HONG KONG NEW WAVE *WUXIA PIAN* FILMS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO

HONG KONG'S NATIONAL AGENCY DURING THE 1980s AND EARLY 1990s

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HONG KONG NEW WAVE *WUXIA PIAN* FILMS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO HONG KONG'S NATIONAL AGENCY DURING THE 1980S AND EARLY 1990S

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Mark Walters, son of Dr. Frank Walters and Mrs. Carol Walters, was born October 7, 1980, in Lafayette, Indiana. He graduated from Auburn High School in 1998. Mark then attended Auburn University and graduated magna cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Mass Communication in August, 2003. After producing videos for the College of Engineering and the English as a Second Language Department, Mark began his two years of study in the Department of Communication and Journalism at Auburn University in August, 2005.

THESIS ABSTRACT

HONG KONG NEW WAVE *WUXIA PIAN* FILMS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO HONG KONG'S NATIONAL AGENCY DURING THE 1980S AND EARLY 1990S

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This thesis uses a national agency approach to analyze seminal Hong Kong New Wave *wuxia pian* films from directors Tsui Hark and Cheng Xiaodong. Martial arts films are a popular genre of films in Hong Kong, and *wuxia pian* films comprise a unique sub-genre that use wire-assisted choreography, special effects, and fantasy elements. Hark and Cheng both began their careers with *wuxia pian* films and continued to work in that genre throughout their careers. The popularity and critical acclaim of their films within such a long standing and traditional genre is significant, and their visual styles have influenced countless martial arts films from countries all over the world.

Using two films by Hark and three films by Cheng, made between the years of 1979 and 1992, this thesis will analyze the films according to their visual elements, generic elements, and production elements in order to assess their contribution to Hong Kong's national agency. This thesis concludes that the *wuxia pian* films of Hark and Cheng represent a genre of film unique to Hong Kong during the 1980s and early 1990s and that they helped define life in Hong Kong during a period of transition and uncertainty through their visual elements and inclusion of themes relevant to Hong Kong audiences.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The fast-paced world of contemporary Hong Kong cinema has produced films that are exceptionally imaginative. From their emotional spontaneity to their sporadic bursts of physical action to their ability to showcase a unique blend of multi-talented performers, Hong Kong films overflow with dynamism, unparalleled action aesthetics, and good old fashioned violence. Of the films produced, I am particularly drawn to the *wuxia pian* films of the Hong Kong New Wave. The Hong Kong New Wave began in 1979, and its unique visual style and reliance on local themes continued into the early 1990s. Radically different from the *gongfu* (kung fu) films of Jackie Chan and Jet Li, *wuxia pian* films are temporarily differentiated and defined as action-esque films inconsistent with reality. Eschewing grounded, complex sequences of martial arts interactions in favor of gravity-defying scenes of swordplay, *wuxia pian* films represent what is fantastically possible only in film.

Before delving too far into an analysis of seminal *wuxia pian* films, it is important to define major terms associated with the genre. To begin, the term *wuxia pian* is difficult to grasp because of the variety of translations. It is often synonymous with swordplay, martial arts, or chivalry, translations which are not far from the literal meanings of the individual written Chinese characters (Chan, 2001). *Wu* refers to aspects of the military or martial arts (Manser, 1999). *Xia*, derived from *xiake*, refers to chivalrous individuals and

swordsmen in old times (Manser, 1999). Finally, *pian* is translated as "a piece of writing" (Manser, 1999). Therefore, *wuxia pian* refers more to novels and written stories than films. However, characteristics ranging from character types to narrative themes to descriptions or depictions of gravity-defying martial arts are common in both media.

Considering the translations and those film elements established through a strong relationship with the original stories, this thesis will examine two films from Tsui Hark and three films from Cheng Xiaodong, both prominent Hong Kong film directors. Their *wuxia pian* films premiered at a time when Hong Kong society had to face its multifaceted nature and desperately needed a voice (Kar, 2001). Therefore, not only are they seen as a distinct form of martial arts cinema, but they are representative of Hong Kong during a major transitional period. This transitional period was due to the re-emergence of the Cantonese dialect in popular culture, Hong Kong's rise on the international stage, and the looming changeover from British to Chinese rule. The 1997 changeover, decided in 1984 after talks between England and China (Wong, 2004), saw Hong Kong handed back to China after existing as a British colony for 155 years. It was a major source of anxiety for the residents of Hong Kong (Ching, 1985).

Key Visual Elements

In addition to their importance to Hong Kong, *wuxia pian* films feature attractive visual elements as well. First, as previously mentioned, *wuxia pian* films differ from traditional martial arts films in that they incorporate fantasy elements such as magic. Finally, the action, combined with cinematography and editing, is highly stylized and incredibly fast. These elements have led to their popularity on an international scale.

Fantasy elements prove to be the most compelling aspects of *wuxia pian* films. While they are often based on real people, places, and events, the addition of fantasy into *wuxia pian* films gives filmmakers more creative freedom to reframe history in a culturally based method using genre conventions such as mystical characters and superhuman abilities. For example, Tsui Hark's 1983 film *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* is based on the sacred mountains of Sichuan Province in the Southwestern part of China, but Hark used the familiar setting as a backdrop from which he launched criticisms aimed at the current state of Hong Kong politics (Chen, 1996). Similarly, King Hu's 1990 film *Swordsman* comments on the upcoming handover of Hong Kong from British to Chinese rule using the Ming Dynasty as its frame of reference (Sanjuro, 2002a). It is embedded political and cultural references such as these that give *wuxia pian* films added substance, meaning, and importance to their Hong Kong audience.

Wuxia pian films have an unparalleled fantasy-induced visual appeal. As Sarkar states, "Watching the *Swordsman* films [a trilogy of *wuxia pian* films] of the early 1990s is often a breathtaking experience" (2001, p. 165). The films feature complex storylines set in the fictional-historic past and are populated with a myriad of culturally-based characters such as heroic swordsmen, all-powerful eunuchs, and bi-gendered villains. The pace is fast, and the editing, primarily during fight sequences, is quick and often jarring. While many dismiss these types of films as pure commercial garbage (Bordwell, 2000), these films are made by filmmakers who are keenly aware of the possibilities of the medium.

Additionally, there are strong parallels between the filmmaking styles of Hong Kong New Wave action film directors and the actual physical execution of martial arts. For example, in analyzing Tsui Hark's 1995 *wuxia pian* film *The Blade* (*Dao*), Teo (2001) comments on its quick cuts and phenomenal sense of speed. Likewise, Teo (2001) alludes to Hark's use of abrupt emotional shifts within his films, noting that this has brought him his fair share of detractors and critics. Lastly, Teo (2001) describes Hark's use of subjective camera angles during fight scenes to portray the beauty and violence of martial arts. These filmmaking techniques are the best use of the medium of film to capture and emulate human physical action, specifically *gongfu*, through dynamic camera movements and fast-paced editing.

In one sense, films are a way to capture action as it occurs in reality. As Bordwell (2001) explains, Hollywood films often rely on camera tricks to simulate action and chaos, whereas Hong Kong action films rely on an actor's physical ability to demonstrate action. In *wuxia pian* films, the camera is in constant motion to capture movement in such a way that enhances its form as well as its physical outcome. In other words, not only is a particular action showcased, but special attention is paid to the physical performance of the actor on the receiving end of a kick or punch. Camera tricks are not used to simulate action, but to enhance the action. Whether employing computer generated imagery, stop animation, wires, or relying on real stunts, *wuxia pian* films use a variety of methods to create their fantasy worlds. In the second sense, *wuxia pian* films emulate human physical action through their pacing. Much like martial arts routines punctuated by poses, *wuxia pian* films are often frenetic, yet they are punctuated with pauses that consist of sustained

emotional tones. In that way, *wuxia pian* films are mentally and physically involving films due to the physical nature in which they are acted, shot, and edited.

Significance

The significance of *wuxia pian* films in cinema cannot be denied. Their importance can first be seen by looking at China's attempts to duplicate the critical and financial success of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* in 2000. Martial arts films are such a staple and well-known element of Chinese cinema that recent forays into the genre have since been made by Zhang Yimou (*Hero*, 2002; *House of Flying Daggers*, 2004; *Curse of the Golden Flower*, 2006), Feng Xiaogang (*The Banquet*, 2006), and Chen Kaige (*The Promise*, 2005), directors with no prior experience in martial arts filmmaking. Their efforts succeeded in bringing widespread international attention to Chinese cinema and illustrate that, as Zhen states, "among all the film genres invented and reinvented in the twentieth century in different parts of the world, the 'martial arts' film, with its foregrounded body language and spectacular visual choreography, is one of the few genres with such far-reaching popularity" (2005, p. 52). As such, they have greatly contributed to the transnational flow of action aesthetics. In addition to being rooted in tradition and history, these contemporary martial arts films draw much of their style and action from the Hong Kong New Wave *wuxia pian* films of Tsui Hark and Cheng Xiaodong. Cheng, an action choreographer in addition to a director, lent his talents to all three of Yimou's martial arts films. In this way, Hark and Cheng set the standard for contemporary and more internationally successful martial arts films.

The films are also important from a purely visual standpoint. According to Kar (2001), there has been much debate on the significance of Hong Kong New Wave films. Compared with representative films of the French New Wave, Hong Kong New Wave cinema, which emerged in 1979, was seen by some as aesthetically stale. This could not be further from the truth, for, as Kar (2001) illustrates, this new style of filmmaking ushered in a visual revolution, a hyper-kinetic aesthetic style that was breathtaking and mesmerizing. Bordwell (2001) credits this new style of action as one that involves rather than undermines the actor by showcasing the realism of the stunts. This is again in stark contrast to Hollywood films that rely heavily on computer generated imagery, taking the potential power of an actor's performance and placing it in the hands of visual effects technicians. Reliance on physical stunts was also a commercial tool used by Hong Kong filmmakers to differentiate their films from older Hong Kong films and competing international films and to attract a wider audience (Bordwell, 2000).

Some Hong Kong action films, however, are not innocent of sidestepping or faking action scenes. Andrew Lau's 1998 film *The Storm Riders* was an exercise in commercially viable and believable visual effects. It was followed in 2001 by Tsui Hark's remake of his 1983 masterpiece *Zu: Warriors of the Magic Mountain*. Called *The Legend of Zu*, it also relied heavily on computer generated special effects, including computer generated humans. The result was a commercial failure (Chung, 2001). Regardless, these two examples are *wuxia pian* films, based on comic books and martial arts novels respectively, and the use of technology to enhance the actors' performances is compatible with fantasy-themed films. In other words, while both Hong Kong New Wave and

contemporary *wuxia pian* films relied on varying degrees of special effects, it is done in the context of fantasy and therefore used to enhance action aesthetics rather than simulate action.

Furthermore, Sarkar (2001) credits this visual style as important to film-based research of Hong Kong culture. In other words, approaching research using films that feature stylized and contemporary action choreography set in a stable and culturally understood past is useful because of the ever-changing and dynamic nature of Hong Kong itself and because of the territory's tumultuous history. The films feature culturally understood frames of reference as well as visual styles that complement Hong Kong society. Combined with the narrative and visual possibilities of fantasy elements, the result is a form of self reflexivity on the current state of Hong Kong society that is often not possible with films set in the contemporary, yet unstable, city of Hong Kong.

This leads to the final point of significance, one that gets to the heart of the importance of Hong Kong New Wave *wuxia pian* films. As products of the Hong Kong film industry, New Wave *wuxia pian* films represent Hong Kong society and Hong Kong culture. Prior to this time period, films made in Cantonese, the dialect of Chinese spoken in Hong Kong, had been in a steady state of decline due to competition from foreign films and the complete lack of contemporary-minded Hong Kong filmmakers (Kar, 2001). This changed in 1979 with the emergence of Hong Kong's film school generation. Kar (2001) describes Hong Kong New Wave film directors as addressing "the city's tensions in several Hong Kong films that conveyed a strong sense of the city's contemporary rhythms" (p. 31). Rodriguez (2001) describes New Wave cinema as specifically related to

the Hong Kong experience despite the films being influenced by world cinema. In other words, Hong Kong films began to offer something that foreign films could not - a sense of national identity reflected in Cantonese-language films.

The significance of Hong Kong New Wave *wuxia pian* films lies both in their visual presentation and close relationship with the cosmopolitan culture of Hong Kong in the 1980s and early 1990s. Additionally, they continue to serve as benchmarks of quality by which more contemporary *wuxia pian* films from prominent mainland Chinese directors have been measured (Zhen, 2005). However, they are primarily significant because of the role they played in Hong Kong's changing society. As a result of Hong Kong beginning to come to terms with its own multicultural nature, prominent filmmakers used their international training and knowledge of filmmaking styles to create a visually unique brand of action which came to represent Hong Kong life through reliance on fantasy elements, hyper-kinetic action aesthetics, a shared history among Hong Kong citizens, and Cantonese as a common dialect (Kar, 2001; Lo, 2005; Rodriguez, 2001; Sarkar, 2001).

Methodology

A national agency approach represents a new and unique way to conduct film research. As Berry (1998) describes it, this approach views films as discursive texts which contribute to the formation of collective identity and agency. As Hong Kong during the 1980s faced an identity crisis and uncertainty regarding the future, an overarching national agency approach examines how *wuxia pian* films defined life during this turbulent time period. Berry (1998) describes it further by relating it to a more

traditional national cinemas approach, stating the two approaches are related in that national cinemas are the building blocks of a national agency. In other words, while films are products of culture, history, and modes of production (Corrigan, 2001), they are not simply reactions to time and conditions but are also instrumental in acting to define the collective experiences of individuals.

Hong Kong films are described as the most commercial films in the world as they must appeal to each member of a relatively small film community (Bordwell, 2000). As such, they rely on familiar conventions to attract audiences. According to Bordwell (2000), Hong Kong films during the 1980s were unique in terms of their visual content, genre conventions, and production aspects such as casting. These conventions, rather than acting as constraints, enabled filmmakers to continually re-invent and re-invigorate Hong Kong cinema (Bordwell, 2000). Directors such as Tsui Hark and Cheng Xiaodong were famous for their abilities to re-imagine conventions despite working within the Hong Kong film industry. Therefore, to understand how *wuxia pian* films defined a national agency for Hong Kong, it is important to analyze their formal elements, genre conventions, and productions aspects, a three-tier framework as defined by Bordwell (2000), using sub-methodologies such as formalism, genre criticism, and auteur theory.

A formalist approach is useful because film is first and foremost an art form. As Bordwell (2001) explains, form refers to the "overall system of relations that we can perceive among the elements in the whole film" (p. 40). Likening it to historical poetics, Jenkins (1995) describes a formalist approach as one that examines a film's motifs, iconographies, and stylistics. It encompasses "descriptive accounts (how artworks *have*

been constructed) and prescriptive arguments (how artworks *should be* constructed)" (Jenkins, 1995, p. 100). As such, formalism is a limiting approach in itself, leaving little room to account for the subtleties of a film not found in its visual form. This approach is necessary, however, because *wuxia pian* films have distinct formal elements. They can be examined from a visual standpoint by looking both at individual parts of the *mise-en-scene* as well as how they work together to create unique works of art. *Wuxia pian* films, for example, can be individually examined from the perspective of costumes, use of color, settings and locations, styles of martial arts, and recurring themes. Texts will therefore be analyzed in part according to their form, with a greater emphasis on how the formal elements combine to create a style of filmmaking which defines the Hong Kong experience.

Formalism is closely related to the idea of genre, because, as Zhen states, "the birth of a genre is more about the production of form than content" (2005, p. 57). Whereas formalism is more focused on film as a general art form, a genre approach allows a researcher to focus on specific formal elements that define a group of films as being distinct and separate from others. Bordwell (2000) claims that genres are closely tied to familiarity and conventions, strengthening their relationship to a particular nation and its history. Genres are also closely related to the idea of narrative economy, or the reusing of story elements and icons for the purpose of quickly producing films. As Hutchings (1995) states, this practice not only solidified genre films, but it was simply a byproduct of the business of filmmaking. Theorists such as Andre Bazin, however, saw genres as a combination of the mythic and the historic rather than a group of films with

similar formal elements (Hutchings, 1995). For the purposes of this thesis then, films will be analyzed according to genre conventions as well as their evolution from a mytho-historical perspective in order to understand both how conventions of *wuxia pian* films are strongly related to Hong Kong and how they have changed in order to suit a more local audience.

Going further than an examination of the films' formal and generic elements will be a focus on Tsui Hark and Cheng Xiaodong as auteurs. Auteur theory, according to Hollows and Jancovich (1995), seeks to understand how filmmakers can retain their own distinct styles while working within larger film industries. This is an essential sub-methodology to this thesis as it takes creative control out of the hands of more abstract entities, such as nations, and places it in the hands of filmmakers. As such, filmmaking is a combination of deliberate choices during every phase of production that helps shape a national agency. Auteur theory's limitation, however, comes from the idea that filmmakers rarely have complete control over their films, except in rare circumstances (Corrigan, 2001). Both Hark and Cheng were strong creative forces in Hong Kong during the 1980s. Their experience enabled them to create unique films that served a more local audience and defined Hong Kong's national agency.

This thesis will examine how New Wave *wuxia pian* films contributed to the national agency of Hong Kong during the 1980s and early 1990s. In writing specifically about Hong Kong films, Bordwell (2000) singles them out for their visual content, genre conventions, and production aspects. Therefore, using Bordwell's (2000) three-tier structure as a framework for analysis, sub-methodologies including formalism, genre

criticism, and auteur theory will be used to explain how *wuxia pian* films, a distinct national cinema of Hong Kong, contributed to a larger national agency during Hong Kong's period of transition and uncertainty.

Texts

Though his film output has lessened since the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China, Tsui Hark remains a visible figure in the Hong Kong film world. Hark worked as an actor and assumed multiple responsibilities behind the camera as director, writer, and producer in multiple genres ranging from romantic comedies to contemporary action films to period martial arts films since his directorial debut in 1979 with *The Butterfly Murders*. He is an intensely visual filmmaker, credited by Bordwell (2005) as having the ability to utilize international filmmaking trends to enhance his own style. His forays into the *wuxia pian* genre have produced entertaining, important, and classic works.

The Butterfly Murders premiered at a time when international filmmaking trends had begun influencing recent graduates of film schools as well as young filmmakers working in television in Hong Kong. Bordwell and Thompson (2001) refer to *The Butterfly Murders* as a "futuristic wuxia pian" (p. 657). Kar (2001) describes it as an amalgamation of Japanese *manga* (comic books), Hollywood science fiction, and traditional Chinese themes, referring to it as a fresh take on an old genre. The story revolves around mysterious deaths at Shum Castle, deaths which appear to be caused by butterflies. These events prompt investigations by various martial arts clans, putting them in danger of the film's true villain. Like many films of the genre, the villain's hope is to eliminate all other warrior clans and become the number one practitioner of martial arts.

Though rough by the standards set by later films, *The Butterfly Murders* represents the true beginning of Hong Kong New Wave themes and action aesthetics.

Hark soon refined his style and directed *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* in 1983. The film, as explained by Teo (2001), is an attempt at a national style of cinema due to its allusions to traditional film genres, but its climate of influence and production (the 1960s to the 1980s) assures that the film remains rooted in contemporary Hong Kong society. This is echoed by Lo (2005) who describes the film's breakneck speed and rapid-fire editing as products of a Hong Kong in chaos and transition. Like *The Butterfly Murders* before it, *Zu* again stresses the pointlessness of clan feuds, though from a much more humorous perspective, amidst more sophisticated special effects and action choreography. The film's opening battle can only be described as color-coded, as hundreds of warriors converge on a battlefield wearing brightly colored uniforms to signify their clan allegiance. Rather than concern themselves with trivial clan feuds, the film's heroes unite to destroy an ever-growing evil force.

Similar to Hark, Cheng Xiaodong performs a variety of film-related duties, including actor, director, producer, writer, stunt performer, and action choreographer. He is credited alongside Hark as one of the prime filmmakers responsible for revitalizing the *wuxia pian* genre, transforming it for the new cosmopolitan Hong Kong society (Lo, 2005; Sarkar, 2001). He often worked alongside Hark, usually as director or action choreographer, and their collaborations have produced some of the most memorable and dizzying *wuxia pian* films in Hong Kong film history.

Duel to the Death (1983) marked the directorial debut of Cheng Xiaodong. The film centers around an upcoming match between master swordsmen from Japan and China and is an amazing mixture of actual physical abilities and highly stylized, wire-enhanced acrobatics. Interestingly, there is little written about *Duel to the Death*. This lack of research undermines its importance as a seminal *wuxia pian* film. Though its cast is entirely composed of Chinese actors, its *Japan versus China* theme is evident of a larger transnational flow of cultural forms (Morris, 2004). In this case, Cheng utilizes action aesthetics from Japanese *chambara* (samurai) films, but with a decidedly unique twist that is highly bombastic.

