian American literary anthology, *AIIEEEEE!*, and Vijay Prashad emphasizes Afro-Asian connections through global anti-imperialism.³²

As these US-based scholars suggest, Lee fully recognized the limitations of Hollywood depictions of Asian Americans and other people of color. His first Hollywood encounter occurred when he conducted a screen test for the producer William Dozier, who was considering him for the role of Number One Son in a proposed Charlie Chan television series that never materialized. The Charlie Chan films had starred a series of white actors in yellowface playing the Chinese American detective.³³ On television, the most visible Asian American character was Hop Sing on *Bonanza* (1959–73), a smiling, bowing, shuffling cook who wore his hair in a long braided queue and spoke in broken, heavily accented English. When Dozier began casting another series, *The Green Hornet*, he turned to Lee for the role of Kato, the driver and sidekick of the white hero. Lee reacted incredulously to being cast in a stereotypical role, recalling, "A producer wanted me to play a Chinese. I immediately could see the part—pigtailed, chopsticks and 'ah-so's,' shuffling obediently behind the master who has saved my life."³⁴ Lee was uninterested in "typical houseboy stuff" and told Dozier, "Look, if you [want to] sign me up with all that pigtail and hopping

around jazz, forget it.”³⁵ Kato did not wear a pigtail, hop around, or shuffle obediently behind his master. Although Kato was supposed to be the Green Hornet’s sidekick, Lee’s suaveness and fighting acumen made him the undeniable star of the show. Admirers deluged the studio with bags full of fan mail, and newspapers across the nation eagerly booked Lee for publicity interviews.

Lee struggled following ABC’s cancellation of *The Green Hornet* after one season. Limited to small on-screen roles on TV and a few films and work as a fight and stunt coordinator, he tried to create new opportunities for himself. He wrote a script for a martial arts film that was never made, *The Silent Flute*, and developed the idea for a television show called *The Warrior*, which he intended to star in as a biracial Shaolin monk wandering across the American West. However, David Carradine—a white actor who had never studied martial arts—scored the role of Caine in the series that aired as *Kung Fu*.³⁶

Lee connected Hollywood’s racism against Asians to the plights of Native Americans and African Americans. In rejecting bad roles, he insisted, “I have to be a real human being”³⁷ and noted, “Like with the Indians. You never see a human being Indian on television.”³⁸ He commented in 1969, “This was the year of the black man. The next year will be the year of the Oriental.”³⁹ He envisioned putting Asian Americans at the center of the story, in the middle of the big screen, concluding, “It’s about time we had an Oriental hero.”⁴⁰ But to become an “Oriental hero,” Lee had to leave Hollywood and return to Hong Kong.

While visiting family in Hong Kong in 1970, Lee discovered that *The Green Hornet* had been playing nonstop on local television under the title *The Kato Show*. To this audience, Kato was not a sidekick but the hero. Crowds and photographers besieged Lee, and he made multiple appearances on television talk shows. The Shaw Brothers studio, which dominated Hong Kong cinema in the 1960s, offered Lee one of its standard player contracts of \$200 per week, which he declined as paltry.⁴¹ Instead he signed a two-film deal with the Golden Harvest, headed by former Shaw Brothers executive Raymond Chow, who was looking for a star to help build his upstart studio.

The Big Boss, Lee’s first film for Golden Harvest, examines themes of diaspora and traffic. Lee plays Cheng, a young man from Hong Kong who travels to Thailand in search of employment. He lives with a group of migrants from the same hometown who form a loosely knit family, calling each other “cousin” and gossiping about news from home. The fighting scenes in the movie make stark visual distinctions between the cousins, who wear drab Chinese peasant clothing, and the Thai thugs, who menace them while clad in garish 1960s Western garb. Cheng initially refuses to fight, having promised his mother that

he would stay out of trouble. He wears a jade pendant that symbolizes his vow, but when one of the thugs breaks it, Cheng unleashes a fusillade of punches and kicks, leaving a trail of broken bodies. The ice factory turns out to be the Big Boss's front for drug smuggling, as some of the ice blocks contain packets of drugs within them. After three of the cousins are murdered for discovering the secret, Cheng struggles over whether to return home to Hong Kong to care for his elderly mother or avenge his new family in Thailand. He chooses vengeance, killing the Big Boss and accepting that his fate will be sealed by the Thai judicial system. The film is a meditation on movement and trade, diaspora, and the elasticity of human bonds over great distances. *The Big Boss* was an immediate smash, selling out midnight openings in five theaters throughout Hong Kong and shattering box office records.⁴²