A Chinese Ghost Story (1987), produced by Tsui Hark, deviates from the dizzying masculinity set forth in *Duel to the Death*, opting instead for a slightly more subdued *wuxia pian* film that revolves around a man's love affair with a female ghost. Nevertheless, Bordwell and Thompson (2001) describe the film as "an extravaganza of supernatural martial arts" (p. 657). More so than that, however, the film represents a balanced *mise-en-scene* with all of the visual elements equally represented in the finished film (Yau, 2001). Finally, like other films before it, *A Chinese Ghost Story* is a perfect blend of international film styles and Hong Kong sensibilities and is both uniquely Hong Kong in nature yet appealing to other cultures. An (2001) describes the film's inter-Asia appeal as the major factor for its success in other Asian countries during the 1980s.

Lastly, *Swordsman II* (1992) premiered near the end of Hong Kong's New Wave, providing one last breath for *wuxia pian* films (Sanjuro, 2002b). Also produced by Hark, *Swordsman II* continues the familiar theme of warring clans. Gaining power with each

victory is the man known as Asia the Invincible, played by actress Brigitte Lin. To gain ultimate power from the Sacred Scrolls, Asia must castrate himself. This loss of sexual identity is interpreted in a multitude of ways. Sarkar (2001) views amputations and castrations in *Swordsman II* and other films of the genre as narrative representations of apprehension toward future relations between the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Teo (2001) takes a more gendered approach, viewing Asia's transmutation as a positive change in which he/she becomes both a sexually desirable figure for men and an image of power for women. These complex themes involving identity, gender, and cultural norms speak to the maturity of the genre by the 1990s in the capable hands of Cheng and Hark.

Altogether, these texts both represent Hong Kong during the 1980s and early 1990s and visually and thematically reflect on Hong Kong's fast-paced lifestyle and feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. The selection of texts covering a 13 year period ensures, as Corrigan (2001) advises, that one can argue for a relationship between a group of films and a specific culture. The *wuxia pian* films of Tsui Hark and Cheng Xiaodong feature similar themes that, when taken as a whole, represent a culturally specific genre unique to Hong Kong. Their stories, while often based on real people and events, exist in the imaginary *jianghu* world, also known as the world of martial arts. As such, characters often possess fantastic martial arts abilities which are portrayed using a variety of special effects techniques. Finally, they represent a uniquely Hong Kong genre due to their choice of language, cultural elements, and sense of speed, both in their editing and action choreography.

Literature Review

The *wuxia pian* genre includes a wide variety of films that stretch as far back as China's film industry. They are based both on historical events and novels as well as more contemporary martial arts novels. It is a uniquely Chinese genre whose *Chineseness* is enhanced by the history involved not only in the adaptation of such stories into films, but also in the production aspects of the films. As Hollywood standardized all aspects of filmmaking into distinct groups, so too did the Chinese and Hong Kong film industries come to rely on experts highly skilled in all aspects of action choreography including choreographing individual fight scenes, performing stunts, and operating wires to enhance the fantastic elements of *wuxia pian* films (Wu & Chan, 2002).

The first *wuxia pian* film is widely believed to be *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple*, adapted from a popular novel and filmed in 1928 by Zhang Shichuan (Gravestock, 2006). Not only was it the first to combine martial arts with concepts of magic, but it also featured early uses of special effects. As Zhen (2005) elaborates, this film, along with 240 other *wuxia pian* films produced between 1928 and 1932, were instrumental in establishing fledgling film industries and instilling in people the benefits of practicing martial arts. Though this initial surge of martial arts films was relatively short-lived, its impact lasted for decades to come. Perhaps its most notable innovation for Chinese film was its manipulation of the body (Zhen, 2005). Prior to this time, performances were very restrained and elegant. Early martial arts films showed bodies in motion and were popular as a result of the powerful image they created of Chinese culture.

The genre went through significant changes in the 1950s and 1960s, finally maturing in the 1960s with the advent of new film technologies that allowed filmmakers to more realistically portray superhuman feats of strength and agility. Chief among these filmmakers was King Hu, director of such films as *A Touch of Zen* (1969) and *Come Drink With Me* (1966). The former, recognized with the Technical Grand Prize at the 1975 Cannes Film Festival, was also instrumental in setting many conventions of the genre still prevalent today. It was also one of many films that demonstrated Hu's use of Chinese history in enhancing the impact of his films (Lu, 2005). The latter featured the debut performance of actress Cheng Peipei as the famous character Golden Swallow, establishing the importance and strength of female characters in the martial arts world. King Hu's films continue to serve as reference points for up-and-coming *wuxia pian* directors. Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* contains many visual references to earlier genre films. The treetop fight in the bamboo forest between Chow Yunfat and Zhang Ziyi is an allusion to Hu's film *A Touch of Zen* while Zhang Ziyi's brawl in the restaurant strongly echoes Hu's *Dragon Gate Inn* (Lu, 2005).

Wuxia pian films took on other forms during this time. Renowned director Zhang Che specialized in chivalry films with hyper-masculine themes. His films, with their depictions of violence, extreme brotherhood, and homoerotic undercurrents, were strong influences on contemporary directors like John Woo. Additionally, the action, in comparison to later directors like Tsui Hark and Cheng Xiaodong, is rhythmic in that it follows a set beat to maintain a consistent speed. As such, the action choreography is focused on showcasing the physical execution of practical martial arts styles (Lo, 2005).

The films that are important to this thesis are Hong Kong New Wave *wuxia pian* films that came into being during the late 1970s and continued throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. As Rodriguez (2001) explains, this period was marked by a burst of creative energy and the fusion of international film styles to create something unique. More specifically, it was during this period of expansion and creativity that Hong Kong became heavily influenced by Hollywood and the Japanese film industry. As Yeh and Davis (2002) state, the Hong Kong film industry began to look primarily to Japan as a business model and an ideal source for both thematic influences and onscreen and offscreen talent. This stream of influence is not one way, however. Morris (2004) details the long history of action cinema as a transnational product, involving the sharing of both talent and techniques. Bordwell (2005) agrees with this transnational flow, but credits many Hong Kong New Wave directors for being able to spin international influences to their own style. One of those directors is Tsui Hark. Not only was Hark influenced by international film styles, but he was heavily invested in both past and present Hong Kong film culture (Teo, 2001). This was true of all New Wave action directors, including such famous filmmakers as Cheng Xiaodong and Yuen Kwai.

In contrast to directors like Zhang Che, Tsui Hark, and Cheng Xiaodong who worked with period *wuxia pian* films, John Woo utilized *wuxia pian* sensibilities in contemporary action films. His films *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), *A Better Tomorrow II* (1987), *The Killer* (1989), *Bullet in the Head* (1990), and *Hard Boiled* (1992) feature hyper-masculine characters like those found in Zhang Che's films, but their weapons of choice are guns rather than swords or their own fists. What really connects his films to

traditional *wuxia pian* films, however, are familiar character types. Like Hark, Woo "intercut[s] shots displaying different rates of slow motion . . . . owes a debt to the tradition of amplifying an action's emotional overtones by playing with speed of motion" (Bordwell, 2001, p. 89). Not only do they serve to amplify the emotions, but this same tactic is used to create an emotional connection between the viewer and the heroic characters onscreen.

More recently, mainland Chinese directors like Zhang Yimou and Cheng Kaige, both renowned for their social dramas and politically critical films, have directed *wuxia pian*-esque films after Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* became an international sensation thanks to its transnational sensibilities and pan-Asian cast (Lu, 2005). Contrary to the films of Hark and Cheng, which were able to fuse Hong Kong sensibilities with a culturally understood past, the *Chineseness* in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* comes less from taking on important and contemporary Chinese themes and more from surface features and perfunctory allusions to the films of King Hu. In contrast, Zhang Yimou's film *Hero* was controversial because of his appearing to justify hundreds of years of Chinese despotism and violence. His clear political references resonated, for better or worse, with many Chinese viewers, whereas the film's striking visuals were its primary selling point on an international scale (Maio, 2006). Finally, Cheng Kaige's more recent offering titled *The Promise* did little to improve on Zhang Yimou's attempts. Described by Maio (2006) as "a movie that will likely leave most audience members, from Shanghai to Chicago, scratching their heads in bafflement and

disappointment" (p. 155), *The Promise* is an overwrought, effects-filled attempt at appealing to both Chinese and international audiences without regard for either group.

Two other important films in the *wuxia pian* genre are Tsui Hark's *The Blade* (1995) and *Seven Swords* (2005). A loose remake of Zhang Che's *The One-Armed Swordsman* (1967), *The Blade* revolves around the *jianghu* world as it is seen through the eyes of a female spectator. It is very much a dark vision of a multicultural China at odds with local sensibilities, in essence reflecting an incompatibility between *Chineseness*/tradition and a mainland China playing host to multiple groups of foreigners (Teo, 2001). As Teo (2001) alludes, it is a deconstruction of *wuxia pian* films, operating as a post-modern critique of the genre. Through unbelievably fast fight scenes and the omnipotent status of the female storyteller, the world of *jianghu* becomes more of an abstract and unrealistic state of mind rather than a culturally understood concept.

Hark countered his own dark vision 10 years later when he directed *Seven Swords*. With little attention in academic research, *Seven Swords* has not been properly analyzed as a *wuxia pian* film. That prospect, however, is beyond the scope of this thesis. While the action is similar in visual style to *The Blade*, the film once again features the theme of internal strife among groups. In the film, a government decree places a ban on the practice of martial arts and promises rewards to those who cut off the heads of those illegally practicing martial arts, persuading disparate individuals to come together in an effort to subdue a powerful warrior clan. *Seven Swords* is thematically a return to form for Hark as he once again tackles the problems facing the relationship between Hong Kong and China

and the fate of Hong Kong society as a whole. Visually, however, the film labors under a slow pace and longer running time.

Research Questions

As many researchers have pointed out, Hong Kong during the 1980s and 1990s was highly influenced by a number of other cultures and the film industry was influenced by international film styles (Lo, 2005; Morris, 2004). However, directors like Tsui Hark and Cheng Xiaodong were able to produce representative Hong Kong films by creatively using international influences. For example, Bordwell (2001) refers to expressive amplification and intense cinematic expression, or Hong Kong cinema's ability to magnify the most arousing sections of action scenes for dramatic effect. This point leads to my first research question:

RQ1: How do Hong Kong New Wave *wuxia pian* films, highly influenced by international filmmaking styles, maintain a Hong Kong identity?

However, there are a number of skeptics of Hong Kong New Wave *wuxia pian* films. Lo (2005) sees the frequent over-reliance on special effects and increasing computer technology as creating a void of *Chineseness*. Rather than showcasing the abilities of actors and action performers, special effects take the lead and speak to a gradual virtualization of Chinese martial arts. To Lo, the very element that differentiated Hong Kong cinema from other film industries, namely its action aesthetics, has now become its own downfall as special effects can render anyone a martial artist. However, as Sarkar (2001) explains, the films nevertheless tackle important themes, usually related

to Hong Kong's relationship with Chinese authority and search for an identity. These points lead to my second research question:

RQ2: How did New Wave *wuxia pian* films, with their reliance on local themes and special effects to create a fantasy world, contribute to Hong Kong's national agency in the 1980s and early 1990s?

Considering these research questions, this thesis will attempt to examine how Hong Kong New Wave *wuxia pian* films from Tsui Hark and Cheng Xiaodong contributed to Hong Kong's national agency. Of Tsui Hark's films, *The Butterfly Murders* (1979) and *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* (1983) will be used as representative texts. Of Cheng Xiaodong's films, *Duel to the Death* (1983), *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987), and *Swordsman II* (1992) will be examined.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Hong Kong cinema has had a tumultuous history given its proximal, political, and cultural relationship to mainland China as well as its status as a British colony and a hub of international influences. Yau (2001) succinctly sums up Hong Kong's position in both the film world as well as the global economic world by describing the city as the former epicenter of United States-Asian relations since the end of World War II. This position was cause for anxiety prior to the 1997 changeover from British to Chinese rule. According to Ching (1985), China held the position that Hong Kong was never a separate territory and that China had a sovereign right to Hong Kong. Ching (1985) also explains that anxiety among Hong Kong residents related to mainland China as a Communist country. As many residents were born in China after the Communist Revolution of 1949, there was a strong element of distrust toward Communist China. Residents were even distrustful of British authority as negotiations between England and China were held in secret and without Hong Kong representation (Ching, 1985).

This anxiety extended into other institutions as well. Conner (1997) explains that stipulations regarding the makeup of the Hong Kong legal system following the transition would leave the door open for Chinese influence in local courts. Also as a result of the looming changeover, land values and stock prices plunged. Business owners were facing economic despair and a falling Hong Kong dollar and thus attempted to relocate to other

countries (Ching, 1985; So, 1997). These examples illustrate that feelings of distrust and anxiety were frequent in Hong Kong prior to the 1997 changeover from British to Chinese rule.

In terms of the film industry, the primary factor contributing to the slow growth of film in Hong Kong is language. Although it shares its history with China, Hong Kong residents primarily speak Cantonese, a local dialect comparatively different from standard Mandarin Chinese. The Hong Kong cinema scene was dominated for years by Mandarin-language films and imports from Japan and the United States (Kar, 2001), effectively limiting Hong Kong cinema's ability to communicate a shared reality among Hong Kong citizens through the use of their language and culture. This statement takes on greater importance in light of Carey's definition of communication as "the process by which reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed" because of the power of language within a mass communication context (1989, p. 23).

In order to provide a cultural context in which Hong Kong cinema developed, this literature review describes the evolution of the Hong Kong film industry starting with the introduction of film technology to the region. With the subsequent addition of sound to Chinese cinema, a clash developed between various spoken Chinese dialects. Due to the huge market for Mandarin films in mainland China as well as governmental policies restricting imports, there was a relatively low number of Cantonese-language films produced after the onset of sound in cinema (Fonoroff, 1997). After 1949, Cantonese-language films enjoyed two major periods of resurgence, the first occurring in the 1950s

when filmmakers began to tackle local Hong Kong issues and the second occurring in the 1970s when Hong Kong began to emerge as a major economic force (Kar, 2001).

Separating the history of Hong Kong cinema into these broad time periods is useful because the 1949 Communist Revolution represents a major shift in East Asian politics and Hong Kong cinema, prior to 1949, simply did not enjoy the combination of creative talent, money, and autonomy that was characteristic of more developed film industries, such as Hollywood. After 1949, however, Hong Kong cinema enjoyed periods of heightened success. Upon recognition of the viability of Cantonese-language films, filmmakers in the 1970s began to cater to the tastes of local audiences with a keen sense for international marketability (Ho, 2001; Kar, 2001; Rodriguez, 2001). As a result, more diverse films were produced, including martial arts films, sophisticated urban comedies, social dramas, action films, and crime dramas.

Hong Kong Cinema Before 1949

As with other film industries around the world, the Hong Kong film industry owes its beginnings to international exhibitors and entrepreneurs. The first Hong Kong film is widely believed to be *Stealing a Roast Duck* (1909), directed by Leung Siu-Po and produced by American filmmaker Benjamin Brodsky, prolific in east Asia as an early film pioneer and a director of early Chinese, Hong Kong, and Japanese films (Kar & Bren, 2000). Subsequent Hong Kong films, consisting of filmed operas, martial arts demonstrations, acrobatics, and peep shows, composed a cinema of attractions. Belton (2005) defines a cinema of attractions from a Western perspective as filmed acts, primitive trick films, and exhibitionist films that were part of a larger performance.

Farquhar and Berry (2005) state that these early films represented the next logical step for Hong Kong popular entertainment which had close ties to Cantonese opera and martial arts. While seen as an entertaining novelty, Hong Kong's cinema of attractions also functioned as mass dissemination of culture and ideology to an increasingly larger audience. In essence, film allowed elements of Hong Kong history and culture to be packaged in a more dynamic fashion and disseminated to wider audiences.

Despite the filming of Hong Kong productions from the beginning of the 20th century, the fledgling film industry met with early resistance due to a preference for the Mandarin dialect of Chinese. Prior to 1949, the Hong Kong film industry was dominated by Mandarin-language productions due to demand, demographics, and political pressure. Considering McQuail's (2000) and Baran and Davis' (2006) characterizations of mass communication as having the ability to act as a cultural voice, then it follows that Hong Kong and its people were virtually invisible given the pressures to make Mandarin-language films and the goal of mainland China to marginalize more local cultures and art forms. Before going in depth regarding factors which led to Mandarin-language film dominance, it is important to first understand what influenced Hong Kong productions.

Influences on Early Hong Kong Films

As early Hollywood films were influenced by live performances such as stage plays and vaudeville, early Hong Kong films were heavily influenced by Chinese art forms including Cantonese opera and martial arts. By the time film technology reached Hong Kong, live opera performances were a well-established art form. As Chan states, Cantonese opera is "the most traditional performing art in Hong Kong" (2005, p. 167).

Chen (1995) provides more specific statistics, stating that traditional Chinese opera as a whole began over 2,000 years ago, before the unification of China. Considering its longstanding status as a popular art form in greater China, it is no surprise that opera singers were the first true film stars and celebrities (Yeh, 2003). From a visual and action standpoint, Cantonese and Chinese operas provided the foundation for what Bordwell (2001) calls "*expressive amplification* of action" (p. 86). In other words, precisely staged and choreographed visual and audible action is used to sell performances and draw viewers into the story. This style of acting carried to film, creating what Farquhar and Berry (2005) consider a unique and important art form.

On the whole, the prevalence of opera in Chinese history can also be seen in the sheer variety of opera styles that vary according to dialect and local musical forms (Chan, 2005). Farquhar and Berry (2005) state that opera existed in many forms and that audiences were not necessarily homogenous. Whether based on venues such as teahouses, geographical location, position within the social hierarchy, or local dialect, audiences varied. As audiences varied, so too did the operatic form vary and evolve to include specific and readily identifiable narratives and dialects. For example, in describing a form of opera called Huaguxi, native to the South Central region of China in Hunan province, Chen (1995) states that Huaguxi opera began with local farmers dancing in festivities during Spring Festivals. What began as a purely visual art form without stories or characters gradually evolved into music and dance-driven narratives that relied on Hunan slang and identifiable characters to increase and maintain popularity with audiences (Chen, 1995). The evolution of opera in general coincided with the introduction of film

technology, producing a unique art form that focused on “Chinese people seeing a Chinese art form” (Farquhar & Berry, 2005, p. 29), a trend which continued with the introduction of martial arts films.

Considering the transnational appeal of action cinema and China’s long history of the practice of martial arts, it is natural that martial arts stories and practitioners successfully made the transition to film in Hong Kong. Although martial arts have long been related to military strategy dating back to before the unification of China (Kei, Chu, & Foerster, 1994), their appearance in narrative Chinese cinema actually did not occur until 1928 with *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple*, directed by Zhang Shichuan (Gravestock, 2006; Kei, Chu, & Foerster, 1994). Based on a popular novel, it set the stage for novel-based martial arts films involving early forms of special effects, wire-assisted martial arts, and magical story elements. It proved to be enormously popular with audiences, combining classical martial arts stories with hybridized action choreography for its time.

Despite the popularity of this and subsequent films of the same style, martial arts films were the subject of contention within the KMT (also called the Kuomintang, or Nationalist Government). In order to push an image of China as a modern society and highlight social issues, fantasy martial arts films were censored or banned, resulting in a drought of martial arts films in mainland China (Kei, Chu, & Foerster, 1994). In Hong Kong, however, there was a huge audience for fantasy martial arts films throughout the 1930s due to the local film industry being the sole producer of such films. Following the Communist Revolution in 1949 and the emergence of a multicultural and economically

strong Hong Kong, there was a desire to produce more “realistic” martial arts films (Fore, 2001; Kei, Chu, & Foerster, 1994; Lim, 2003). Among the most popular films were stories about real life figure Wong Fei-hung, a martial artist and doctor whose name and exploits were the subject of newspaper serials after his death in 1924 (Fore, 2001). The first of dozens of Wong Fei-hung films was made in 1949 with Kwan Tak-hing as Fei-hung. Despite the amateurish nature of these films (Bordwell, 2003), the result was a stabilizing force in that these films alluded to a common historical past and demonstrated the physical beauty and power of Chinese martial arts through elaborate choreography and the strong presence of actor Kwan Tak-hing.

From a gender perspective, martial arts films have also been essential in showcasing the strength of female characters. Palmer and Lau (2003) look at these female characters from a unique perspective, describing their important role in martial arts film history not as a reaction to male dominance, but as a continuation of traditional martial arts sagas. Elaborating further, Palmer and Lau (2003) state that female heroines have a long history in Chinese popular culture from the earliest novels and martial arts movies made in Shanghai. Furthermore, the transnational appeal of women in martial arts films can be seen in the cult-like status that many contemporary stars such as Brigitte Lin, Maggie Cheung, and Michelle Yeoh have attained on an international scale, whether or not they are formally trained martial artists (Desser, 2003).

Regardless of gender, part of the appeal of the application of martial arts in early Hong Kong productions is the manipulation of the body. Bordwell (2001) states that from very early on in Hong Kong cinema, the position and movement of the body in action

sequences have been essential in further drawing audiences into the story worlds. This is due to the rhythm and editing of action scenes that showcase action rather than imply action has taken place. In other words, action scenes, specifically body movements, are filmed and edited in such a way that action and reaction are foregrounded with concern for the overall pacing of the film as well as audience enjoyment.

With opera and martial arts films, Chinese audiences in general were finally able to see Chinese people perform Chinese art forms. In the beginning of the 20th century, the predominant image of Chinese people in the West was that of ignorant peasants, criminals, or drug users (Goldstein, 1999; Xiao, 1997). This image filtered into China and Hong Kong because early film exhibition primarily consisted of Hollywood imports that depicted Chinese characters as negative stereotypes such as drug addicts or dangerous, violent people (Farquhar & Berry, 2005; Kei, Chu, & Foerster, 1994; Xiao, 1997). For example, D. W. Griffith's 1919 film *Broken Blossoms: The Yellow Man and the Girl* tells the story of a Buddhist missionary from China, played by American stage actor Richard Barthelmess, who comes to America to expound the teachings of Buddha. While the film acts as a commentary on racism and intolerance in America, it nevertheless furthered Chinese stereotypes first and foremost by having a White actor portray a Chinese character. This casting decision marginalized Asians and furthered their invisible status in society. The character of the Chinaman often spends his time in an opium parlor, furthering the stereotype of Asians as drug addicts. Another film, the Harold Lloyd vehicle *Welcome Danger*, was screened in Shanghai in 1930 and subsequently sparked protests due to its racist depiction of Chinese characters as "stupid,

ridiculous, and uncouth" (Xiao, 1997, p. 38). As a result, feelings of Chinese nationalism swept over the film industry, eradicating subversive portrayals of Chinese people and instilling in audiences a sense of unity and pride in traditional art forms.

Political Pressure and the Language Issue

Despite being a colony of the British empire for 155 years, Hong Kong was susceptible to film regulations and censorship laws set forth by the Nationalist Party in mainland China. Officially established in 1912, the KMT was set on preserving traditional values related to nationalism and the livelihood of the people. According to Xiao (1997), there was also a desire by the KMT to start China on the road to modernity. In order to maintain integrity through film, an increasingly popular leisure activity since its introduction, the KMT banned importing Cantonese-language films beginning in the early 1930s and severely limited Western imports from the United States and Europe (Lu & Yeh, 2005). According to Abend (1933), foreign imports were allowed so long as they did not conflict with the principles of the KMT and could function as useful propaganda tools. In this sense, the KMT actively censored films that were deemed leftist or humiliating to Chinese people (UCSD, 2003; Xiao, 1997). These included fantasy martial arts films, degrading comedies, and Cantonese-language films.

The KMT's policy on both foreign and domestic films was essentially a reaction to the early dominance of Hollywood films in China. In addition to the negative depiction of Chinese characters in Hollywood films and mass media (Farquhar & Berry, 2005; Kei, Chu, & Foerster, 1994; Xiao, 1997), the dominance of English language productions ensured a greater dissemination of Western values than traditional Chinese and Confucian

values of filial piety, unity, and cultural awareness. As Lu and Yeh (2005) explain it, language creates unity. Considering that one of the core tenets of the KMT was to foster unity among Chinese citizens, a push to develop domestic production and limit foreign competition was a byproduct of its sense of nationalism.

The push for national unity through Mandarin-language standardization cast a shadow over Hong Kong cinema for decades, both in terms of language and personnel. While Hong Kong was able to produce Cantonese-language operas and *wuxia pian* films for film-hungry Hong Kong audiences in the early 1930s (Teo, 1997), this resurgence was short-lived due to political strife in mainland China. Following the Japanese occupation of Shanghai during World War II, China's filmmakers emigrated to Hong Kong and began producing Mandarin-language films. Except for a single Japanese produced propaganda film that depicted the taking of Hong Kong (Teo, 1997), film production shut down during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong. Political strife continued after World War II in the form of the Chinese Civil War between the emerging Chinese Communist Party and the struggling KMT, increasing the number of Shanghainese filmmakers who fled to Hong Kong and transformed the city into the capital of Mandarin-language filmmaking (Rodriguez, 2001). It was not until the Communist Revolution of 1949 that Hong Kong filmmakers began making Cantonese-language films that catered to local audiences.

Hong Kong Cinema After 1949

The Communist Revolution of 1949 signaled a major shift in East Asian culture. This shift had such a resounding impact that Chiao (1991) credits 1949 as the year that

gave birth to the Hong Kong film industry due to the influx of mainland filmmakers fleeing to Hong Kong from the new Chinese Communist Party. They brought with them more sophisticated filmmaking techniques and a host of personnel familiar with all elements of filmmaking. Furthermore, Chan (2005) states that Hong Kong underwent massive industrialization during the 1950s due to multiple trade embargos against China by the United States and the United Nations and the financial support that Hong Kong provided to the deteriorating British economy. This view of the beginning of Hong Kong cinema can also be seen in the available academic research detailing Hong Kong film history before 1949 which tends to focus on a few popular genres and the effects of regional politics on film output as opposed to cultural analyses of films and popular performers as they related to a Hong Kong independent of mainland China.

This lack of research, however, is not due to disinterest in early Hong Kong cinema but is instead the result of disregard for film preservation. According to Fonoroff (1997), Japanese occupiers in Hong Kong destroyed many existing copies of Hong Kong films to extract their silver nitrate for the purpose of making ammunition and explosives. The result is confusion over the number of pre-World War II Hong Kong films that were made. According to a filmography compiled by the Hong Kong Film Archive in 2006, there were roughly 900 Hong Kong productions made prior to 1949, but the actual number of films still in existence today is believed to be much smaller. This lack of film production and appreciation changed with Hong Kong's economic growth and acquisition of filmmaking talent following the Communist Revolution. The film culture that resulted eventually paved the way for Hong Kong cinema's most successful years in the late 1970s

and 1980s. As Blake (2003) states, Hong Kong eventually came to be known as the Hollywood of the East, producing the third highest output of films behind India and the United States in its most productive years.

The First Golden Age of Hong Kong Cinema

With the finality of the Communist Revolution and the end of World War II and Japanese occupation, filmmakers within Hong Kong were free to restart film production. However, with the recent flood of mainland Chinese into Hong Kong, film production essentially split into Mandarin and Cantonese productions (Kar, 2001; Lo, 2005). In addition, Cantonese-language films had to contend with imports from Japan and the United States. Nevertheless, local films became very successful in part due to the political structure of Hong Kong. While the film industries of nearby China and Taiwan were tied to the state, Hong Kong cinema remained largely independent due to the laissez-faire policies of the British empire (Chan, 2005). Filmmakers were therefore free to operate with flexible accumulation, defined by Yeh and Davis (2002) as a mode of production that does not rely on vertical integration. In other words, production is decentralized and conducted on a product-by-product basis. As such, filmmakers enjoyed a sense of autonomy and were able to quickly produce films without interference from a central power structure.

Recognizing the need to forge a national identity, Hong Kong filmmakers and performers founded the Zhonglian Company to produce Cantonese-language films (Kar, 2001). With the ability to quickly produce films, Cantonese filmmakers found success in the 1950s and early 1960s with Cantonese opera films, martial arts and *wuxia pian* films,

and family melodramas (Kar, 2001). Popular examples of postwar *wuxia pian* films include *The Six Fingered Lord of the Lute* (1965) and *Sacred Fire, Heroic Wind* (1966), both making use of hand-drawn animation and special effects (Lim, 2003). As with more realistic martial arts films, *wuxia pian* films were produced in record numbers, saturating both domestic and international markets with low budget and low quality films to capitalize on the then existing martial arts craze (Chute, 2003). Furthermore, all popular genres of the 1950s were essentially commercial in nature, relying less on local themes and focusing instead on turning a profit. Standout filmmakers from this era include Chor Yuen who achieved success with popular Cantonese-language cat burglar thrillers such as *Black Rose* (1965) and melodramas such as *Eternal Regret* (1962).

As a response to criticism of low-budget productions manufactured in the 1950s, filmmakers began to look deeper into Hong Kong for inspiration in the later part of the 1960s (Kar, 2001; Rodriguez, 2001). Popular filmmakers of this time period were Chor Yuen, a filmmaker from the previous decade and founder of the New Films Company in 1968, Lung Kong, and Shu Shuen. The appeal of their films was their attention to social issues. Chor Yuen's 1969 film *Joys and Sorrows of Youth* depicted youth violence and restlessness as a response to hatred of middle class values (Kar, 2001). Lung Kong was more concerned with visual rhythm and social criticism in his 1967 film *Story of a Discharged Prisoner* (Kar, 2001). He was also among the first to use graphic violence as a metaphor for local conflict and uncertainty in the 1969 film *Teddy Girls* (Kar, 2001). Shu Shuen's directorial debut in 1970 with *The Arch* signaled the international emergence of art films within Hong Kong cinema. In addition to the visual style of Indian

cinematographer Subrata Mitra, *The Arch* was the first Hong Kong film to gain international attention at film festivals (Kar, 2001). However, the emergence of these films near the end of Cantonese cinema was insufficient to completely revive Cantonese-language cinema, though their efforts inspired a new generation of filmmakers who directed the first films of the Hong Kong New Wave in 1979 (Kar, 2001).

Until the early 1980s, the Shaw Brothers studio was a powerful force in Hong Kong Mandarin filmmaking and a major force in the international popularization of Chinese cinema with their elaborate martial arts films (Desser, 2003). As Kar (2001) states, the Shaw Brothers studio modified the *wuxia pian*, maintaining the use of heroes and swordsmen but relying on more realistic martial arts, larger budgets, and fresh talent. Studio heads also imported Japanese talent to help with production efficiency (Yeh & Davis, 2002). According to Lo (2005), a major source of revenue for the Shaw Brothers studio came from international sales, making them a valuable commodity in the Hong Kong filmmaking world. Also contributing to their dominance was recognition of the international appeal of their films which led to the subtitling of all films in both English and standard written Chinese (Lo, 2005). Some filmmakers such as Chor Yuen, instrumental in the creation of social dramas in the late 1960s, were unable to survive the downturn of Cantonese-language cinema and became employees of the Shaw Brothers studio (Kar, 2001).

The Hong Kong New Wave

The emergence of the Hong Kong New Wave in 1979 signaled a standardization of film form and content that appealed to local audiences. In essence, filmmakers

recognized the need to create films in a style that complemented life in Hong Kong. Kar (2001) states that in the eyes of some critics, the Hong Kong New Wave essentially came out of nowhere and appeared to have little uniformity. These statements by critics, however, are not supported in light of available research. Rodriguez (2001) details the history of film criticism in Hong Kong and credits a growing film culture as a driving force in the emergence of a New Wave. In other words, with the emerging self-awareness among Hong Kong citizens and film scholars came a desire to understand the link between popular cinema and their own social environment and an even stronger desire to forge a local identity. From a critical perspective, this represents an examination of Hong Kong films as products of Hong Kong culture. From a filmmaking perspective, this is what Lai (2001) refers to as *enigmatization*, or the reorganization of popular culture for the purpose of both defining a specific local audience as having the necessary cultural background to fully understand representative texts and subsequently marketing to that audience. Research indicates that the Hong Kong New Wave is additionally attributed to the rise of television in Hong Kong, standardized education in Cantonese, and a growing sense of nostalgia among citizens (Kar, 2001; Rodriguez, 2001).

While Mandarin filmmakers were concentrating on elaborate, big budget *wuxia pian* films, audiences as well as Cantonese filmmakers were looking to television as a cheap alternative to the expensive and uncertain world of Cantonese-language films. For filmmakers, it provided a training ground in which aspiring filmmakers could learn the craft of budget storytelling by producing, directing, and starring in original productions. As Kar (2001) states, the importance of television to the emergence of the Hong Kong

New Wave was that it functioned as an ideological training ground as much as a technical training ground. Many up and coming directors such as Ann Hui and Tsui Hark made a name for themselves with television films and series that explored social issues in Hong Kong such as poverty, corruption, class distinctions, and political ineptitude.

Contributing to the success of and appreciation for more local films was a change in the education of Hong Kong residents. According to Lo (2005), Hong Kong began to form a national identity through education in a more standardized form of Cantonese, contributing to the decrease in hybrid dialects that included words and phrases spoken in English, Shanghainese, Mandarin, and other Chinese dialects. This process continued in cinematic form. As Lu and Yeh state, "cinema has increasingly participated in the 'birth of a nation'" (2005, p. 2). Following language education came Cantonese-language popularization through mass communication, continuing the process of constructing and maintaining a collective reality and a national identity.

Another factor contributing to the success of Hong Kong New Wave films was their nostalgia factor. Lu and Yeh (2005) explain that New Wave filmmakers had a desire to capture reality while alluding to history and cultural traditions. According to Wai, "the use of the past as a basis for constructing locality spontaneously gives rise to a sense of nostalgia that is directly related to the issue of identity formation" (2005, p. 322). In other words, this desire for nostalgia extended beyond a yearning for the idealized past to also include an examination of cultural and popular culture history for the purposes of furthering education and fostering an identity. In the case of Hong Kong, this hybridized identity is forged through reinterpretation and translation of culture as opposed to relying

strictly on tradition (Wai, 2005). As an example, New Wave filmmaker Tsui Hark was proficient in creating films filled with allusions to past films and cultural traditions (Teo, 2001). However, considering his international sensibilities and cultural awareness in contrast with his intense focus on the local, it was said the nostalgia invoked in his films is hybridized in that he reimagines Hong Kong in the face of cosmopolitanism. Regardless, Hark's films were instrumental in fostering shared meaning among Hong Kong citizens by depicting a stable past in the midst of increasing change.

However, virtually all Hong Kong films during the New Wave period throughout the 1980s were made in the shadow of mainland China. In other words, at a time when Hong Kong was attempting to forge a national identity and export films on an international scale, it was difficult to escape from the general *Chinese* category. Wai (2005) refers to this as *spectral nationality.* As researchers have noted, this uncertainty regarding identity and the relationship to mainland China contributed to the content and themes found in Hong Kong New Wave films (Ciecko, 1997; Kar, 2001). To make matters worse, the impending 1997 changeover from British to Chinese rule aroused feelings of anxiety and fear that permeated films of all genres. Ciecko (1997) argues that Hong Kong was in a pre-postcolonial position, stuck trying to escape from the shadow of China in the midst of increasing anxiety about the eventual changeover to China in 1997.

Hong Kong's struggle for an identity within the shadow of China can be seen in films of the time that featured characters and storylines that reflected feelings of isolation, anxiety, and uncertainty. This is supported by Kar (2001) who argues that some film critics of the time praised these New Wave films for basing their stories and themes on

life in contemporary, ever-changing Hong Kong. Ann Hui's film *The Secret* (1979) was a mixture of genres and shifting female perspectives under the umbrella of a murder mystery (Ho, 2001). Tsui Hark's *The Butterfly Murders* (1979) reimagined the classic *wuxia pian* films with a keen eye for fantasy elements and special effects (Teo, 2001). *Cops and Robbers* (1979), by Alex Cheung, used contemporary Hong Kong as the setting for a modern crime drama (Kar, 2001). Finally, Peter Wai-chun Yung's *The System* (1979) depicted the uncomfortable reality of the relationship between law enforcement and organized crime (Kar, 2001).

While the first batch of Hong Kong New Wave films were box office failures (Kar, 2001), their critical successes were staggering. Furthermore, their increasing commercial sensibilities and attention to local audiences with relevant themes and a unique visual style gradually ensured their success. Kar (2001) explains that by the early 1980s, Mandarin-language productions virtually disappeared from Hong Kong cinema in the midst of a rediscovery of Cantonese-language cinema. This led to a subsequent rediscovery and refashioning of popular genres, such as *wuxia pian* films, for more educated, affluent, and contemporary audiences.

The *Wuxia Pian* Genre and Two Important Filmmakers

Of the films produced during the Hong Kong New Wave, few have enjoyed such long lasting critical and commercial success as *wuxia pian* films. Sarkar (2001) briefly defines *wuxia pian* films as martial arts films. Pollard (2004) further describes *wuxia pian* films as more ethereal in nature, combining elements of fantasy and magic. In describing their importance to transnational action aesthetics, Bordwell (2001) claims that *wuxia*

pian films use the form and abilities of the human body as the central element of their *mise-en-scene*. Lo (2005) further argues that they function, on the surface, as nostalgic depictions of an ideal past. *Wuxia pian* films draw their inspiration from classic novels from authors such as Jin Yong and Gu Long. While these are more contemporary examples, Chute (2003) claims that stories about martial arts heroes have been a popular form of entertainment since the third century B.C.E. Likewise, fantasy-oriented *wuxia pian* films have been a mainstay in Chinese and Hong Kong cinema for decades. In 1928, the first recorded *wuxia pian* film, *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* by Zhang Shichuan, started a revolution, eventually leading to a flood of hundreds of similar films within the next four years (Gravestock, 2006).

Following the KMT ban on *wuxia pian* films in 1932, the Hong Kong film industry filled the void and began to produce prodigious amounts of fantasy martial arts films throughout the 1930s until the Japanese occupation shut down film production. It was not until after 1949 that martial arts cinema reemerged, this time in the form of the more stable and grounded Wong Fei-hung films. Fantasy-oriented *wuxia pian* films, however, were not completely absent. As Chan (2001) states, *wuxia pian* films in the immediate post war era relied on fantasy and the convincing portrayal of characters with supernatural abilities. While they were initially drowned out by the flood of cheaply made Wong Fei-hung films as well as other martial arts films, *wuxia pian* films made a comeback in the late 1960s and 1970s, reimagined by directors like Zhang Che in a hyper-masculine fashion and featuring choreography that adhered to actual styles of martial arts (Fore, 2001). Examples of these films include *One Armed Swordsman* (1967)

and *Blood Brothers* (1973). This shift in presentation was due in part to competition from popular Hollywood imports and the changing demographics in that a growing number of Hong Kong's residents were born after 1949 (Fore, 2001).

Cantonese language began to dominate the film scene in 1979 with the emergence of Hong Kong New Wave directors. One of the first New Wave films was Tsui Hark's *The Butterfly Murders* (1979), a *wuxia pian* film that relied on highly stylized choreography and limited, yet effective, special effects to entertain audiences. The popularization of Cantonese and the prevalence of more inventive and commercial filmmaking sensibilities in the New Wave led to a major resurgence of *wuxia pian* films. Important films from this time period include Hark's *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* (1983), Cheng Xiaodong's *Duel to the Death* (1983) and *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987), as well as Ronny Yu's *The Bride with White Hair* (1993).

An important characteristic of *wuxia pian* films is the chivalrous nature of the characters. As Sarkar (2001) states, strong displays of chivalry are subversive in nature because of their incompatibility with law and order. As such, like *wuxia pian* films themselves, these characters function as stable elements that audiences can look to and immediately understand. *Wuxia pian* films essentially came full circle in 1991 with the release of Tsui Hark's *Once Upon a Time in China*, starring a relatively unknown Jet Li. The film, which spawned numerous sequels, returned to the stable and heroic character of Wong Fei-hung, reimagined in the wake of more schizophrenic *wuxia pian* films made in the 1980s with wire-assisted martial arts and fantasy elements in terms of Fei-hung's martial arts abilities. Aside from being a commercially and critically successful endeavor,

the film is a prime example of hybridized nostalgia in that it reinterpreted Fei-hung's life by pitting him against Western domination and native opportunists.

Tsui Hark

Since his directorial debut in 1979 with the New Wave *wuxia pian* film *The Butterfly Murders*, Tsui Hark has been a major creative force in the Hong Kong film industry. Providing a short summary of Hark's early years, Teo (2001) states that Hark was born in Vietnam in 1951, eventually moving to Hong Kong by the age of 15. As with Ang Lee, the Taiwanese director who brought international attention to contemporary *wuxia pian* films in 1999 with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Hark studied the art of filmmaking in the United States (Lu, 2005; Teo, 2001), although he was educated in Hong Kong. Unlike Lee, however, Hark retained the visual appeal and commercialism of Hollywood films rather than narrative sensibilities and smooth storytelling. Hark's films are fiercely Hong Kong in nature in that they reflect Hong Kong's position at the crossroads of international influences. This awareness of the context in which he made and released films can be seen in the schizophrenic nature of their visuals as well as their narratives (Sarkar, 2001), relating them to Hong Kong's search for a local identity in the midst of a rapidly changing society.

Before turning to directing films, Hark got his start in Hong Kong working on television productions. Most notable of his television productions was an adaptation of martial arts novelist Gu Long's *The Gold Dagger Romance* (Kei, Chu, & Foerster, 1994). Hark's feature film directorial debut came in 1979 with *The Butterfly Murders*. The film not only showed Hark's ability to blend special effects with an engrossing story and

inventive action choreography, but it also demonstrated his desire to forge a local identity, a desire that continued with ferocity in his following films. *Dangerous Encounter of the 1st Kind* (1980) functioned as a metaphor for social chaos in post-war Hong Kong and depicted foreign characters as dangerous and destructive (Kar, 2001). Also released in 1980, *We Are Going to Eat You* featured zombies and graphic violence which Hark used to enhance the local factor in the film (Teo, 2001). Kar (2001) explains this local factor found in Hark's films by claiming that violence, chaos, and a mixture of genre conventions were a metaphor for Hong Kong in transition. Following a string of acting roles in 1981 and 1982, Hark returned to his *wuxia pian* roots with *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* in 1983. The result was increasing sophistication regarding special effects and breakneck pacing as an allegory for a chaotic Hong Kong (Lo, 2005).