In contrast to the US-centric literature's concentration on Lee's resistance to racism, Asian studies scholarship stresses Lee as a symbol of Chinese nationalism. Stephen Teo argues that the "nationalistic theme in his films [had] nothing to do with his adoptive country" of the United States, describing his appeal as "an abstract kind of cultural nationalism" binding together Chinese people across the diaspora.⁴³ Lee's next project, *Fist of Fury*, departed from *The Big Boss*'s emphasis on diaspora to take on the topic of colonialism and Chinese pride. Lee plays Chen Zhen, a student at the Jingwu school of martial arts in early twentieth-century Shanghai. The historical Jingwu school arose out of the nexus between Chinese nationalism and martial arts. In the mid- to late 1800s, Western powers and Japan forced China to sign a series of unequal treaties, under which China ceded territory, trading rights, and extraterritoriality to foreigners. The Boxer Rebellion (1900–1901), which aimed to expel outsiders and eradicate foreign influences, was named after its adherents, who practiced martial arts in the mistaken belief that they could provide protection against Western armaments. A multinational force crushed the rebellion, but the Jingwu school was created to ensure that kung fu would continue to be taught.⁴⁴ In *Fist of Fury*, Chen's teacher has been murdered by members of a rival Japanese school. His quest for vengeance fuels the plot, which moves through balletically choreographed fight scenes. Chinese national humiliation forms a major theme of the film, as two Japanese *karatekas* present students of the Jingwu school with a scroll reading "The Sick Man of Asia" (a reference to China's weakness), and a sign at a park entrance proclaims "No Dogs and Chinese Allowed." Chen restores Chinese dignity by beating the *karatekas* and forcing them to eat the scroll, and shattering the sign with a defiant high kick. Hong Kong audiences thrilled to the movie's message of Chinese patriotism. One viewer at an opening screening noted that when Chen declared, "We

are not the sick man of Asia!” the packed crowd let out a “mighty roar” and “deafening applause and stamping of feet shook the theater.” In response, a Westerner in the audience “scrunched lower in his seat, suddenly feeling very much the foreigner in an alien land.”⁴⁵

Beyond its ability to inspire Chinese audiences, *Fist of Fury* bears the traces of Lee’s transpacific journeys, complicating readings of it as a straightforward expression of Chinese pride and invoking the larger context of decolonization. Chen’s virtuoso deployment of the *nunchaku* drives two of the most striking fight scenes in the film: in the first, he defeats a score of karate and kendo fighters; in the second, he slays the *katana*-wielding Japanese master. M. T. Kato traces the evolution of Okinawan martial arts to cultural and commercial exchanges between China and the Ryukyu Islands in the fifteenth century. After consolidating the Ryukyus into a kingdom, the ruling Sho clan demilitarized the nobility and disarmed the populace. The disarmament continued under Japanese colonialism, but peasants adapted rice flails into the *nunchaku* to use in defending themselves against *katana*-armed samurai. The *nunchaku*–*katana* battle thus entangles the histories of Okinawan and Chinese anticolonialism.⁴⁶ Given the alternate genealogy of the *nunchaku* as the *tabak toyok*, the fight can also be read as a reference to Filipino resistance to the Japanese invasion in World War II. Rather than simply affirm the relationship of diasporic Chinese people with the “mother culture,” as Teo suggests, the film builds an identification through references to cultural interflows and multiple struggles against colonialism.⁴⁷

Lee’s third Hong Kong martial arts film, *Way of the Dragon*,⁴⁸ marked a dramatic departure from his prior works in two ways. First, having fulfilled his contract with Golden Harvest with two films that set box office records, he was a free agent and the biggest movie star in Asia, which enabled him to demand total artistic freedom. He and Raymond Chow formed a jointly owned company, Concord Productions, to create his next project. Lee wrote, directed, choreographed, and starred in a film that expressed his martial arts philosophy, entangling Chinese and Western martial arts techniques and bodies. Second, the film invokes imperialism and race while vigorously undermining the orientalist binary of East versus West. Partly filmed on location in Rome, *Way of the Dragon* was the first Hong Kong production to be shot in Europe.⁴⁹ Lee plays Tang Lung, a country boy from Hong Kong sent to Italy to defend a Chinese restaurant from Italian thugs who want to take it over. The opening sequence shows Tang at the airport, his foreignness portrayed by the contrast between his simple Chinese clothing and the modern 1970s garb worn by the Europeans surrounding him. One white woman gawks openly, staring wide-

eyed at this imperturbable alien. The drive from the airport into Rome takes Tang through significant sites that evoke the Eternal City's imperial past. He passes through Piazza del Popolo, which features the towering Flaminio Obelisk, plundered from Egypt after the Roman conquest. He skirts the Arch of Constantine, spanning the Via Triumphalis, through which Roman emperors led their armies when returning victorious from battle.