After making a name for himself with his early films, Hark's creativity needed greater freedom. This freedom came in 1984 in the form of Film Workshop, Hark's own film production company. In an interview, Hark stated "other companies had their own theories, their own way they believed they should make films. So in forming Film Workshop, I could go the way I wanted" (Mottesheard, 2001). Following this endeavor, Hark made *Shanghai Blues* (1984), a romantic comedy about a love triangle set in Shanghai during the 1940s. As the first film made under Film Workshop, Hark has called it his most personal and sweetest film (Short, 2000). With *Shanghai Blues*, Hark continued to create films that demonstrated his knowledge of Hong Kong film history, alluding to master directors like King Hu and Zhang Che (Teo, 2001).

Although he directed only a few commercial films between 1986 and 1991, his skill as a producer and his commercial sensibilities were instrumental in creating some of the most iconic Hong Kong films of all time: *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987), and *The Killer* (1989). Hark's success as a director continued into the 1990s with the epic trilogy *Once Upon a Time in China*, starring relative newcomer Jet Li as iconic martial arts hero Wong Fei-hung. The series was an enormous triumph, winning awards for Best Director and Best Action Design from the Hong Kong Film Awards and transforming Jet Li into an international action star. Subsequently, Hark went on to director the film's sequels and maintained continued success as a producer of *wuxia pian* films such as *The Swordsman* trilogy (1990, 1992, and 1993) and *Dragon Inn* (1992). Nearing the 1997 changeover of Hong Kong to China, Hark directed *The Blade* (1995). A *wuxia pian* film on the surface, it functions instead as a deconstruction of the genre. As such, it also functions as a deconstruction of an imagined Hong Kong identity (Chen, 2002b). A remake of Zhang Che's *One Armed Swordsman* (1967), *The Blade* sees the martial arts world of *jianghu* through the eyes of a female spectator. Hysterically violent, the film depicts China of the past as a multicultural hub filled with infighting and xenophobia, practices and circumstances which are natural byproducts of increased globalization (Teo, 2001).

Like other Hong Kong film icons such as John Woo and Jackie Chan, Hark eventually left to work in Hollywood. His Hollywood directorial debut came in 1997 with *Double Team*, starring Jean-Claude Van Damme and Dennis Rodman. The impact of Hark's career in Hollywood is his contribution to the Hong Kongification of Hollywood

action aesthetics (Lu, 2005), a process that came full circle with the enormous success of both Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and the Wachowski Brothers' *The Matrix* (1999), both featuring wire-assisted action choreography by Yuen Woo-ping. Hark returned to Hong Kong periodically, but with little success. His most recent film, *Seven Swords* (2005), was a modest success both in terms of style and content. An adaptation of Liang Yu-sheng's multi-volume epic, *Seven Swords* eschews the nihilism of *The Blade* and recalls the heroic nature of *Once Upon a Time in China* as a band of swordsmen extol the benefits of martial arts in self-defense and self-discovery and right political wrongdoings.

Cheng Xiaodong

Lesser known by name than his contemporary and frequent filmmaking partner Tsui Hark, Cheng Xiaodong is equally important in both the international popularization of the Hong Kong New Wave and the revitalization of *wuxia pian* films. Cheng was born in Hong Kong in 1953, son of the famous Shaw Brothers director Ching Gong. Growing up in a martial arts environment within the Shaw Brothers studios, Cheng eventually came to study martial arts himself, learning at a Beijing Opera school in Hong Kong for seven years from the age of eight (Lukitsh and Pollard, 2004). His training soon developed into teaching as he opened *Long Hu Wu Shi*, a famous *wu guan* (martial arts school) in Hong Kong where he taught for a number of years (Duan Mu Min Jiao, 2006).

More visible on an international scale, however, has been Cheng's contribution to direction and action choreography in Hong Kong cinema. Along with fellow filmmaker Tsui Hark, Cheng is credited with reviving Hong Kong cinema and the *wuxia pian* genre

in the 1980s (Lo, 2005; Lu, 2005). Duan Mu Min Jiao (2006) argues that Cheng's familiarity with many styles of Chinese martial arts has made him particularly adept at devising action choreography for *wuxia pian* films. Furthermore, in Hong Kong action filmmaking, action choreographers are often given free reign to design and edit their own action sequences without the director being present (Lukitsh & Pollard, 2004). This style of filmmaking has allowed Cheng to develop a unique style of choreography which is instantly recognizable. Working his way up from a stuntman to action choreographer to director and working behind the scenes as an editor and screenwriter, Cheng has been and still is a versatile force in action cinema.

After working for years as a stuntman, Cheng directed *Duel to the Death* in 1983. The story follows Bo Ching-wan of China and Kada Hashimoto of Japan as they are selected to participate in a life or death duel. The film demonstrated Cheng's skill not only as an action choreographer but also as an editor and visual artist. The action scenes are fast and highly stylized, yet also comprehensible as a result of careful staging and precise editing. Furthermore, in a film that features exploding bodies, dismemberments, and decapitations, the lightning fast action is in line with the film's over-the-top graphic content. In an interview, Cheng credits the film's combination of graphic violence and macabre humor to his desire to create a more commercial film. (Lukitsh & Pollard, 2005).

While primarily relegating himself to the role of action choreographer, Cheng went on to direct seminal *wuxia pian* films in the years to come. In 1987, he collaborated with Tsui Hark on *A Chinese Ghost Story*, starring Cantonese pop star Leslie Cheung. The story of a traveling tax collector who becomes romantically entangled with a female

ghost proved to be a successful merger of transnational action sensibilities and various entertainment forms, earning a multitude of nominations and awards from the Hong Kong Film Awards (Chen, 1990). Yau (2001) credits the film's popularity in part to its borrowing elements from Japanese samurai films to American silent films and comedies, stating further that despite its amalgamated nature, it is successful at maintaining a very sensual style.

Aside from directing and choreographing the action for the two sequels to *A Chinese Ghost Story*, Cheng directed and choreographed *Swordsman II* (1992) and *Swordsman III: The East is Red* (1993), both starring Taiwanese actress Brigitte Lin as Asia the Invincible. With these films, Cheng once again demonstrated his ability to design dizzying action sequences that made use of wire-assisted martial arts, miniatures, pyrotechnics, and other special effects.

More importantly, however, was how Cheng dealt with female characters in his films, most notably that of Asia the Invincible. As Duan Mu Min Jiao (2006) states, female characters are referred to as *qingjie*, which is to say they are deeply rooted in culture and often represent a very complex knot of various meanings and characteristics. Palmer and Lau (2003) state that the character of Asia the Invincible is neither male nor female as a result of self-castration in order to gain more powerful skills. On the other hand, Teo describes Asia the Invincible as "ambiguous in gender and covers the spectrum from villain to hero, from female to male, from man to eunuch to woman" and explains that the character was directly influenced by the use of male actors to play female characters in Peking opera, often creating androgynous characters (2001, p. 153). Asia the

Invincible's position between male and female proves to be his undoing in that he lusts for power yet has strong affections for his opponent. This represents a significant aspect of Cheng's career as a filmmaker because it demonstrates Cheng's ability to fuse complex cultural characters and values with modern sensibilities in a *wuxia pian* setting, making his films accessible to audiences throughout Hong Kong.

Cheng's claim to fame following the 1997 changeover to China has been as action director for mainland director Zhang Yimou's martial arts melodramas *Hero* (2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006). As all films have had wide theatrical runs in the United States, Cheng, like Tsui Hark, is contributing to the globalization of action cinema, not by Hong Kongifying Hollywood action films, but by demonstrating that action choreography is an art form that is visually appealing and marketable on a mass scale (Lo, 2005).

Summary

Wuxia pian films have a long history within Hong Kong cinema. However, Hong Kong cinema in general was slow to develop due to censorship, imports from China, Japan, and the United States, and the dominance of Mandarin-language productions. It was not until the early 1970s that Hong Kong cinema, with a batch of fresh and contemporary-minded directors, was able to create shared meaning among local citizens through Cantonese-language films. The resurgence of *wuxia pian* films in Hong Kong's New Wave allowed directors such as Tsui Hark and Cheng Xiaodong to creatively use international influences and new styles of action choreography to produce marketable, yet culturally understood, fast-paced films that relied on local themes of identity and conflict.

III. METHODOLOGY

A national cinemas approach has proven to be a popular method for film research. Using this approach, researchers come to understand a film by locating it within a larger cultural and national framework and viewing that framework as the film's author (Corrigan, 2001). For this thesis, I will go beyond this idea that films are authored by nations and approach research from a national agency perspective, as detailed by Berry (1998), to specifically examine how seminal *wuxia pian* films from the 1980s helped to forge an identity for the then British Colony of Hong Kong. By using the term *agency*, Berry (1998) is referring to cinema's participation in the creation, legitimation, and articulation of a constructed entity. As a concept then, *agency* refers to a collective or an agent that is created through the act of communication. Similar to national cinema, a national agency methodology is directly concerned with matters regarding concepts of nation, state, identity, and community. National cinema and national agency are closely related in that a national agency is created through competition as well as conflict between national cinemas. However, national agency views films as national cinemas in that they are "bound together by the politics of . . . collective subjectivity" (Berry, 1998, p. 132) and are active agents in identity formation rather passive products of the nation as author (Berry, 1998).

This thesis uses an overarching national agency approach to film analysis for the purpose of explaining how the selected movies from directors Tsui Hark and Cheng Xiaodong helped to define life in Hong Kong during a period of turbulence and uncertainty in the 1980s. This approach clarifies the concept of national cinema, allowing for a tighter focus on specific films and genres by both labeling them as distinct national cinemas and highlighting their contribution to the creation of a national agency. More specific to this thesis, its use lies in its concern with attempting to define a nation by examining discourse, such as films, rather than assume a nation to be a "socially and historically specific idea of community" (Berry, 1998, p. 136). Furthermore, this approach incorporates formalism, genre criticism, and auteur theory as elements of each approach are crucial in defining and differentiating films as types of national cinemas.

National Agency and National Cinema

Film research from a national cinema perspective takes the position of viewing films as authored by the state. For example, in defining Australia's national cinema, Zielinski (2006) describes representative films as imbued with *Australianness*. As this definition implies, nations are taken as homogenous groups that produce films, and, as such, all films are somehow similar in terms of themes and content because they were authored by a larger, collective identity. Corrigan (2001) defines a national cinemas approach as understanding a film by placing it within a specific cultural and political framework, claiming that it is difficult to fully understand a film unless one understands the cultural climate that produced it.

Along a different path, much research from a national cinema perspective describes national cinemas as reactions to Hollywood dominance (Berry, 1998). In detailing the history of Chinese cinema, Lu states that "the emergence and consolidation of a Chinese 'national cinema' (*minzu dianying*) in the ensuing years must be read against this background of the importation of film as a Western technology, ideology, and medium of art" (1997, p. 4). Similarly, Michael (2005) credits the popularity of contemporary French martial arts films to a consolidated effort in the film industry to counter the domination of Hollywood blockbusters. According to this approach, then, national cinemas often emerge from national policies or industry standards in a deliberate effort to combat Western ideologies and promote local values.

A national cinema methodology ultimately fails in its assumption that all films from a particular film industry inherently exhibit standardized national traits. According to Bordwell (2000), this assumption proves false because some countries do not have native film production and instead rely on exhibition of foreign imports or co-productions. As a result, what it means to be a *national* cinema becomes unclear. If a film is a co-production between France and Germany, is it inherently *French* or is it inherently *German*? The concept of *national* becomes increasingly complex in the face of globalization and increasing reliance on technology which blur the lines between different mass media. Additionally, Berry (1998) takes issue with research from a strictly national cinema perspective by elucidating the absurdity in the image of an entire nation communicating and shooting films with solidarity and unity.

A national agency approach takes a different route to the relationship between a collective and its cinema. As Berry (1998) defines it, rather than make a case for a film movement as emblematic of a particular nation and representing the beliefs, values, and attitudes of its citizens, a national agency approach looks at how a film movement or a specific genre contributes to the creation of a collective or national identity. However, rather than see this approach as independent of national cinema, Berry (1998) states that the two are closely intertwined, arguing that nations are discursively created agencies rather than pre-existing entities and that it is cinema, composed of multiple national cinemas, which defines a nation.

While Berry (1998) is detailing national agency within a specific framework of Chinese cinema, the central argument is sound enough to reinvigorate film research from an overarching national cinemas perspective. Using a national agency methodology places the creative control of filmmaking in the hands of the filmmakers rather than operates under the assumption that a nation and its collective identity serve to standardize film themes and content, for, as Bordwell states, conventions "give the artist a structure within which to exercise his or her talents" (2000, p. 149). In other words, filmmakers make use of common filmmaking conventions to create unique films that bear their signature, a statement which proves to be the underlying theme of auteur theory (Corrigan, 2001; Stoddart, 1995).

Furthermore, a national agency approach takes modes of film practice into account. Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson define a mode of film practice as "a set of widely held stylistic norms sustained by and sustaining an integral mode of film

production" (1985, p. xiv). The central claim in this definition is that stylistic elements are the product of a mode of production and, upon their success and acceptance among industry professionals and the filmgoing public, subsequently continue to support the mode of production. Such a consideration assures that attention is not paid solely to the text itself but to the text in history and in relation to film production. Bordwell (2000) follows a similar line of research specifically on Hong Kong cinema by analyzing films according to three aspects: genre conventions, the star system, and visual style. It is Bordwell's (2000) framework which will be adhered to for the analytical purposes of this thesis as it dictates not only which filmic elements will be examined, but also because it implies sub-methodologies to be utilized: formalism, genre criticism, and auteur theory.

From a national agency perspective, however, this examination of stylistic elements and film production using the three sub-methodologies listed above represents only the first methodological step. For Berry (1998), the question is not how nationalism is represented in films through visual motifs, but how films and filmmakers use film production and visual motifs to define a cultural and collective experience. For researchers, this constitutes a number of different factors. From a film production standpoint, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson (1985) argue that distribution, financing, and available technology influence the final version of a film by providing filmmakers with choices throughout production. More specifically, according to Bordwell (2000), film distribution and exhibition are instrumental in increasing film literacy and shaping local film culture as a result of a combination of content and filmmaking practices. Regarding visual motifs and other film content, Bordwell (2000), referring to emerging

Hong Kong cinema of the late 1970s, cites local dialects, locations, figure behavior, and underlying morals as factors contributing to a redefinition of what it means to live in Hong Kong.

Therefore, with Bordwell's (2000) framework providing a list of elements to examine, this thesis will analyze visual content, genre conventions, and film production (represented originally as "the star system" in Bordwell's framework) using a combination of formalism, genre criticism, and auteur theory. This will allow for an inferential leap from more focused sub-methodologies to a larger, national agency approach by claiming that certain textual aspects under analysis shape Hong Kong's national agency.

National Agency as it Relates to Formalism, Genre Criticism, and Auteur Theory

Formalism is defined by Corrigan as "film criticism concerned with matters of structure and style in a movie or with how those features [the narrative or the *mise-en-scene*] are organized in particular ways in a movie" (2001, p. 103). Formalism as a critical method represents a very basic method of film analysis as it focuses on the visual or narrative elements that compose a film with no regard for modes of film practice or the culture in which the film was produced (Bordwell, Staiger, & Thompson, 1985; Corrigan, 2001). According to Jenkins, formalism as a critical method used to evaluate art derives from Aristotle's *Poetics*, or a focus "on the processes and conventions through which artworks are constructed and evaluated" (1995, p. 100).

While formalism focuses on textual analysis by establishing rules by which art forms should be analyzed, there is room for consideration of the roles that history and

culture play in the creation and standardization of formal elements (Jenkins, 1995). However, this approach, while examining the relationship between a culture and its films, assumes a chronological view of filmmaking in that culture and tradition, at least partially, dictate filmmaking. This examination is more concerned with how filmmakers use the tools at their disposal to consciously create films that define a nation, an assumption that is more closely related to auteur theory. Regardless, an examination of formal elements is necessary to provide a foundation by which to analyze visual and narrative elements that construct films because films, first and foremost, rely on filmmaking conventions, such as continuity editing and shot-reverse-shot sequencing for example, for their construction.

Going further in taking history and culture into account is an analytical method based on generic elements. Defined as "classifying films in terms of common patterns of form and content" (Corrigan, 2001, p. 98), a genre analysis examines how historically based form and content create distinct categories of film. Genre analysis was especially popular in the 1960s and 1970s due to the research of critics such as Andre Bazin, Robert Warshow, and Lawrence Alloway (Hutchings, 1995). According to Hutchings (1995), for Bazin, genre analysis is less about a deconstruction of formal elements and more about a genre's relation to cultural beliefs and prevalent cultural myths. Bazin's contemporaries, however, were interested in a genre's relationship to modes of film production and audience expectations.

Also of interest is Alloway's idea of genre filmmaking as representing collective authorship (Hutchings, 1995), a sort of hybridized view of auteur theory that essentially

looks at a group of authors rather than creative individuals. However, Bordwell (2000) credits some directors working in specific genres as being able to creatively use genre conventions to separate themselves from the collective and emerge as individual auteurs. For example, Tsui Hark is described as an internationally savvy director who molds various film techniques and genre conventions into a unique and individual style, separating himself from other directors in the commercial world of Hong Kong filmmaking (Bordwell, 2000).

A study of generic elements is essential to film research from a national agency perspective because genres are firmly rooted in a collective experience. Bordwell sums up the importance of genres to a distinct nation by stating that "at the center of any genre is an interplay between familiarity and novelty, convention and innovation. Genres cross media, so it comes as no surprise that a film genre typically arises from conventions ruling literature and drama" (2000, p. 150). In other words, genres are closely related to cultural practices and norms as well as cultural art forms that provide a foundation for filmmaking conventions and audience expectations. As such, genre analysis is essential to this thesis because Hong Kong New Wave *wuxia pian* films are rooted in a culturally understood past so as to comment on the present situation that operated in Hong Kong.

Finally, considering auteur theory as a component of national agency is necessary and practical because, according to Stoddart (1995), auteur theory looks at how filmmakers can express individual visions while working within a larger film industry. As a critical method, it is central in placing a creative filmmaker at the forefront of filmmaking, crediting her or him with their film's visual and narrative style and

essentially assigning ownership of a film to the filmmaker (Corrigan, 2001). From an audience perspective, it allows us to categorize films according to filmmakers with distinct styles, providing us with expectations depending on whether we plan to see a "Steven Spielberg film" or a "Luc Besson film." However, it is in this categorization that auteur theory reveals its primary flaw regarding film research. Except in certain cases, "rarely does a director have the total control that the term suggests, since anyone from a scriptwriter to an editor may be more responsible for the look and logic of a film" (Corrigan, 2001, p. 102).

Regardless of its primary limitation, auteur theory gets to the heart of national agency, especially as it relates to Hong Kong during the 1980s, because the central claim is that filmmakers consciously use formal elements and genre conventions to define a cultural experience. Furthermore, its limitation is lessened when combined with formalism and genre analysis, both of which posit that filmmakers are in fact limited in their filmmaking choices as a result of historically based conventions and styles.

Therefore, a combination of auteur theory, formalism, and genre analysis to film research subsequently describes filmmaking as a series of deliberate choices which result in unique cultural artifacts that participate in shaping a national agency. These subgenres make for a useful combination in understanding the films under analysis as distinct Hong Kong films. Furthermore, as Hong Kong New Wave *wuxia pian* films premiered at a time when Cantonese-language cinema was overshadowed by foreign competition, their relationship to the city of Hong Kong and its local themes and concerns as well as their

visual and thematic representation of the Hong Kong experience necessitate research from multiple perspectives.

Limitations of a National Agency Approach

While approaching the concept of national cinemas from a national agency perspective is an invigorating method of research, it has limitations. In critiquing Berry's focus on national agency and its relationship to national cinemas, Zhang (2004) claims that its chief weakness is its ambiguous nature. This weakness, as with a national cinema methodology, comes from the vague concept of *national*. In terms of a national agency, questions arise as to what exactly contributes in a discursive manner to a larger, collective identity. For example, Berry (1998) examines the Taiwanese film *City of Sadness* (1989), pointing out that the film's central theme, the failed revolution against the Kuomintang government in 1947, is largely portrayed in the film through the effects that it has on the individual characters. Is this creating a *national* agency when it is depicted in a more personal manner despite the significance of the event? For Berry (1998), the answer lies with the audiences and how they choose to read films.

All film research exists in tension between analysis and interpretation (Bordwell, Staiger, & Thompson, 1985). Considering films as contributing to a national agency takes both content and culture into account, but Berry's (1998) proposition contains no clear structure for how such an analysis is to be conducted. While I have combined national agency with Bordwell's three-tier framework on analyzing Hong Kong cinema, it represents a methodological choice based on two primary reasons. First, it is necessary to examine the content, conventions, and modes of production of the selected texts in order

to understand how they function as unique films with distinct forms. Second, given Hong Kong's contested nature as a British colony with ties to China and the West, an examination of how Hong Kong cinema has attempted to define what it means to live in Hong Kong is most significant.

National Agency and Hong Kong *Wuxia Pian* Films

National agency, although it is related to established research methodologies such as formalism, genre criticism, and auteur theory, is a relatively new way to approach film research. Additionally, when applied to Hong Kong cinema, a national agency approach is confounded by the fact that conceiving of Hong Kong as a *nation* is a complex undertaking given its contested status as the bridge between East and West. According to Teo (2000), Hong Kong's long search for an identity is the most prominent theme in art films as well as purely commercial cinema. It is from this foundation that an overarching national agency approach, composed of formalism, genre criticism, and auteur theory, will be used to analyze the selected texts by Tsui Hark and Cheng Xiaodong using Bordwell's (2000) three-tier focus on visual style, genre conventions, and film production.

A national agency approach goes beyond a categorical methodology that labels films as authored by a particular nation and instead allows for a deeper analysis that examines how films contribute to the creation of a national identity or a national agency. The first aspect of the selected movies which will be examined is the visual style. As Bordwell states, "style is no less important [than norms of genre and stardom] for being invisible" (2000, p. 160). For each film, therefore, I examine visual elements ranging

from elements of the *mise-en-scene* to varying styles of action choreography. This will yield an understanding of the approach to filmmaking utilized by Hark and Xiaodong regarding the processes of staging, shooting, and cutting.

Secondly, this thesis will assume a generic approach in analyzing how visual elements work to define these films as part of a distinct genre of martial arts films. This represents a progressive move as it goes beyond a textual analysis to locate these films within a historical timeline, taking into account modes of film practice and filmmaking conventions. A genre analysis also marks the first step in truly getting to the heart of how the filmmakers use the selected texts to create a national agency because these films represents a consistent use of their individual filmmaking styles and themes. Studying genre conventions will yield a grasp of how *wuxia pian* films in the 1980s, while based on a historically popular genre, were re-imagined for the creation of a national agency.

Finally, this analysis will cover production elements ranging from casting to martial arts choreography and the relationship between films and audiences. For example, Bordwell (2000) describes the usual midnight screening of a Hong Kong film during its most productive years in the 1980s and early 1990s as a final opportunity for filmmakers to directly receive audience feedback before their films go into a wider release. The typical midnight screening was an important event in which the filmmakers would often attend the screening with highly critical local audiences who would provide direct and blunt feedback related to the film. This direct link between audiences and filmmakers had an effect on the mode of production that operated within Hong Kong. As with both the analyses of visual style and genre conventions, the focus is not only on what is visible on

screen, but also how these directors used their filmmaking skill and knowledge to both create unique films and to shape a national agency. This will yield an understanding of how *wuxia pian* films cater to local audiences in terms of casting and exhibition by providing audiences with identifiable stars and products for the purpose of fostering discourse and forging an identity.

As is implied in Bordwell's (2000) framework, these categories are not mutually exclusive. More importantly, the primary focus is on how these categories work together in discursively producing a national agency. For Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson (1985), a simple textual analysis is not enough, nor is an overemphasis on a historical timeline. Rather, the primary focus is on understanding not only how history has led to certain conventions and filmmaking practices, but also on how those practices are used for the creation of a national agency. In the case of Hong Kong during the 1980s, this is an especially relevant topic to explore as the city was in search of an identity as a result of its placement between East and West.

It should be noted, however, that Berry does not consider Hong Kong to be a viable field of study regarding national cinema because of its status as a former British colony and because its audience is "as much the Chinese global diaspora as it is the population of Hong Kong itself" (1998, p. 134). Regarding national agency, Berry (1998) does not illuminate Hong Kong's position in research. Counter to Berry's (1998) position, however, considering that global film exhibition is at least partially erasing borders between countries, it would seem that no country would be fit to examine as fostering a national agency through cinema. The fact of the matter is that Hong Kong cinema during

the 1980s, though films were indeed exhibited throughout the Chinese global diaspora, had a different impact on Hong Kong audiences as a result of filmmaking choices made by internationally trained filmmakers. However, Berry's position on Hong Kong and national agency also comes after both Hong Kong cinema's most productive years in the 1980s and 1990s and the 1997 changeover from British to Chinese rule.

Concluding Remarks

In summary, this examination focuses on the visual style, genre conventions, and production elements of *wuxia pian* films by Tsui Hark and Cheng Xiaodong, paying particular attention to formal and generic elements and how they work together to define these films as a specific national cinema of Hong Kong during the 1980s. In keeping with theme of placing creative control in the hands of the filmmakers rather than a larger, collective identity, this thesis will also analyze these films as products of creative auteurs who used filmmaking conventions and available resources in the Hong Kong film industry to create signature films. Finally, this thesis will consider how these visual elements and filmmaking choices contribute to the creation of a collective identity by placing them under the larger concept of national agency.

I have demonstrated how a national agency approach can be used to examine the contribution of Hong Kong New Wave *wuxia pian* films to Hong Kong's national agency. Although Hong Kong has historic and cultural ties to mainland China and Great Britain, it represents an important field of study as a result of its long search for an identity. It is this identity which can be better understood by examining films in context as well as examining how directors used filmmaking conventions to appeal to local audiences for

the purpose of contributing to a national agency. Using Bordwell's (2000) exhaustive framework for Hong Kong film analysis and approaching research from formal, generic, and auteur perspectives, this analysis will be comprehensive enough to claim that *wuxia pian* films released in Hong Kong in the 1980s and early 1990s represented a distinct national cinema and helped to define the experience of living in Hong Kong.

IV. ANALYSIS

An analysis of the films of Tsui Hark's and Cheng Xiaodong's films throughout the 1980s provides insight into how they both evolved as filmmakers in creating movies for Hong Kong audiences. Both directors received much of their training overseas. Hark studied filmmaking in Texas and Cheng, as a martial artist and action choreographer himself, is fluent in a variety of Asian fighting styles and used that knowledge to make his films more commercially viable. Their international training served to elevate their films in the eyes of Hong Kong audiences as the city itself has many international influences. Despite their international training, both Hark and Cheng worked in the larger Hong Kong film industry and within the established *wuxia pian* genre, yet they were able to creatively modify established conventions to provide audiences with films more "local" in terms of their visual styles, genre conventions, and production aspects. By modifying established filmmaking styles as well as genre conventions, Hark and Cheng created unique films that began to define the Hong Kong experience during the 1980s.

Analysis from a national agency perspective necessitates examination of the filmmaking choices made by directors for the subsequent purpose of explaining how they create a national agency. This thesis will therefore examine the visual style, genre conventions, and production elements of *The Butterfly Murders* (1979), *Zu: Warriors of the Magic Mountain* (1983), *Duel to the Death* (1983), *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987),

and *Swordsman II* (1992) from the perspectives of formalism, genre criticism, and auteur theory. Elements of the films' visual styles that will be analyzed are intense cinematic expression, what Bordwell (2000) defines as the fusion of visual and audible elements to create a striking scene or shot, cinematography and editing, *mise-en-scene*, color, and action and staging. Genre conventions that will be analyzed consist of recurring themes of conflict, character types, and action aesthetics. Production aspects have to do with the films' stars, budgets, and behind-the-scenes elements that worked to maintain the film industry.

Visual Style

A film's visual style encompasses all that is seen and heard on the screen and represents the foundation of a particular film. As Bordwell (2000) explains, the early days of cinema saw agreement among filmmakers on a style of filmmaking called the continuity style, which relies on techniques such as establishing shots, eyeline matching, and following an axis of action to convey information. While this style remained dominant for a number of years in many parts of the world, there gradually emerged new styles by which to organize films. The visual styles of Hark and Cheng, two prominent Hong Kong filmmakers throughout the 1980s, are characterized by more vibrant visuals, elaborate staging and action choreography, and an overall faster pace complete with faster cuts and more subjective point-of-view cinematography, but with great regard for visual flow and intense cinematic expression. This style of filmmaking is also complimented by striking compositions of color, lighting, and action.

The Butterfly Murders

As Hark's feature film debut, *The Butterfly Murders* represents the establishment of Hark's signature chaotic visual style, a style marked by highly stylized sequences of action, many of which feature fast-paced editing and disorienting cinematography, advanced special effects, the use of vibrant colors, and music that is less traditional and more Western. *The Butterfly Murders* is told in flashback form by Fong (Lau Siu-ming), a traveling scholar and collector of martial arts stories. Following the opening narration, the film follows Tien Fung (Huang Shutang), a martial arts master and leader of the Ten Flags Clan, as he travels with his clan to Shum Castle to investigate a series of mysterious murders involving butterflies. With this film, Hark showed both his knowledge of filmmaking conventions and began to establish himself as a unique creative force in Hong Kong cinema as a result of the stylistic choices Hark made as director.

Intense Cinematic Expression

For Hark, an intensely visual director, the use of intense cinematic expressions begins at the start of the film and continues throughout. The film opens with expositional narration by Fong who provides historical information about the martial arts world and describes how he came to be involved with Tien Fung, leader of the Ten Flags Clan. The narration can be heard over striking scenes of an ominous, foreboding sky and a barren desert. The opening scene concludes with a closeup of Fong's fist clenching a butterfly as a rousing pop song begins that relies less on traditional Chinese instruments and more on Western instruments and rhythms. No sooner does the pop song begin than it is interrupted mid-way through by the sound of a waterfall as the camera pans over a stream

full of dead bodies, the entire sequence setting a dark and pessimistic tone for the rest of the film.

As Bordwell (2000) explains, this type of cinematic expressiveness is not confined to a single shot, but can also be found in entire scenes. Following the introduction of Tien Fung, he issues orders to his clans as they prepare to investigate the mysterious butterfly incidents at Shum Castle. The scene cuts between shots of Tien Fung as he looks down on his clans from up high and his clans looking up to him as a trumpet fanfare grows louder. The lack of physical motion and camera movement draws attention to Tien Fung as the stoic and immovable hero of the film.

The most striking example of intense cinematic expression comes in the final fight between Tien Fung and Master Shum (Guozhu Zhang), a scene which makes use of high speed photography to emphasize the impact of the scene. Set in the caverns beneath the castle, Master Shum attempts to flee his battle with Tien Fung by using his grappling hook. Just as he begins sliding down his rope, Tien Fung leaps off of the ledge above to grab onto Shum's body, cascading down the rope and crashing Master Shum's head into the opposite wall. Aside from the culmination of the fight, the scene represents a dramatic combination of visual and audible elements. After hooking his grappling hook into a far off wall, the film cuts to a wider shot as Master Shum begins to slide in slow motion with Tien Fung leaping off the ledge above him. With the score striking a loud chord, the actors scream as they slide down the rope. The film cuts between shots of the actors sliding toward the camera and shots of the oncoming wall zooming in toward the camera. Tien Fung's victory is visually sealed with a shot of blood splattering on the wall.

Cinematography and Editing

While the cinematography during scenes of dialogue (initially following the opening credits) relies on traditional techniques such as establishing shots and shot-reverse-shot cinematography, the camera work becomes increasingly chaotic and more expressive once the action begins. As members of Tien Fung's White Flag Clan chase a murder suspect through a field of tall grass, the camera shifts back and forth from a first person perspective of the suspect, a third person perspective behind the suspect, and lateral tracking shot as the suspect runs, signifying the chaotic nature of the chase. Once the suspect is caught by the clan's leader, a short one-on-one fight ensues with the camera fixed on close-ups of the characters only to quickly zoom out or cut to a wider shot to see the physical actions and uses of weapons.

Many of the film's later action scenes consist of butterflies attacking people. It is in these scenes where Hark's creative use of editing and camera movements begin to show. In the scenes leading up to the first butterfly attack, Hark crosscuts between closeups of butterflies as they stalk a group of graverobbers and closeups of the graverobbers, focusing specifically on the sweat glistening on their bodies. It is a rhythmic series of cuts that serves to heighten tension before the butterflies actually attack.

In a later attack at Shum Castle, Hark creates chaos by simply shaking the camera amidst a series of quick cuts of characters swatting at butterflies in a panic. However, when one of the characters falls over a railing to a lower part of the room, the camera quickly cants 90 degrees counter-clockwise to visually counter the actor's clockwise

falling motion. The take is short, but it stands out not only because it is the only shot like it in the scene and one of the few shots like it in the entire film, but also because there is a noticeably stronger and more involving physical impact that does not come through in the more standard, chaotic camera shaking.

Mise-en-scene

The film's setting is primarily in and underneath Shum Castle. As the residents have either gone missing or have been killed, the castle is in a state of disrepair. Many of the windows, covered by traditional paper screens, are torn and the entire castle's position in a desert-like location gives it a dusty, faded, and colorless appearance. Underneath the castle is a twisting maze of caverns and various store rooms. One of those rooms, filled with experimental armaments and dead butterflies, is reminiscent of laboratories found in horror films.

The lighting scheme found in *The Butterfly Murders* is a key component of its visual style. Unlike other *wuxia pian* films before it, much of the action in *The Butterfly Murders* takes place either at night or in underground caverns, necessitating the need to properly illuminate the action. While the dark visuals of the film fit in with its overall mystery, it also serves to differentiate the film from its predecessors as a new style of *wuxia pian*, one more visually similar to Western science fiction, horror, and film noir genres that use harsh lighting to create shadowy and ominous atmospheres.

Making use of vibrant colors with regards to costumes, Hark opts less for traditional attire found in previous films of the genre and more for color-coded clans and characters that visually stand out. Tien Fung's clans are distinguished by their stark white

or bright red uniforms, signaling the specific faction they belong to. Likewise, Tien Fung himself is dressed completely in black, giving him both an air of superiority and identifying him as a skilled warrior independent of his troops. It is significant also because black is typically associated with masculinity and strength, traits that are possessed by Tien Fung.

The introduction of the film's heroine is marked by an explosive use of the color green. Walking a path surrounded by trees, Tien Fung is approached by Green Shadow (Michelle Mee) who makes her entrance swinging from tree to tree using a grappling hook for transportation. She is dressed completely in bright green to match the surrounding foliage. These colors appear all the more striking when juxtaposed against the film's future locales, such as in and around Shum Castle and in the underground caverns. These locales are marked by muted earth tones and a general lack of vibrant colors.

The film's pessimistic themes are complimented by the actors' performances, all of which are relatively stoic in nature. In contrast to later *wuxia pian* films, character behavior is understated. Tien Fung's entrance into Shum Castle is depicted in a slow manner as he takes time to observe his surroundings. This carries throughout the rest of the film as dialogue scenes especially rely on rigid performances to complement the film's themes of pessimism and uncertainty.

Action and Staging

The film's first action scene is brief, but is characteristic of the more fantastical choreography that is utilized later. While running from members of the Tien Fung's

White Flag clan, a suspected murderer performs an impossible jump down a hillside. However, most of the jump occurs off camera, serving more as a hint of actions to come in later fight scenes. Upon landing, he is confronted with the leader of the White Flag Clan who dispatches him at close range with a hook-like weapon after a few physical exchanges.

The film's first major scene of physical combat occurs almost an hour into the film. As such, it takes on less of a perfunctory purpose and is more the explosive product of the film's intensifying mystery element and the appearance at Shum Castle of the Thunders, outlaws skilled in different styles of martial arts. While waiting for the third Thunder to arrive at the castle, the other two Thunders, Kwok Li and Li Kim (Eddy Ko and Jiang Wang respectively), voice their concerns to one another over the presence of Tien Fung as his clan represents a threat to theirs. Kwok Li says to Li Kim, "There are only two kinds of people. One is our men, the other is our enemy."

At this point, a mysterious figure (who is thought to be the third Thunder) appears and attempts to kill Madam Shum while she sleeps. After he is discovered, members of the White Flag Clan descend upon him with their curved blades. Deviating from traditional fight scenes, the masked man is wearing black, flexible armor that renders him invulnerable to blade strikes and allows him to mercilessly pummel the White Flag Clan. It is a very claustrophobic fight that takes place inside a bed chamber, making use of close-range strikes to create a sense of urgency for the outmatched White Flag Clan with a strong, foregrounded emphasis on the effects of the characters' physical strikes. Characters are sent flying from strikes by the masked man and spit up blood when struck.

Once the masked man moves outside, Hark uses the open space to elevate the fight to new heights. Confronted with Tien Fung, who wields a short club for a weapon, the masked man is soon beaten into submission, eventually using a concealed grappling hook to pull himself up to the rooftops. It is at this point that the masked man and Green Shadow, herself proficient with a similar weapon, confront each other while swinging from rooftop to rooftop. That these characters can perform seemingly impossible physical feats is never treated as enigmatic or out of the ordinary. It is instead accepted as normal in the story world. Additionally, although the action is taken for granted in the story world, it is all the more striking and visually stunning when juxtaposed against the claustrophobic nature of the interior fight scene just minutes before.

The final sequence in which Tien Fung and Green Shadow battle the masked man, now discovered to be Master Shum himself, and Kwok Li is an extended sequence that pulls together all of the techniques utilized in previous action scenes. Taking place in the castle courtyard as well as in the underground caverns, the sequence uses extensive pyrotechnics, brutal physical combat, wire-assisted combat, and the destruction of the castle set itself to end the film on a visually powerful note and to demonstrate Hark's ability to creatively stage action in a variety of locales.

The most notable scene in the sequence is when Tien Fung kills Master Shum. It is striking not only because of the inherent difficulty in killing a character who is armored from head to toe, but also because it is the only shot in the film photographed in high speed, dramatically slowing down the visual look of the action while heightening its dramatic and visual impact. After stripping Master Shum of his helmet, Tien Fung leaps

onto Master Shum as he fires his grappling hook into a far away wall in an attempt to flee, sliding along the rope with him and crashing Master Shum's head into the wall. The leap itself is played out in painfully slow motion, concluding with a shot of blood splattering onto the wall after the impact.

Summary of Important Points

As Hark's debut film, *The Butterfly Murders* contains many visual elements that would define his later films. Action scenes are highly stylized, with many scenes featuring characters fighting while suspended from wires and grappling hooks. Action scenes are more visually stunning thanks to the film's sophistication in terms of its *mise-en-scene* compared with previous Hong Kong films. Furthermore, the stylized action scenes visually counter the actors' restrained performances. Finally, the color shift upon the characters' entrance to Shum Castle is an important visual juxtaposition that signifies their entrance into uncertain territory. These visual elements not only signaled an approach to filmmaking unique to Hong Kong, they complemented the city's fast-paced nature while calling attention to Hong Kong's emergence on to the world stage.

Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain

Zu is Hark's second *wuxia pian* film, made four years after the start of Hong Kong's New Wave. Its narrative is more complex, with a greater variety of settings and characters. The film follows Ti Ming-Chi (Yuen Biao) as he escapes from clan feuds in the real world to the fantasy world of Mount Zu. Once in Mount Zu, he becomes an apprentice to Ting Yin (Adam Cheng), a master swordsman, and learns that his fate is to destroy the evil Blood Demon with the help of Yi Chen (Mang Hoi), a Buddhist monk.

Visually, it is similar to *The Butterfly Murders* in terms of action aesthetics and genre conventions as Hark began to solidify his auteur status. In many ways, it is a logical extension of his previous film's stylistic aspects in that it incorporates many of the same visual elements while greatly expanding upon them. Thematically, however, it represents a tonal shift that affects the presentation and purpose of the action scenes. *Zu* is more comically satirical than pessimistic, and the action and recurring themes of conflict are often played for laughs. Despite this shift in tone, the film continues Hark's motif of juxtaposing color and surroundings as well as different types of actions to create striking visuals.

Intense Cinematic Expression

Zu is a more frenetic film compared with *The Butterfly Murders*, and nowhere is this more evident than the film's many action scenes. In keeping with the film's satirical approach to group conflict, the battles are often used to heighten the absurdity of conflict in general using well-choreographed martial arts and comedic motifs of coincidence and bad luck. Prior to a major battle, Ti Ming-Chi and Chang Mei (Sammo Hung), former rivals who now realize that they have a common enemy in the form of authority, are shown relaxing in a forest. After remarking that they would not be able to have such a nice conversation if they were on the battlefield, they are suddenly surrounded by multiple armies who turn the tranquil setting into a battlefield. At this point, Chang Mei shouts out, "Not again!" leading to a lengthy sequence in which these two warriors use their skills in a pretend duel to avoid war.

Armies in red, green, and yellow charge each other as swords clash and bodies fly through the air. Ti Ming-Chi and Chang Mei begin to fight against each other so as to appear preoccupied and engaged in battle. In one particular sequence, the camera laterally follows the two as they shuffle away and clash swords in purposely bad choreography, all for the sake of exiting the battle as soon as possible. The film then cuts to each of their faces as they look away from each other to avoid nearby skirmishes while continuing their pretend duel. These two shots also let the audience know that Ti Ming-Chi and Chang Mei are not watching each other as they are escaping. After the film cuts back to a wider shot, Ti Ming-Chi is suddenly pulled away and replaced with a soldier intent on killing Chang Mei. Chang Mei does not realize it until he notices that Ti Ming-Chi's strikes have become harder and more aggressive, at which point he looks, sees the snarling face of a rival soldier rather than Ti Ming-Chi, and goes on the offensive. This sequence demonstrates how visual and audible elements work together in the film to create physical comedy based on coincidence.