The film seems to set up an East–West dichotomy, but begins to resist that interpretation almost immediately, instead entangling the two through its fight scenes and use of characters. After Tang unleashes kung fu to easily handle the Italian thugs and their Western boxing, the Italian boss calls in mercenary karate experts, including Colt (Chuck Norris), who is reputed to be “America’s best.” A Japanese *karateka* challenges him for the honor of facing Tang, proclaiming, “Who can do karate better than Japanese?” (comically, the Japanese *karateka* is played by a Korean *hapkido* expert). Colt’s victory in the challenge match unsnarls martial arts ability from race and ethnicity by demonstrating that an American can master the Japanese style better than a Japanese. As discussed earlier, the showdown between Colt and Tang in the Colosseum expresses Lee’s philosophy of adopting and adapting a multiplicity of martial arts styles, but the larger point is that Chinese kung fu, Japanese karate, and Western boxing cannot stand apart but are most effective when synthesized. Beyond entangling Eastern and Western fighting styles, the film resists casting Chinese characters as purely heroic and white characters as simple villains. Mr. Woo, a fawning translator for the Italian crime boss, treacherously lures Tang into the Colosseum to be attacked by Colt. Furthermore, the conclusion of the film reveals that Uncle Wong, who had summoned Tang to Rome, has been in cahoots with the Italians all along. Though Tang must fight Colt, he does not wish to kill him, imploring the wounded American to cease combat and, after breaking his neck, mournfully covering his fallen foe as a gesture of respect.

The bodily aesthetics of *Way of the Dragon*, which introduced new forms of masculinity to Hong Kong filmmaking, evinces Lee’s transpacific nomadism. The film’s Italian setting conjures the spaghetti westerns made during the 1960s and also evokes sword and sandal epics such as *Ben-Hur* and *Spartacus*, which featured bare-chested male bodies on-screen. Tang puts Kirk Douglas to shame when he poses and flexes, naked to the waist, impossibly ripped and lean. Lee’s films introduced this brawny aesthetic to Hong Kong *wuxia* (martial arts) films, which had never before focused the gaze so centrally on an explicitly sexualized male body.⁵⁰ Prior to Lee’s return to Hong Kong, the long-running and wildly popular Wong Fei-hung (Huang Feihong) series dominated not just *wuxia* films but all of Hong Kong cinema, with ninety-nine films made

from 1949 to 1994, with the vast majority in the 1950s.⁵¹ The twenty-five Wong Fei-hung films made in 1956 alone made up 12 percent of Hong Kong's entire cinematic output that year. The series portrayed the heroic Master Wong as a gentlemanly Confucian scholar and herbal doctor who always remained properly clad.⁵² Wong embodied Chinese *wen* masculinity, which emphasizes scholarly achievement and literary refinement and stands in contrast to *wu* masculinity, which values physical or martial prowess.⁵³ In contrast to Wong's staid and proper masculinity, a "new style" of martial arts films rose to dominate the Hong Kong market in the 1970s, ushering in a new form of masculinity.⁵⁴ Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar argue that Lee's unveiling of the body emblemized a new form of "neo-*wu* masculinity" that combined the traditional Chinese *wu* with American codes of muscularity.⁵⁵ In each of his movies, Lee plays an unimposing character whose ferocity remains concealed until he rips his shirt off. The emphasis on his corporeal form is highlighted when he suffers a cut, touches his bleeding wound, and tastes his own blood—then goes off to wreak havoc. In *Way of the Dragon*, salacious stares by both an Italian prostitute and Mr. Woo make obvious that Tang's body is an object of sexual desire for both women and men.⁵⁶ Although US and Asian genealogies of Lee's body differ, his corporeal representation entangles influences from around the globe, including the somatic aesthetics of Italian peplum films, Hollywood sword and sandal epics, and Hong Kong *wuxia* productions.