A singular moment in the film is the introduction of the Countess of the Jade Pool Faerie Fortress, played by legendary Taiwanese actress Brigitte Lin. Yi Chen brings his wounded master Hsiao Yu (Damian Lau) to the fortress to be healed by the Countess. Accompanied by Ting Yin and Ti Ming-Chi, he learns that if the Countess does not appear before a blue flame in the fortress is extinguished, it is fate that his master dies. Hoping to keep the flame alive with his magical powers until the Countess arrives, Ting Yin holds it above his fingers with a determined look as Hsiao Yu's wounded form is seen in the background. The film then cuts to the Countess' servants as they angrily leap

in front of the door leading to the Countess' chambers, a high angle shot signifying their determination to uphold their society's rules and regulations. Suddenly the music stops and a close up shot shows the door open, brilliant white light spilling out into the hall. A stream of white fabric flies from the open door followed by a high angle shot of the Countess flying directly over the camera. A 180 degree cut shows her flying away from the camera as she lands on a giant elephant statue. Two quick axial cuts then bring the Countess into a close up shot as she gazes directly into the camera with a piercing stare. Here, the combination of motion, rhythm, and performance is used as a striking introduction to the film's female protagonist.

Cinematography and Editing

The most notable departure for *Zu* from the editing style of *The Butterfly Murder*s is an increase in the use of shorter takes. In keeping with the films frenetic nature with regards to the speed and style of the action, the time between cuts is drastically shorter, reflecting Hark's contemporary and more commercial approach to making films in Hong Kong. This becomes most noticeable in the action scenes. However, despite the use of quick cuts, the action is never unintelligible or obscured but is instead enhanced in its physical intensity by the combination of quick cuts and precise camera work.

The cinematography is more objective in that it guides audiences through the action rather than subjectively involving them. In other words, whereas *The Butterfly Murders* featured many subjective camera angles as well as handheld style footage during battle scenes to involve the audience in the mystery element, *Zu* is more about conveying spectacular images and actions in a clear manner. As such, the camera is primarily

objective, guiding audiences through the film in order to highlight the action in the best way possible. As many of the characters in the film are essentially able to fly without the aid of grappling hooks, Hark uses all of the available space around the actors to enhance their actions, moving the camera counter to onscreen action, as he did in *The Butterfly Murders*, as well as with the action to a much greater effect.

Mise-en-scene

The settings of *Zu* are varied and distinct and demonstrate Hark's ability to give his films a very organic feel. The opening setting on the beach sets the pace and tone of the film with the crashing waves in the background. Later scenes on Mount Zu, such as a dilapidated temple and the cave of the Blood Demon, are dressed to look ominous and lifeless. The temple especially is dusty and in an extreme state of disrepair. The Jade Pool Faerie Fortress is the most distinct as it is the set with the greatest amount of color and light. It is filled with statues of elephants and Buddha, giving it a very spiritual feel. Furthermore, as it is set underwater, it has a very bluish look to it and the delicate actions of the Countess and her servants suggest a very fluid environment. With all of the sets, there is a great sense of life in that large pieces of the set are capable of moving. In the Fortress, the large elephant statues fly around the room at the Countess' will while elsewhere, Long Brows uses his eyebrows to cover the Blood Demon with the myriad of human skulls that line the ground inside the Blood Demon's cave.

As with *The Butterfly Murders*, many of *Zu*'s scenes take place in dark locales. Rather than rely on a more natural lighting style, however, Hark relies on thunderstorms, pyrotechnics, fire, and the film's many special effects to light the film's sets. In a later

scene where Ti Ming-Chi is confronted by the Blood Demon, casting an evil red light, and Long Brow (another character also played by Sammo Hung), casting a tranquil blue light, the film alternates between the two contrasting colors as if lit by a flashing neon sign. This lighting style continues throughout the film and is a strong departure from the natural style of the film's opening, outdoor scenes. This shift, however, occurs when Ti Ming-Chi enters Mount Zu, signifying his departure to another world radically different from the one he knows. Furthermore, the use of red to represent a larger evil is a motif that plays heavily into Hark's future films.

The characters' costumes are functional in that they define the characters' personalities and roles. Ti Ming-Chi and Chang Mei are dressed in armor suited for low-ranking soldiers and carry curved swords. Hsiao Yu and Yi Chen wear traditional Buddhist robes and use long staffs for weapons. Ting Yin, as the film's stoic hero, is dressed in the stark white robes and black hat of a swordsman and he carries a more refined Tai Chi sword. Lastly, as the Countess exists in an underwater fortress, her ensemble consists of brightly colored robes with long, flowing trails which give her an element of mystery and otherworldly beauty.

Compared with the performances in *The Butterfly Murders*, the characters in *Zu* appear much more animated, even when not engaged in action scenes. Their function is to provide exaggerated physical comedy. After meeting Chang Mei, Ti Ming-Chi follows him to return his water bottle. He trips on an exposed tree root and throws the water bottle while falling, hitting Chang Mei in the head in an comically exaggerated manner.

Actions like this during the film's dialogue scenes create a consistent appearance of physicality throughout the film.

Somewhat counter to the dialogue scenes, performances in the film's action scenes feature quick, exaggerated movements that are punctuated by distinct stances and poses. These poses call attention to the fact that the position of the body is important in martial arts. However, many of these pauses are given substantial screen time, calling attention to singular moments of clarity and stability amidst the clamor of chaos and unrest.

Color

Harks's use of color in *Zu* greatly outshines the somewhat muted tones of *The Butterfly Murders*, with warring clans outfitted in bright uniforms to signify their allegiance. In a large-scale battle between green, yellow, and red troops, Ti Ming-Chi notes, in a self-reflexive manner, "this sure is a colorful battle!" Aside from the colors of the clans' uniforms, Hark experiments with more vibrant and expressive colors in the film's fantasy sequences. In a scene where Ti Ming-Chi is battling a demon who hides in the shadows of a dilapidated temple, the demon's bright blue eyes can be seen in the darkness. When illuminated by a flash of lightning, its brightly colored form becomes readily noticeable. The colors found in the film's fantasy sequences take precedence over the segregation due to colored uniforms, erasing any distinctions between characters and placing them all in opposition against a larger evil.

Action and Staging

As a film that is more fantasy-oriented than *The Butterfly Murders*, *Zu* features a greater variety of more sophisticated special effects and more elaborate sequences of action. The first major action scene, occurring a mere five minutes into the film, features an increased usage of wires as Ti Ming-Chi avoids the wrath of his own army. Surrounded by fellow troops intent on killing him, Ti Ming-Chi kicks a troop in the back of the legs, causing him to fall to his knees. He then steps onto his back and, leaping high into the air, jumps from horse to horse until he rides away. Occurring on a beach with waves crashing in the background, the scene is less a natural part of the story and serves more as an impressive introduction to the physical skills of real life martial artist Yuen Biao, who also choreographed the action for the film, and to the high-flying style of martial arts to be featured in the film.

Unlike this first action scene, many of the film's later action scenes involve physical comedy. After escaping from his fellow troops, Ti Ming-Chi happens upon a boat which he tries to hijack. Unknown to him, the boat was already hijacked by a solder from another army. When asked why he cannot take Ti Ming-Chi across the river, the man on the boat states, "The sword behind me says no." What follows is a lightning fast exchange of moves and strikes between Ti Ming-Chi and Chang Mei, the other hijacker, on the deck of the small boat. The fight is more flashy than visceral, using shorter takes and capitalizing on the skills of the actors, both of whom studied in the same Peking Opera school when they were younger. As they fight, they get closer and closer to the boatman who eventually dives into the river to avoid being cut down.

Large-scale action scenes in *Zu* also benefit from the film's comedic and fantasy elements. As opposed to *The Butterfly Murders*, in which the action was depicted as brutal, raw, and carrying severe consequences, much of the action in *Zu* is played for laughs as Ti Ming Chi and Chang Mei use their abilities to avoid any confrontations. Rather than fight against their enemies, they pretend to fight with each other so as not to attract attention. To emphasize the humor of the whole sequence, Chang Mei even gets angry with Ti Ming-Chi for hitting too hard. In this sequence, the film juxtaposes the intentionally bad choreography of the two non-combatants with the sheer chaos going on around them. Near the end of the battle, both men pretend as though they have killed each other and remain still until it is safe to escape.

While the beginning of the film emphasizes the actual physical skills of the actors in humorous situations, later action scenes increasingly rely on a variety of special effects. In one scene, Ti Ming-Chi battles a demon that hides in the shadows and flies around the room with ease. The scene makes heavy use of wires as Ti Ming-Chi leaps to the rafters to avoid the demon. He is rescued by Ting-Yin, a master martial artist who commands a flying sword. Soon after, two warrior monks make an appearance, one using the other as a vessel on which to fly. In a sequence that uses computer effects, pyrotechnics, animation, and wire-assisted stunts, all four characters battle the demon.

Summary of Important Points

Zu is significant in that it represents a refined example of Hark's unique visual style. Color is again used to signify a visual and thematic shift as Ti Ming-Chi enters the unknown world of Mount Zu, but the use of red to signify evil is a metaphor for evil and

imperial authority that would surface in many of Hark's future films. The film's action choreography is also more stylized, making use of a variety of sophisticated visual and special effects and wire-assisted stunts to portray a fantasy world. Finally, performances are more expressive in terms of physical comedy and exaggerated actions. Therefore, *Zu* directly catered to citizens of Hong Kong with its commercial sensibilities, but it nevertheless posed important questions related to local concerns and anxieties.

Duel to the Death

After working as a stuntman and choreographer, Cheng Xiaodong made his directorial debut with *Duel to the Death* (1983). *Duel to the Death* stars Damian Lau and Norman Chu as rival swordsmen Ching Wan and Hashimoto, from China and Japan respectively. They are chosen to participate in a historic duel to the death that takes place every 10 years between the two countries. From a visual standpoint, it stands similar to Hark's *wuxia pian* films in terms of creative use of wire-assisted stunts and outlandish visuals, with a great deal more graphic violence, but with a much faster yet fluid style of choreography that would develop into and remain Cheng's signature style in his future films.

Intense Cinematic Expression

Intense cinematic expression can be found in the rhythm of the film's many action scenes. By Cheng's own admission, his purpose in making *Duel to the Death* in the manner he chose was to make it as commercially viable as possible. To accomplish this, action physics were reimagined with an emphasis on the human body in intense physical action to portray body's strength and power independent of explicit magical elements. A

duel on the beach between Buddhist monks and ninjas concludes with the ninjas burying stolen information and then blowing themselves up while attached to the monks. A closeup shot of a ninjas burying a scroll in the sand is followed by a medium shot of two ninjas, side by side, as they open their uniforms to reveal sticks of dynamite with fighting going on around them. With sparks flying from the dynamite's fuse, the ninjas leap gracefully into the air, landing on unsuspecting monks and then detonating. This is seen four times in much the same manner, with the graceful nature of the jumps juxtaposed against the bright flash and resonating sound of the explosion. After the fourth explosion, there is a quick montage of five more explosions. The scene concludes with a freeze frame of the last explosion, emphasizing the explosive nature of the attack. The scene would not be as powerful if Cheng shied away from the graphic outcomes of the explosions. Instead, using prosthetics and life size dummies, the monks and ninjas appear to suffer horrible fates.

Cheng's aim with *Duel to the Death* appears to be a focus on a plausible martial arts world. In other words, there are no elements of magic or science fiction. Characters do not have magical abilities that allow them to throw spiritual projectiles. The characters do, however, have otherworldly abilities that allow them to defy gravity. This focus on the skills of the human body allows Cheng to manipulate physical actions in imaginative and more realistic ways. In one sequence, Ching Wan and Hashimoto arrive at the dueling ground, the Holy Sword House. They are greeted by Master Han who is fishing on a raft in the middle of a pond. He asks them to come closer, prompting them to leap from their building to his raft. At the last minute, he steers his raft away. To avoid landing in the

water, Ching Wan throws his sword into the water and uses it as a stepping stone, grasping it again after leaping back into the air. Hashimoto places his sword underneath his feet and kicks off of it in mid-air. The editing is remarkable, for their outlandish actions are visually understood in a clear manner without further explanation. What really makes the scene stand out is the use of high speed photography, drawing attention to the grace and beauty of their amazing abilities.

The film's violence cannot be ignored. Compared with past *wuxia pian* films where characters often suffered stabbings or lacerations during fights, Cheng uses everything from beheadings to amputations to more symbolic stabbings in order to convey the impact of the action. They are symbolic in that they represent the characters' true fighting spirit and desire for fair competition. In the final moments of the duel between Ching Wan and Hashimoto, both suffer debilitating injuries. As Hashimoto lunges at Ching Wan, Ching Wan's gut reaction is to grab Hashimoto's sword by the blade to stop it. The film then cuts to a shot of Hashimoto as he begins to twist his sword, followed by a closeup shot of Ching Wan's hand as his fingers are severed by Hashimoto's blade. This is then followed by Ching Wan swinging his sword, cutting a deep gash in Hashimoto's chest, and finally by a shot of Hashimoto raising his sword to sever Ching Wan's sword arm at the shoulder. The scene concludes with the two slowly walking away from one another as their fight is essentially over. As Ching Wan grasps his wound, Hashimoto is seen over his shoulder. The film cuts to a medium shot of Hashimoto as he stabs his own sword downward into his foot to keep from falling. The shot-reverse-shot rhythm is quick and clear, and the speed of the sequence adds power to

their actions and meaning to their injuries. The end of the scene, with its slower rhythm, is all the more devastating for we know that both men fought to the death.

Cinematography and Editing

Like other *wuxia pian* films, the purpose of editing and cinematography in *Duel to the Death* is to maximize the impact of the action. As the fight scenes often incorporate multiple fighters, editing is used as a visual guide that shifts attention from one sequence of action to another. For scenes in which a single character is fighting a group, cuts signify a change in attacker as they come from all different directions. For scenes involving groups fighting groups, cuts are used to switch between different members of the groups. Finally, within any fight scene, cuts break up a specific exchange of moves and signify when a new attack begins.

Within many of the fight scenes, there are long takes of unbroken action, often shot in objective wide shots to establish the style of action before the camera moves in closer. Unlike *Zu*, the cinematography combines both objective and subjective camera shots, giving the audience a spectator-like view of the action while involving them in a very fluid manner. Establishing subjective shots are used to show which enemy characters are facing. More objective shots are used during the fight scenes with the camera following the direction of the actors' movements as well as the movements of the weapons, highlighting specific hits and strikes as well as the amazingly detailed choreography.

The film also features camera moves that both physically counter and follow on-screen action. In one shot, a ninja runs toward the left of the screen and performs a flip off

of a short ledge. As he spins and lands, the camera cants 45 degrees clockwise to counter his action while tilting down to follow the actor's motion. This is immediately followed by a shot of the same ninja performing another flip directly over the camera as the camera tilts up to follow the action. The takes are very quick, but the effect is exhilarating and involving without being disorienting.

Mise-en-scene

The film's setting is primarily functional as opposed to expressive. Many of the fight scenes take place outside in unremarkable open areas. Interiors are represented by traditional homes with a minimum of set dressing. This is in keeping with Cheng's focus on the outlandish action to make the film commercially successful. There are, however, two sets that have more expressive qualities. In an early sequence, Ching Wan is making his way to the dueling grounds and travels through a crowded entertainment district at night. The set is filled with bright, red lanterns and is populated with a number of kiosks and other attractions. The sequence is important for it introduces the character of Sing-Lam who later falls in love with Ching Wan. The second expressive set is underneath the Holy Sword House where a number of Chinese martial arts masters are being kept hostage by Master Han. Suspended from a spider web of rope above a seemingly bottomless pit, there is nothing visible besides the actors. The stark emptiness of the scene stands out and adds an extra element of mystery to the story.

Unlike Hark's films in which night scenes are shot at night with careful lighting schemes, *Duel to the Death* features a day-for-night shot at the beginning of the film. Its inclusion is a bit glaring as it clashes with actual night scenes that take place soon after. It

does, however, reflect the fast-paced nature of Hong Kong cinema in that films are often made very quickly with little preparation time. Regardless, the film's many night scenes are splendid in their lighting scheme as they are lit by bright, red lanterns, as in crowded marketplaces and entertainment districts, or small, intimate fires for more intimate exchanges between characters. However, unlike all of the night scenes in *The Butterfly Murders* in which light sources, such as torches and lanterns, are visible on screen, other night scenes in *Duel to the Death* are brightly lit without any visible, diegetic source light sources.

One scene also stands out as the only instance in the film where lighting is used to directly represent emotions. In this scene, which takes place at night and is lit by a large torch, Hashimoto is confronted by Kenji (Eddy Ko), a Japanese Buddhist monk sent to watch over Hashimoto, and a squad of ninjas. After learning from Kenji that the duel itself is a distraction and that other Japanese warriors plan to kidnap China's best fighters to learn their kung fu, Hashimoto is devastated. After all, he is a warrior who seeks perfection through honorable duels with worthy opponents. As the ninjas and Kenji vanish into the nearby woods, the torch goes out, extinguishing all light in the scene except for a single spotlight on Hashimoto's kneeled form, representing his feeling of isolation and betrayal. Aside from this one shot, the consistent and sometimes un-realistic style of lighting in *Duel to the Death* is not used to compliment the film's story or tone but rather to highlight the action as best as it can.

The costumes and look of the characters are significant in defining the characters and their backgrounds. The introduction of Hashimoto, the representative from Japan,

follows a conversation between Ching Wan and a Buddhist monk, each wearing traditional Chinese clothes. The monk especially stands out as his Buddhist attire is traditionally Chinese, complete with a red and orange robe and a necklace of large prayer beads. When the film cuts to Hashimoto, he is dressed in a black kimono as Japanese wind instruments play a solemn tune. Running past him is a large group of young boys dressed in fencing gear and on their way to practice kendo (Japanese-style fencing). The following scene sees Hashimoto in a meeting with Japanese samurai. They are dressed in traditional samurai attire and are most readily identifiable by their topknot hairstyle. This shift, however, is only visual as the actor himself is from Hong Kong and the characters are all speaking Cantonese. Similarly, the style of weapons are used to identify various characters in the film. Japanese characters carry curved samurai swords often attached to their waists while Ching Wan and other Chinese characters carry straight Tai Chi swords slung on their backs.

Costumes in the film are also used to dictate gender roles. At the beginning of the film, Sing Lam (Flora Cheung), daughter of Master Han, is dressed in men's clothing. Her demeanor is fierce and confrontational, and she engages in a number of battles herself. After she begins to develop feelings for Ching Wan, there is a lengthy sequence in which she changes into women's clothing, the camera slowly panning across her feminine form while slow dissolves replace the film's abundant use of quick cuts. Her character quickly becomes more demure and she urges Ching Wan to abandon the duel for her sake.

The performances in the film are forcefully restrained and represent a departure from the comedic histrionics of Hark's *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain.* As the central theme is one of perfection of the self through combat and fighting to the death, Damian Lau and Norman Chu portray their characters as perpetually stoic, only showing their emotions when confronted with the film's conspiracies and mystery villains. This style of acting fits the film without becoming humorous and therefore serves to anchor the film during its imaginative and sometimes over-the-top action sequences.

Color

Color in the film is used for functional purposes as it does not stand out in a striking manner as in other *wuxia pian* films in this analysis. Ching Wan, as a stoic swordsman, wears white robes. Sing Lam wears a variety of colorful dresses that go along with her costuming to define her as a feminine character. Perhaps the most striking use of color in the film is the use of red during the film's final duel. As both fighters are dressed in light clothing and set against a light background, the deep, red blood from their injuries visually stands out.

Action and Staging

From the start of the film, the action in *Duel to the Death* is fast-paced, outdoing even Hark's film *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain.* Most notable is Cheng's penchant for long tracking shots of continuous action. This can be seen in the opening sequence in which a squad of Japanese ninjas sneak into a castle. Beginning with a shot of windows opening, the camera trucks back as a ninja performs a flip and somersault through the window. In a continuous, fluid movement, the camera continues moving back

as ninjas flip and roll into frame from the left and right, striking a group pose while clutching their swords before continuing on their mission. This style of action can be seen not only in group action scenes, but also in one-on-one fights in which the actors exchange multiple moves before the scene is punctuated by a cut.

Unlike other *wuxia pian* films, *Duel to the Death* showcases Cheng's ability to stage massive action scenes involving dozens of characters at once. The opening raid on the castle by a squad of ninjas concludes with a large-scale battle between the ninjas and a group of Buddhist monks. Unlike other action films where actors can be spotted performing with a minimal amount of care simply because they are in the background, all of the actors in *Duel to the Death* have parts to play. A cursory glance at figures both in the foreground and background shows that everyone is performing carefully choreographed moves so as not to ruin the integrity of the scene.

The style of action in the film can best be described as dizzying. Characters spin into battle in a flurry of moves and weapon strikes that are very circular in nature. For example, Buddhist monks spin and swing their staffs in wide, circular arcs as they enter into battle. The squad of ninjas, working as a sort of collective force controlled by Kenji, enter into battle by flying, flipping, jumping, and rolling. When attacking a single enemy, they come from all directions in a continuous flow of action. The effect is exhilarating and the end result is flashy choreography performed with devastating force by all of the performers.

Summary of Important Points

Action choreography in *Duel to the Death* is the most stylized of any film in this analysis. Characters perform impossible, gravity-defying actions during many extended scenes of complex and expertly choreographed swordplay. These action scenes are enhanced by the film's graphic violence which adds greater physical impact to the actors' movements. The physical skills and stoic performances of Ching Wan and Hashimoto are also instrumental in defining their characters as heroic swordsman involved in a larger conflict. Therefore, as with other films in this analysis, *Duel to the Death* is concerned with local themes such as distrust of authority and the futility of conflict despite being a commercial film.

A Chinese Ghost Story

A Chinese Ghost Story is a significant film because it represents a true fusion of the commercial sensibilities of Hark, the film's producer, and the creative action aesthetics of Cheng, the director and action choreographer. The two worked together previously on Hark's *Peking Opera Blues* (1986), but *A Chinese Ghost Story* is their first true *wuxia pian* film together. It is also more explicitly romantic than previous *wuxia pian* films. *A Chinese Ghost Story* is about Ning (Leslie Cheung), a traveling tax collector who meets and falls in love with a female ghost named Nie (Joey Wong). With the help of the swordsman Yin (Wu Ma), Ning rescues Nie from her arranged marriage to the Lord of the Black Mountain, a demon of the underworld. As Bordwell (2000) points out, there is some dispute whether Hark or Cheng actually made a majority of filmmaking decisions

during the production process, but that is beyond the scope of this thesis. The film will therefore be analyzed as a Cheng Xiaodong film with creative input from Tsui Hark.

Intense Cinematic Expressions

A Chinese Ghost Story makes good use of the visuals and the actors' precisely staged performances to create striking scenes of comedy, action, and beauty. A memorable scene in the film sees Nie, a female ghost working for the evil tree demon Lau Lau (Lau Siu-Ming), conceal Ning insider her bathtub as Lau Lau and other female ghosts enter her room. Quick takes and exaggerated actions by the actors create visual chaos in the scene as Ning quickly runs out of breath, only to have Nie continually push his head under water anytime Lau Lau or another ghost approaches the bath tub.

Additionally, many of the scenes highlight the star system in place in Hong Kong at this time by beautifully showcasing the film's stars. In an early sequence, Ning arrives at Lan Yeuk Temple. Amidst a lighting scheme which gives the film an overwhelmingly blue composition, a high angle shot sees Ning walk up the stairs to his room. He then enters his room in a low angle shot which gives a good view of the condition of the temple, especially the dilapidated ceiling. The film cuts to a closeup of a window which slowly opens to reveal the ghostly face of Nie, her hair blowing across her face as she stares directly into the camera, and is accompanied by a short, vocalized tune which becomes her musical theme. As Ning continues to inspect his room, Nie quietly flies back from the window, never taking her eyes off of the camera, as the window slowly closes. The sequence concludes with a shot of a small lantern on a table as Ning picks it up to lift

it closer to his face, illuminating his handsome features and giving the scene a soft and warm feeling.

Cinematography and Editing

As with Cheng's previous *wuxia pian* films, the emphasis with cinematography and editing within the fights scenes in *A Chinese Ghost Story* is to highlight the film's action by providing a fast-paced rhythm and by visually focusing on the impacts of the characters' strikes and falls. The film's first extended fight sequence occurs between rival swordsmen Yin and Hsiao-Hou (Lam Wai). As they clash swords on the grounds of Lan Yeuk temple, the characters flip and fly, making use of the temple grounds' many objects and buildings. Quick cutaways show their swords striking inanimate objects and sometimes each other. The fight lasts for a total of one minute, but the characters cover a lot of ground, jumping to the temple's higher levels, kicking off of tall wooden poles, and covering the entire courtyard. The takes are quick, with an average length of less than one second, yet the cinematography is clear and focuses on the actors' motions and strikes to guide the audience through the mayhem.

In other scenes not involving swordplay, the purpose of the editing and cinematography is to emphasize any sort of physical action to keep the film moving at a fast pace. In a sequence in which Yin is jumping from tree to tree to avoid Lau Lau's deadly tongue, a wide shot sees Yin jump off of a tree as Lau Lau's tongue wraps around it. The film then cuts to a closeup of the tree as the tongue severs the top half of the tree before the sequence continues. The cutaway is fast but understandable and serves to make the rudimentary visual effects believable and more real.

The film's comedy scenes also benefit from creative uses of cinematography and editing. The character of Ning is portrayed as being out of his element and wholly unfamiliar with the spiritual world. When he arrives at Lan Yeuk Temple, he is in perpetual danger from long deceased men, now zombie-like figures, who lurk above and below his room waiting to kill him. Though Ning has no idea what is in the space above his room, he climbs a ladder to investigate as wide shots show the crawling figures of the zombies approach the ladder from above. Ning is saved when he leaves to investigate ghostly music coming from outside the temple, never realizing how close he came to death. During his trip back to the temple, the film crosscuts between shots of Ning approaching the temple and the zombies crawling down the ladder. As the ladder is placed in front of the door, Ning must force the door open to get in, causing the ladder and the zombies to fall and crash through the floor into the basement. This subplot concludes when Ning later ventures into the basement to find his jar of ink. In a precisely staged sequence, Ning unintentionally avoids the attacks of the zombies and unknowingly kills them by opening a window to light the basement.

In addition to the film's action and comedy scenes, there are a number of dialogue and romantic interludes between characters. Rather than clash with the quick editing of the fight scenes, they compliment them with their equally fast-paced nature and quick rhythm. The love scene between Ning and Nie relies on canted high and low angles to create a visual relationship between the two characters. As they begin to make love, the film cuts to shots of the pouring rain and dissolves in and out of flashbacks detailing how they first met. During the love scene, the hanging cloths that line the small temple begin

to flutter in the wind, casting reverberating shadows over their figures. The scene moves with a similar pace to the action scenes while still maintaining a focus on their romance.

Mise-en-scene

Outdoing both of their previous films, the settings in *A Chinese Ghost Story* are varied and highly expressive, giving the film an ethereal sense of beauty. The opening sequence in which an unknown character inside of a temple is seduced and ultimately killed by Nie and her master Lau Lau is filled with scrolls, books, and lanterns. The addition of flowing sheets of fabric hanging from the ceiling add a sense of fluidity to the ghostly scene. This setup continues in most of the film's interiors. Lau Lau's house is filled with pink, red, and purple cloths. On the other hand, Ning's room in Lan Yeuk Temple is run down and in a state of disrepair. The paper windows are filled with holes and there are gaps in the ceiling. When juxtaposed against one another, these two setting schemes provide a nice contrast between the drab reality of the human world and the ethereal beauty of the spirit world.

Early scenes also solidify Hark as the father of Hong Kong special effects. A wide shot of the town near which the majority of the film takes place depicts large pagodas in the background. As Bey Logan explains in the commentary accompanying the DVD, this was an early process shot used to give the film a more epic feel and to differentiate *A Chinese Ghost Story* from the original film as well as other contemporary Hong Kong films.

The lighting in the film is highly expressive. Scenes that take place in the underworld are characterized by deep blues and an overall dark composition that is also

reflected in the color of the costumes. This also reflects the film's horror elements in that many of the scenes are dark with little lighting, reflecting a fear of the unknown. This color composition is also used to signify a shift from the human world to the spirit world as it marks the first time that Ning is confronted by mysterious wolves in the forest and swordsman Yin at Lan Yeuk Temple. Other interiors, both in the spirit world and the human world, are marked by warm tones from lanterns and fires, a lighting scheme to be found in the later film *Swordsman II*.

The performances in the film are physically exaggerated, with many scenes relying on comically exaggerated actions and sight gags by actors Leslie Cheung and Wu Ma. In the sequence where they first meet, after Yin's battle with Hsiao-Hou, Yin gets right in the face of Ning and tells him to leave the temple. When Yin turns to leave, the lower half of his robe is accidentally torn by Ning. Other scenes emphasize the exaggerated dramatic effect of the actors' performances. When Lau Lau, suspicious that Nie has been communicating with humans, enters Nie's room, she slaps Nie hard across the face. Rather than simply turn her head with the slap, Joey Wong, or perhaps her stunt double, spins and flies backward to add emphasis to Lau Lau's attack. Therefore, with this film, more than previous films by both Hark and Cheng, performances are based on precise staging for dramatic and comic effect.

The costumes are used to identify each character's role in the film. Ning is dressed as an ordinary man, wearing plain, white robes, a pair of old sandals that are full of holes, and a black hat. Nie's flowing dresses add to her character's ethereal nature and perfectly compliment Joey Wong's beauty. The way her dress moves with her delicate actions

differentiates her from the other characters and identifies her as a wandering spirit. Furthermore, makeup is used to highlight her fair skin, making her more ghost-like. As a swordsman, Yin's costume is perfectly suited for battle. Aside from his sword which he keeps slung on his back, there are various projectiles which he can reach at a moment's notice during battle.

Color

A Chinese Ghost Story contains scenes of wondrous color that are used to express emotions and signify changes in tone. The scenes between Ning and Nie are dressed in variations of pink and white, signifying their love for one another. Nie wears dresses that are stark white or in shades of pink and purple, giving her an otherworldly appearance. On the other hand, the film features a number of ghosts and demons, including an extended sequence in which Ning and Yin travel to the underworld to rescue Nie from the Lord of the Black Mountain. These sequences are characterized by an abundance of deep blues and varying shades of black to elicit fear and uncertainty.

Additionally, the color red is used as a metaphor for a larger evil, a motif that began in Hark's film *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain*. The film's title sequence begins with a shot of a billowing red sheet filling up the screen as the title of the film fades in, the music striking a very ominous tone. This is followed by a sequence in which Ning seeks shelter from the rain inside a small shelter on the side of the path. Suddenly, a group of men run by the shelter, pursued by a man wielding a large sword who kills each one of them. After the last strike by the swordsman, the film cuts to a shot of Ning underneath the shelter as blood sprays onto his face. The appearance of such deep red

blood on the face of a pure, chivalrous character signifies his entrance into a sinister world.

Later in the film, Nie learns that she is to be married to the evil Lord of the Black Mountain. Her wedding dress is a flowing red dress, which she tries on for approval from Lau Lau. Although the dress is sumptuous and the scene itself showcases actress Joey Wong's beauty, it necessarily represents a larger, all-encompassing evil in the form of the Lord of the Black Mountain. *A Chinese Ghost Story* was made in 1987, three years after negotiations between Great Britain, Hong Kong, and the People's Republic of China decided Hong Kong's fate in the form of a looming changeover. As Hark was fearful of the impact the changeover would have on the autonomy of Hong Kong, red, a color typically associated with anger and hatred, is used to represent mainland China.

Action and Staging

Cheng Xiaodong was both the director and action choreographer of *A Chinese Ghost Story*. With a large amount of creative control over the film's many action scenes, his trademark style is clearly seen. To begin with, the film features a large amount of swordplay. As with *Duel to the Death*, these are expertly staged and choreographed, often featuring extended exchanges of unbroken action. The film's early fight scene between Yin and Hsiao-Hou is a prime example of Cheng's style. The two characters collide in a flurry of circular moves, punctuated by lengthy exchanges.

Unlike *Duel to the Death*, *A Chinese Ghost Story* also features action scenes that make use of magical and spiritual actions. As such, the staging during these action scenes involves complex wire-work. Much of the wirework involves the character of Nie who,

as a ghost, is able to fly, and Yin who is a master swordsman. Nie is seen effortlessly flying through the film's locales while Yin leaps into the air from various structures to defy gravity. There are also a variety of demons which the characters must battle and which give the action scenes added visual appeal. At one point in the film, Lau Lau's giant tongue splits open, revealing a hideous mouth with sharp teeth and tentacles.

Summary of Important Points

A Chinese Ghost Story features a number of important visual elements that continue both Hark's and Cheng's visual styles. Similar to *Zu*, the color red is once again used in *A Chinese Ghost Story* to represent evil in the form of an unholy demon. Action is highly stylized, relying on even more sophisticated effects such as pixellation and large-scale props but with a reliance on physical comedy, exaggerated performances, and romantic interludes. The result is again a commercial film that complements Hong Kong's fast-paced lifestyle, but the visual elements raise more direct concerns regarding Hong Kong's future in the face of the 1997 changeover from British to Chinese rule.

Swordsman II

Visually, *Swordsman II* is another brilliant collaboration between Hark and Cheng. The film features a similar style of action in keeping with Cheng's trademark style, but the outlandish aspects of the choreography are increased with a stronger emphasis on filling action scenes with as much motion as possible. Additionally, the film features a number of motifs common in Hark's pervious *wuxia pian* films such as expressive colors and striking visual compositions. *Swordsman II*, as the middle part of a trilogy, is a very complex films involving sects, clans, and uncertain allegiances. On his

way to retire to Wah Mountain with his fellow warriors, swordsman Ling (Jet Li) and his companion Kiddo (Michelle Reis) are pulled into a war against Asia the Invincible (Brigitte Lin), a powerful martial artist who seized control of the Sun Moon Sect and castrated himself in order to learn the most powerful form of martial arts.

Intense Cinematic Expressions

In terms of intense cinematic expressions, *Swordsman II* capitalizes on the piercing gaze of its star Brigitte Lin, playing the film's male villain Asia the Invincible. With her intense and expressive eyes, she is a key component of the film's most memorable scenes and stirring compositions of sound and visuals are use to portray her abilities as deadly and powerful. Swordsman Ling is riding through the woods when he suddenly hears an explosion in the nearby lake. He looks up and the camera cuts to his view as birds begin dropping from the sky, their bodies covering the path. The film then crosscuts between shots of the birds falling and the explosion in the lake subsiding as Ling performs an impossible jump to a tree limb to observe his surroundings. In a medium wide shot, Asia the Invincible rises from the center of the lake, expressionless and unblinking as he stares directly into the camera. His upper body visible in the frame, the emphasis is place on his physical actions as he raises his hands. Commanding the water itself, he begins to wave his arms and hurl water droplets into the nearby forest. All of this is played out in slow motion as the film cuts between Asia the Invincible and the trees and leaves in the forest becoming perforated from the projectile water. With this sequence, and without killing anyone, it is understood that he is a character of extraordinary skill as he essentially has the power to control nature.

A sequence further demonstrating Asia's powers occurs when he fights Ling's Wah Mountain brothers and members of the Sun Moon Sect. As he does not use a sword in battle, Asia's physical movements must be highly expressive. As the swordsmen charge him, he breaks their swords with a slow motion wave of his fan. Spreading his arms apart, a mist enshrouds him and his enemies, tearing them limb from limb. To deal with the remaining three swordsmen, a closeup shot shows him thrust his palm at the camera, followed by an immediate cut of the swordsmen's heads snapping back, blood pouring from their mouths and noses. In a delayed reaction, their bodies spontaneously explode, killing them instantly. This sequence, more than Asia's introduction in the film, shows how a combination of precisely staged actions combined with graphic uses of prosthetics and exaggerated reactions turn the character of Asia the Invincible into a formidable opponent.

Cinematography and Editing

As with other *wuxia pian* films, the purpose of the cinematography is to highlight the action. In *Swordsman II*, however, the action is increasingly complex, faster, and more reliant on wire-work than previous *wuxia pian* films. Cheng's approach to filming the action scenes is quite similar to his previous films, and the result is clarity of action and a focus on the most important pieces of action sequences. More so than his previous films, there is also an abundance of slow motion shots that punctuate the action scenes. As Ling, mistaken for an enemy spy, fights with Wu (Yen Shi-Kwan), Ling's extravagant swordplay, in which his sword literally spins around his body and his hand, is shown

using high speed photography and closeups. This style of cinematography helps to clarify the action further and allow us to witness the amazing and inventive choreography.

In scenes involving primarily dialogue, however, cinematography and editing are used to create striking visual compositions that substitute for physical action. In a scene where Ling talks with a loyal member of the Sun Moon Sect immediately after an extended fight sequence between the two, the cinematography relies on closeups and quick zooms to continue the visual action. The zoom ins are used to visually counter the onscreen action when, for example, characters move toward the camera. The effect is an exaggeration of their forward motion and the end result for the whole film is continuous motion through each and every scene.

Mise-en-scene

Swordsman II includes a variety of settings, from various inns and marketplaces to Asia the Invincible's fortress and underground dungeon. These sets demonstrate increasing sophistication regarding set dressing in Hong Kong *wuxia pian* films as they are made to look very organic. The interior of Asia's fortress contains needlepoint creations and multiple spools of thread as well as paintings and screens of various designs. This juxtaposed with his underground dungeon which is crawling with rats and has a very dark feel to it. The nature of the dungeon is best witnessed in Wu's cell where he is suspended from the ceiling by grotesque bone hooks that pierce his back.

The lighting in the film creates striking compositions that are used to elicit strong emotions. Scenes in which Ling and his Wah Mountain brothers are together in the inn are lit by roaring fires, creating strong, inviting, and consistent orange glows. This is

contrasted in scenes in Asia's fortress in which fires are used to create harsh contrasts between dark and light areas. Light is also filtered through red fabrics in later scenes involving Wu, the exiled leader of the Sun Moon Sect. This bathes entire scenes in a harsh red light that actually drowns out many of the actors' facial feature, making them almost indistinguishable.

Costumes are again used to define character types as well as gender roles. Ling and his Wah Mountain brothers wear clothing that identifies them as swordsmen, with plain white and black robes and black hats. As they are concerned chiefly with the practice of their Wah Mountain style of swordplay, unspectacular costumes fits their characters. Chief Ying and other members of the Sun Moon Sect, depicted in the film as exiled royalty, wear more elaborate and colorful dresses and large, turban-like hats.

Kiddo (played by famous Hong Kong beauty Michelle Reis), wears the clothes of a swordsman not because she is trying to disguise herself as a man, but because she is more of a tomboy-like character with martial arts skills. However, she has feelings for Ling and wants to show him that she is in fact a woman. In an early sequence, she changes her hairstyle into a more feminine style, using additional hairpieces, and puts on makeup in order to be noticed in a more sexual manner by Ling. In a similar sequence, Asia the Invincible is differentiated by her costume and makeup. Beginning the film as a man, he must castrate himself if he is to learn the ultimate power contained within the Sacred Volume. Asia's appearance gradually becomes more feminine in nature, and his complete transformation into a woman is sealed with women's clothes and the

application of makeup, a transformation that is immediately noticed by his lover and juxtaposed with the comedy of Kiddo's previous scene.

As with *A Chinese Ghost Story*, performances in *Swordsman II* are physically and sometimes comically exaggerated. However, every action carries meaning and is highly expressive. Performances are also used to counter elements of the cinematography such as quick zooms. To heighten the effect of a camera movement, the actors will move in the opposite direction. For example, characters will step toward the camera as it zooms in. Compared with Cheng's and Hark's previous films, this effect is heightened in *Swordsman II* as many of the scenes contain a number of actors who act in unison.

Color

Although much of the color in *Swordsman II* is muted due to the film's arid location and high exposure, many colors come through in expressive ways. The character of Asia the Invincible is notable for her bright, red ensembles. In keeping with Hark's motif of red as a metaphor for uncertainty and a larger evil, Asia the Invincible is seen as a villain in the film. However, Wu, although he is the rightful leader of the Sun Moon Sect, is arrogant and power-hungry. After he is freed from prison by Ling, he learns more of Asia the Invincible's takeover of his sect. The lighting scheme in the room changes from a warm, glowing orange to a fierce red color as Wu vows to kill Asia the Invincible.

Action and Staging

Swordsman II goes beyond other *wuxia pian* films in depicting the characters' amazing martial arts abilities. Intense wire-work and ever-increasing visual effects are used to create visual chaos in the action scenes. In a battle with Japanese ninjas, Chief

Ying (Rosamund Kwan) uses her whip to fight her enemy. Rather than simply strike him, she uses her whip to grab hold of full grown trees, ripping them right out of the ground and flinging them into the air. The Japanese ninjas ride giant flying blades and the character of Wu is able to suck the life out of characters with his bare hand and lift up large chunks of the ground beneath his feet to use in an attack. As can be seen with these examples, the action is highly stylized, going almost further than *Duel to the Death* in terms of outrageousness.

The film features many action scenes similar to Cheng's previous films. There are a number of large-scale battles that feature multiple characters, each performing very specific actions. Likewise, even in the non-action scenes, staging is extremely important to maintain the film's constant visual flow. In a scene which uses a similar staging setup as in the opening of *Duel to the Death* in which a squad of ninjas sneak into the Holy Sword House, Cheng pulls the camera back in one continuous motion as Chief Ying, Ling, and their fellow warriors come into frame one by one around a table to discuss how to deal with Asia the Invincible.