The ending of *Way of the Dragon* also departs from its predecessors, both of which set up a Confucian moral universe in which Lee's character atones for his violence in order to restore the social order. *The Big Boss* concludes with Cheng surrendering to the Thai police after killing the Big Boss, and *Fist of Fury* ends with Chen essentially committing suicide by running headlong into a hail of police bullets. In contrast, at the end of *Way of the Dragon*, an onlooker muses, "In this world of guns and knives, wherever Tang Lung goes, he will always travel on his own." Indeed, as the credits roll, Tang strolls into the distance like a cowboy riding off into the sunset—evidence of how the sensibility of the Western film genre seeps into this Hong Kong *wuxia* production.

Way of the Dragon became the first Hong Kong film to gross over HK\$5 million. Despite its wild popularity, the *China Mail* deemed *Way of the Dragon* less "tight in structure" than Lee's two previous Lo Wei-directed efforts, attributing its success to Lee's status as a superstar and its "masterful" publicity campaign.⁵⁷ This opinion may have reflected the newspaper's refusal to accept the film's Western-inspired aesthetics and morality, but the box office record shows that many adoring Hong Kong fans eagerly embraced these transpacific cross-pollinations.

Lee's rising star finally caught the attention of Hollywood, which had spurned him before. His final film, *Enter the Dragon* (1973), wove Third World solidarity into the fabric of the martial arts genre, a move that Prashad attributes to the "anti-imperialism of kung fu."⁵⁸ Unpacking that anti-imperialism requires understanding how Lee's emplacements in Hong Kong and the United States entangled a critique of colonialism with the ideology of Third World liberation. Produced in partnership between Concord Productions and Warner Brothers Studios, *Enter the Dragon* bears witness to its transpacific origins. Bruce plays a character named Lee, a martial artist recruited by a shadowy British intelligence agency to infiltrate a deadly tournament sponsored by a mysterious man named Han on an island near Hong Kong. He forges alliances with two American contestants in the tournament: Roper (played by John Saxton), a white playboy running from gambling debts, and Williams (played by Jim Kelly), an African American fighter intimately familiar with police harassment.

Enter the Dragon highlights black resistance to racism as a way to explain how Williams and Lee establish a form of Afro-Asian solidarity. A flashback shows Williams in a karate dojo filled with black students, exchanging a Black Power closed-fist salute with the instructor. The dojo's logo, present on its wall and on the students' uniforms, consists of a flared king cobra within an outline of a fist filled by yellow, red, green, and black stripes. After Williams leaves the dojo, two racist police officers harass and try to arrest him, but Williams beats them and flees in their cruiser. Maryam Aziz points out that the instructor in the scene is played by Steve Sanders, who took the name Steve Muhammad upon converting to Islam and cofounded the Black Karate Federation (BKF).⁵⁹ A former marine, Muhammad learned karate in Okinawa prior to being deployed to Southeast Asia. Despite the danger he faced, he developed sympathy for the Viet Cong, stating, "As far as I am concerned, those people just want to be left alone to do their thing."⁶⁰ Muhammad, his BKF cofounders, and a host of other black teachers viewed martial arts as a way to provide opportunities for black youth, instill pride and discipline, and prepare communities to struggle for justice.⁶¹ The dojo's logo in the film is an early version of the BKF emblem, which conjures Pan-Africanism with its colors and deadliness with the snake.⁶² In the film, Lee confronts a cobra, but captures instead of killing it, then later releases it to frighten two guards who impede his progress. Rather than treat the snake as an enemy, Lee enlists it as a confederate. Williams also proves to be a trusted collaborator who gives his life to avoid imperiling Lee. *Enter the Dragon's* evocation of black antiracism can also be seen in the casting of Jim Kelly, a talented athlete who won a scholarship to play football at the University of Louisville, but left the team abruptly in protest of the coach's racist treatment

of another player. The role of Williams was his first on-screen appearance, but his charismatic turn impressed Warner Bros. enough to offer him a three-movie contract, making Kelly the first martial artist to land such a deal. Through the remainder of the 1970s, Kelly became a staple of blaxploitation films, starring in *Black Belt Jones*, *Three the Hard Way* (in which he teamed with Jim Brown and Fred Williamson), *Hot Potato*, and *Black Samurai*.⁶³

Although Roper and Williams both ally with Lee, their relationships to the local people and milieu differ markedly. Roper arrives at the Hong Kong airport with dozens of pieces of luggage and leaves in a rickshaw, trailed by four more rickshaws laden with his baggage, the drivers serving as his beasts of burden. Riding a gondola wending through the harbor, he stares impassively at his surroundings. In contrast, Williams arrives empty-handed and explores the city streets on foot. On the gondola, he glances around inquisitively and incites excited laughter by waving at onlooking children. Williams recognizes the poverty that surrounds him, exclaiming, “Ghettos are the same all over the world. They stink.” Decades later, speaking of Lee and his frustrations with Hollywood, Kelly recalled, “He knew my struggle, and I knew his.”⁶⁴

Lee and Williams’ interracial solidarity cinematically enacts the connection between the Asian American and Black Power movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s—a relationship forged within the United States through consciousness of Third World struggles in Asia and Africa. Williams’s cultural nationalism and its congruence with Asian martial arts was eminently legible to black audiences in the United States, for as Amy Abugo Ongiri notes, kung fu theater provided “visual narratives of the body as an instrument of social justice,” a tool honed through discipline and deployed by those who possessed few other means for resistance.⁶⁵

Just as *Enter the Dragon* appealed to African American audiences with a narrative of antiracism, it offered Hong Kong viewers an anticolonial message. Ironically, despite being coproduced by Warner Brothers, written and directed by white Americans, and featuring white and African American actors in key roles, *Enter the Dragon* reflects Hong Kong more directly than any of Lee’s other films. It was the first to be shot primarily in Hong Kong (*The Big Boss* was filmed in Thailand, *Fist of Fury* in Macau, and *Way of the Dragon* in Italy). In addition, the actor who played the Han, Shek Kin (also known as Shih Kien or Shi Jian), was a well-known face reprising a familiar role. The sixty-year-old actor was an iconic villain, having repeatedly faced off against Wong Fei-hung in the immensely popular series of movies, and a fan favorite because he always accepted his defeat graciously and reformed his wicked ways.⁶⁶ The film’s anti-imperialism consists in its erosion of colonial authority. Han’s

island lies partially outside the jurisdiction of British authorities, and the agency that recruits Lee acknowledges that it cannot enforce laws, but only gathers intelligence. Lee uncovers Han's drug dealing and sex trafficking—bringing to light what the agency only suspected. Furthermore, only after Lee kills Han does the assistance promised by the agency arrive. As the helicopters fly into view, Lee surveys the carnage left on the island, and he shakes his head ruefully, knowing that he could never have counted on them. Lee proves himself more powerful than the British by accomplishing what they could not, doing so with his bare fists and feet. The portrayal of an ill-equipped Asian man triumphing where modern Western military technology had failed also raised the specter of the Vietnam War,⁶⁷ for the United States signed the Paris Peace Accords and nearly completed the withdrawal of its troops from Southeast Asia in the same year that *Enter the Dragon* was released.

American audiences flocked to *Enter the Dragon*, which hit number one in its first week in wide distribution, spent three weeks atop the charts, and nine weeks in the top ten.⁶⁸ *Variety* raved, “Lee socks over a performance seldom equaled in action.”⁶⁹ The *New York Times* concurred, declaring, “The picture is expertly made and well-meshed; it moves like lightning and brims with color,” and calling Lee “a fine actor” who delivers a “downright fascinating” performance.⁷⁰ Bruce Lee was unable to appreciate the popularity of his first American film, because by the time it was released, he was dead at the age of thirty-two. Without having been immersed in transpacific currents, Lee might never have apostatized from martial arts orthodoxy, developed his iconic body, connected antiracism with anticolonialism, or remade both US and Hong Kong cinema. Viewing the entangled figure of Lee through a transpacific lens makes clear the necessity of employing an intellectually itinerant method that enmeshes readings from American, Asian American, and Asian studies scholarship to reveal how it conjoins tensions, contradictions, connections, and multiplicities. Bruce Lee's nomadic crossings—or “spooky actions at a distance”—allowed him to achieve what no other martial artist or actor—Asian or otherwise—had ever accomplished before: entangling fighting styles, corporeal aesthetics, and struggles for justice from around the world, and in so doing, becoming a global icon.

Notes

- I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers, the *AQ* editorial board, audience members at presentations at American Studies Network conference, University of the Ryukyus, Doshisha University, University of Denver, and especially the editors of this special issue for their commentary and suggestions.
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 15. Sylvia Chong, *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 211–12.
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