Important Points of the Films' Visual Styles

In all of the films under analysis, strong emphasis is placed on the complexity and clarity of the action sequences. They are highly stylized and fast-paced and help demonstrate the sophistication of Hong Kong New Wave cinema compared to previous Hong Kong films. The films also feature important visual shifts and juxtapositions which help foster feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Color shifts serve to signify the characters entering unknown environments and worlds. Similarly, stoic performances are juxtaposed

with expressive and stylized action scenes, highlighting the dark themes of films such as *The Butterfly Murders* and *Duel to the Death*. Finally, the color red is often used as a metaphor for evil and imperial authority.

Genre Conventions

Wuxia pian films have been mainstays in Hong Kong cinema since the introduction of film technology to the city. As such, there are a number of genre conventions that distinguish *wuxia pian* films from other martial arts films, most notably their reliance on fantasy elements, highly stylized choreography involving wires and harnesses, and themes involving conflict among martial arts clans. As creative forces in the fast-paced Hong Kong film industry of the 1980s, both Hark and Cheng utilized these common conventions, but, through the adaptation of new cinematic techniques and international influences, they critically and stylistically modified them to suit modern Hong Kong audiences. Therefore, Hong Kong New Wave *wuxia pian* films took on a new identity through a critical reworking of history and traditional filmmaking.

The Butterfly Murders

Relying on an established convention, Hark establishes the central theme of *The Butterfly Murders* as one involving conflict, unrest, and uncertainty. Overt narration at the start of the film details the history of wars and conflicts that have devastated the martial arts world, bringing an end to the “Old Era” and ushering in a “New Era” of unrest and chaos following a quiet period. This statement is highly prophetic and takes on new importance given the film’s timing and contribution to the Hong Kong New Wave.

Genre Amalgamation

Relying on more than just a traditional *wuxia pian* formula, Hark utilized a variety of other genres in making *The Butterfly Murders* a more unique film. The film has a strong mystery element. The secret of the butterflies is kept hidden until the climax of the film. Until then, Tien Fung and Green Shadow travel to Shum Castle and meet the master of the castle as well as Fong, the traveling scholar, as they learn more about the butterfly murders. As such, the film appropriates aspects of the *film noir* style. Upon reaching Shum Castle, Tien Fung and Green Shadow are ushered to the underground caverns, a location characterized by harsh lighting, creeping shadows, and an occasionally smoky atmosphere due to incense. What follows is a series of scenes in which the characters scour the castle looking for clues, happening on dead bodies during their search.

Hark also uses elements of the Western genre. Aside from the barren landscape in which the film takes place, reminiscent at times of the "frontier" found in Hollywood's classic Westerns, the film has clear distinctions between good and evil characters. At the beginning of the film, two of Tien Fung's soldiers speculate that Tien Fung desires to bring peace and stability to the martial arts world, signifying him as a man of power, but also a man of law and order. However, his quest to uncover the mystery of the Shum Castle murders is hindered by the appearance of three of the Four Thunders, dubious outlaws who have been summoned by the master of the castle, and each skilled in different forms of martial arts. Tien Fung's confrontation with Guo, a martial artist who uses a variety of explosives during combat, begins as a standoff, with the two warriors squaring off in the center courtyard of the castle waiting to see who draws first. The

mixture of various genres is a characteristic of Hark's filmmaking style that continued well into his later films.

Character Types

Likewise, the characters that populate the martial arts world of *The Butterfly Murders*, while rooted in *wuxia pian* films and novels of the past, are modified for younger, more critical audiences. Tien Fung, the boss of the Ten Flags clan, is portrayed less as a chivalrous and stoic hero and more like a rock star or comic book hero. Making his grand entrance on a rock situated above his army, an exaggerated low-angle shot sees him with one leg propped up on another rock, towering over his army. Dressed in a black ensemble with a flowing cape behind him, he represents a hero for the younger generation come to life. Later in the film, Tien Fung travels to Shum Castle to investigate a series of murders involving butterflies. In this sense, he takes on the role of detective with Green Shadow as his sidekick, adding a layer of mystery to a traditional *wuxia pian* framework.

Traditionally, classic *wuxia pian* films and novels feature very heroic characters, or *xia ke*. While the films of Hark and Cheng do feature many heroic martial artists, the main characters are often thrust into conflict not by their own choice, but by circumstance or bad luck. The main character in *The Butterfly Murders*, Fong, is not a swordsman but a traveling scholar "untrained in martial arts" who records the details of important events in the martial arts world and meets Tien Fung "in an intriguing encounter." Tien Fung himself states that "there's a great difference between writing and fighting," emphasizing Fong's intrusive nature into the martial arts world. After solving the mystery of the butterflies and discovering the identity of the masked man, Fong states that "a common

man in the martial [arts] world is usually looked down [on] by the others." As a scholar, historian, and the narrator of the film, Fong's purpose is not to illustrate a great distinction between the martial arts world and the non-martial arts world. He instead acts as a guide through this new style of *wuxia pian* filmmaking as created by Hark, taking audiences by the hand into the Hong Kong New Wave.

Action Aesthetics

As *wuxia pian* films are a genre of martial arts films, one of the most widely recognizable genre conventions is highly stylized action. Many characters in the film, therefore, are experienced martial artists. However, rather than rely on conventional and traditional weapons for use in the action scenes, Hark made creative use of new technology and innovations to depict their skills and weapons as markedly different and in line with their character types. The character Green Shadow, a free spirit character with no allegiance to any clan, is first seen swinging through the trees using a grappling hook which she keeps wrapped around her wrists. This weapon allows her to quickly move from place to place. She is also able to use it as a projectile to throw at enemies. Kwok Li, as one of the film's primary villains, is proficient with explosives, allowing him to start fires and hurl explosive projectiles with devastating effect. Tien Fung, a renowned fighter favoring closer combat, relies on a short, black club which he conceals in his attire. Finally, Master Shum is covered from head to toe in protective armor, making him invulnerable to most physical attacks. In addition to using a rocket-powered grappling hook for quick and stealthy movement, Master Shum uses his armored fists to literally bludgeon his enemies. As such, emphasis is placed on foregrounded action as characters'

strikes are shown to have clear and devastating effects on inanimate objects as well as other people.

Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain

Zu is more explicitly fantasy-based than *The Butterfly Murders*. The opening of the film begins with overt narration as the camera flies over a large-scale model of Mount Zu in Western China. The effect is crude by Hollywood standards, but remarkably well polished for a Hong Kong film at this time period. With this opening shot, Hark directly challenges genre conventions as he immediately establishes new visual conventions for *wuxia pian* films and presents the story as one involving mystery, folklore, and magic on an unprecedented epic scale.

Themes of Conflict

As with other *wuxia pian* films before it, *Zu* has recurring themes of conflict and unrest, but they are more explicitly humorous in nature. Like *The Butterfly Murders*, *Zu* begins with narration briefly describing the decades of civil war and unrest that have devastated 5th Century China, setting a pessimistic tone at the start of the film. The film then cuts to an army situated along the beach as the two commanders listen to news from their scout, Ti Ming-Chi. He tells them about the rival Yellow Troops who are recovering at San Chang Creek nearby. Feelings of pessimism and dread are soon put to rest as the two commanders, obvious authority figures, argue about whether to attack from land or from the water as Ti Min-Chi, remaining subordinate throughout their argument, claims in desperation that he will obey both of their orders. This prompts the second commander to yell, “That’s insubordination! I’ll kill you!” Ti Min-Chi then states, “Then I will obey

neither one of your orders!" Angered as well, the first commander shouts, "That's worse! Kill him!" Further countering the film's initial pessimism, Ti Ming-Chi later meets Chang Mei, a soldier from an opposing army. Upon becoming friends, Chang Mei says to Ti Ming-Chi, "We're both good men. We're just dressed in different colors."

Character Types

Like in *The Butterfly Murders*, the heroes of *Zu* are not heroes by choice. Although Ti Ming-Chi and Chang Mei are skilled swordsmen (played by martial artists), they are thrust into a conflict between magical forces while trying to avoid a growing conflict between other martial arts clans, despite belonging to opposing clans themselves. Here, however, the fish-out-of-water element is played for laughs unlike in *The Butterfly Murders* where the character of Fong is used for exposition and to guide the audience through the film's style and mystery. At the beginning of the film, there is a lengthy battle between different groups, each identified by their brightly colored uniforms. Wanting to live through the battle, Ti Ming-Chi and Chang Mei decide to help each other, alternating between playing dead and fending off enemies from all sides.

Genre Amalgamation

If *The Butterfly Murders* represented Hark's homage to *film noir* and mystery films, then *Zu* represents his appropriation of science fiction, fantasy, and adventure conventions for local audiences. To begin with, the film has a more spectacular approach to action and drama, giving it a swashbuckling feel similar to the serials that inspired a number of Hollywood adventure films. This comes not only from the film's common use of swords as weapons, but also because of its more lighthearted approach to conflict and

drama in a manner than involves comedy. This is cemented by the appearance of a dashing hero, Ting Yin, and a princess-like figure, the Countess, who become romantically involved.

Given its reliance on spectacular visual effects, *Zu* is more of a science fiction fantasy than other New Wave *wuxia pian* films of the 1980s. The massive number of explosions, computer effects, and elaborate and imaginative sets, including an underwater fortress, are more reminiscent of fantasy films than *wuxia pian* films. Given the style and variety of locations, it is as if the characters are traveling to different worlds. Similarly, the lighting scheme, with bright fluorescent lights illuminating smoky atmospheres, gives the film a futuristic, high tech look.

Thematically, the film's most prominent genre appropriation is that of slapstick comedy films. Physical humor is a form of comedy that relies on little cultural knowledge to be understood. It has also proven to be a commercially viable form of comedy and filmmaking in general for a number of years. With references to Hollywood comedy teams like Laurel and Hardy and Abbot and Costello, actors Yuen Biao and Sammo Hung (slim and large actors respectively) play off of one another in comically exaggerated ways. They accidentally and intentionally hit one another and are consistently caught up in sequences of bad luck and coincidence.

Action Aesthetics

Zu went farther than *The Butterfly Murders* in terms of outlandish choreography. As Chen (1996) explains, the inspiration for the film came from Lee Sau-Man's multivolume novel. What Hark did was bring those story elements to life in a visually

stunning manner. This is a story world where gravity has little effect, as characters fly around at times without the aid of any sort of weapon or grappling hook. Furthermore, anything can become a weapon, such as Long Brow's eyebrows which he uses to battle the Blood Demon.

Continuing with his interest in unique weapons, Hark adapts genre conventions for a more science fiction context. The weapons in *Zu* are most often projectile-based and not connected to the characters via any rope or chain. Characters throw and control swords, shields, staffs, and a variety of energy-based projectiles. If swords are seen as an extension of a martial artist's body and soul, then the ability to control one without even touching it implies an even deeper connection with one's weapons and abilities.

Duel to the Death

Duel to the Death is a more traditional *wuxia pian* film than those directed by Hark. Its central theme of perfection of the self and its focus on swordplay are more similar to the classic films such as those about Chinese folk hero Wong Fei-hong. Where the film departs from its roots is primarily in its approach to action aesthetics and its fusion of multiple film genres for international appeal.

Genre Amalgamation

Duel to the Death is a great showcase for Cheng's knowledge of other film genres. To begin, the film has a strong conspiratorial element that shows up at the very beginning of the film. After a squad of ninjas break into the Holy Sword House to copy secret scrolls, they bury their spoils and commit suicide. Their actions signal that the film's inevitable duel will occur amidst a larger context of mystery and intrigue. Later it

is revealed that Master Han is conspiring with the Japanese by kidnapping powerful Chinese martial artists so their kung fu can be studied.

As with *The Butterfly Murders*, there are conventions commonly found in the Western genre. Characters stare each other down before quickly going for their weapons in a flurry of action. The action in *Duel to the Death* is fast, beginning with quick draws of swords and continuing with lightning fast strikes. After duels, there is ambiguity about who was actually struck, much like in the quickdraws of Westerns, until a character or characters fall down dead.

Recurring Themes

The primary theme of *Duel to the Death* is that of perfection of the self. While this is implicit in Hark's films, it is much more explicit in *Duel to the Death* as the film revolves around a deciding sword battle every 10 years. The film's focus on the conflict can be seen at the end of the film when Ching Wan decides not to fight. To convince him to fight, Hashimoto kills Ching Wan's master. In addition to being a competition between people, it is a competition between styles of martial arts, specifically Shaolin kung fu and Japanese karate and kendo. Perfection of the self is therefore a deciding factor in which style of martial arts is ultimately deemed superior.

Despite the film's focus on a grand conflict between China and Japan, there is also conflict among internal groups within both China and Japan. Hashimoto does not seek fame or fortune but instead wants a fair duel with Ching Wan. The Japanese authorities, however, are more focused on long term benefits by kidnaping Chinese martial artists to study their kung fu. Meanwhile, Master Han was dead set on his

daughter competing in the duel rather than Ching Wan to further the family name. He therefore conspires with the Japanese so that his daughter may compete in the duel and win.

Character Types

The characters in *Duel to the Death* are the epitome of chivalrous swordsmen found in classic *wuxia pian* stories. They seek glory and honor in battle and are more concerned with bettering themselves rather than gaining fame and fortune through their victories. Their desire for an honorable duel can be seen in their working together to eliminate conspirators on both sides before dueling. In a series of extended fight scenes, Ching Wan discovers that Master Han is conspiring with the Japanese to kidnap China's best martial artists. At the same time, Hashimoto learns that Japan will go to great lengths to see that the duel is played out according to their terms. Furthermore, Hashimoto learns that he is expendable and that the Shogun in Japan wants him to lose the fight because kidnaping China's top warriors is deemed more important.

However, the inevitable duel turns out to be a deciding factor in the depiction of the two characters. Before the duel, Ching Wan declares that he will not fight Hashimoto. Angered, Hashimoto kills Ching Wan's master to provoke him to fight. In the end, the two characters have their duel on the cliffs overlooking the ocean. During the duel, Hashimoto accidentally stabs Ching Wan in the chest as the two fall off of the cliff. Once they are again on solid ground, Hashimoto stabs himself in the chest to even out their injuries. In the end, both characters are the same as they fight until they are both wounded

to the point of death. Even Ching Wan, who still could have chosen not to fight, exists solely for the pursuit of perfection.

Action Aesthetics

While Hark may be more adept at fusing together various genre conventions to create unique stories, Cheng, while borrowing from other genres as well, is proficient in taking traditional action aesthetics to new levels of creativity. The action aesthetics of *Duel to the Death* single it out as a seminal and unique *wuxia pian* film. Hark set the stage for wire-assisted choreography in which characters are capable of amazing feats of strength, but it was Cheng who capitalized on that style, focusing not on eliciting thrills through effects and *mise-en-scene* but through the manipulation of physical motion in a non-fantasy context.

Duel to the Death differs from other Hong Kong New Wave *wuxia pian* films in that it is closer to the classic swordplay of past films. Unlike Hark's films where characters rely on spiritual projectiles and unique weapons that compliment their personalities, swords are an extension of the body in *Duel to the Death* unlike any film before or after it, and it is here where the film deviates from traditional genre conventions by making use of wires, special effects, and prosthetics to give swords, and by extension the characters, a new level of importance and power. The importance of the sword is established early on as Hashimoto partially unsheathes his sword, eliciting a sharp tone and a blinding light, and look at it with a fierce look of determination. This motif is repeated later in the film as Ching Wan and Hashimoto prepare to duel. As they draw their swords, an ear-piercing "*shing*" can be heard.

Finally, as the film features many Japanese characters, *Duel to the Death* features action aesthetics found in Japanese *chambara* films. The character of Hashimoto carries traditional Japanese weapons such as a full length katana and a shorter wakizashi, both swords strapped to his waist. When engaged in battle, Hashimoto assumes stances found in kendo, a Japanese style of fencing. Seeing this distinctly Japanese style of fighting juxtaposed against traditional Chinese style adds to the larger sense of conflict between China and Japan.

A Chinese Ghost Story

As the first *wuxia pian* collaboration between Hark and Cheng, *A Chinese Ghost Story* bears their unique approaches to genre conventions. Adapted from a previous film called *The Enchanting Shadow* (1960), they updated the film with commercial sensibilities for a Hong Kong audience, using a mixture of various genres such as horror and fantasy and creating striking scenes of colorful beauty and highly stylized action aesthetics.

Genre Amalgamation

More than other Hong Kong New Wave *wuxia pian* films before it, *A Chinese Ghost Story* has a strong element of romance and unfulfilled love. The characters of Nie and Ning have a strong attraction toward one another as soon as they first meet. Although Nie is ordered by Lau Lau to kill Ning, she can not go through with it as she finds his character endearing. At the end of the film, Nie is reincarnated elsewhere in the world, but her whereabouts remain a mystery to Ning. This is a heartbreaking ending as the love story is a powerful element in the film.

Like *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain*, *A Chinese Ghost Story* also has a number of fantasy elements which keep it from being mired in tradition and make it more suitable for modern audiences bombarded with Western imports. The film uses a great deal of pyrotechnics to represent the fighting skills of Yin, who is a Daoist warrior. Daoism, as one of China's most influential philosophical schools of thought, is commonly associated with mysticism and is a reaction to the more traditional, rigid hierarchy of Confucianism. Yin is a recluse who has studied Daoism for years, giving him supernatural abilities although he is a human. He is able to hurl explosive projectiles from his palms and to spiritually charge his attacks by reciting sutras.

Finally, as the title suggests, *A Chinese Ghost Story* has elements of traditional Chinese horror films but with a more modern twist in the form of additional fantasy and comedy elements and advanced visual effects. The opening sequence sees a forlorn Nie as she unwillingly lures a man to his death, attacked by an unseen assailant, later revealed to be the giant tongue of Lau Lau. The final sequence which takes place in the underworld is depicted as a type of hell in which dead warriors come to life and hands spring out of the walls to grab hold of people. The Lord of the Black Mountain himself is a fearsome looking demon represented by a skeleton draped in a large, black cloak.

Themes of Conflict

Once again, *A Chinese Ghost Story* features themes of internal conflict and strife between different groups vying for power. At the beginning of the film, Ning arrives in a small town where he must collect taxes from local business. Cheng creates an atmosphere of disarray and confusion as officials from different clans wander the streets looking for

wanted criminals, intently looking at every man's face and comparing them to wanted posters. After officials inspect Ning, slamming his back against a wall that contains a shop owner's money, he walks away with some of the money on his back, prompting the shop owner to shout out, "Don't go!" Upon hearing this, officials from multiple clans emerge thinking there is a criminal on the loose and end up fighting with each other. As this scene shows, themes of internal conflict are relegated to the background of the film and mostly played for laughs, making room for the film's more attractive themes of action and romance.

Another theme of conflict that plays into the film is one between the living and the dead, or the real world and the spirit world. This is similar to the conflict in *Zu* between the real world and the spirit world. In *A Chinese Ghost Story*, the world of the living is depicted as uncaring and too preoccupied with internal conflict to care about the spirit world, seemingly ignorant on a collective scale of the battles between the living and the dead that ultimately decide their fate. This conflict has strong resonating themes when you again consider the film's timing in relation to international negotiations about Hong Kong's future. The underworld as a metaphor for mainland China and the need for internal cohesion is powerfully represented.

Character Types

The main characters in *A Chinese Ghost Story* are very chivalrous in nature. The swordsman Yin has relegated himself to ridding the world of evil spirits. Subverting traditional character types of heroic swordsmen, Yin's fierce and tough exterior is revealed to be a front as he breaks down and admits to Ning that he resides among spirits

because he is afraid of the human world. Ning, on the other hand, is almost the exact opposite. He is chivalrous but also naive and innocent. Not realizing that Nie is actually a spirit, he begins a romantic relationship with her in the hopes of rescuing her from her impending marriage. His chivalrous nature does not change when he realizes the danger he is in, but instead furthers his resolve for the rest of the film.

Furthermore, the film continues Hark's oft used motif of thrusting characters into unknowing danger usually through either bad luck or circumstance. This motif fits best with the character of Ning. As a traveling tax collector, his job is to travel from city to city collecting taxes from various businesses. From the opening scenes, he is depicted as a character wholly untrained in martial arts and unfamiliar with action and adventure. As he is traveling along the path, he appears to be clumsy and a bit foolish. He is appalled at the sight of carnage as a swordsman kills a group of thieves right in front of him. In a scene that mimics the duel on the boat in *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain*, Yin and Hsiao-Hou clash swords in the same space as Ning. As he tries to avoid them, they get closer and closer until he is caught right in the middle of their swords, pleading for his life. It is only towards the end of the film that Ning finally realizes he is caught in a battle between good and evil and that the woman he loves is actually a ghost.

Action Aesthetics

A Chinese Ghost Story, like *Duel to the Death*, features action scenes that rely heavily on swordplay. Cheng's trademark approach to action aesthetics once again comes through as characters swing their swords with great regard for strong visual motion. From the one-on-one sword battles to fights that include Lau Lau's giant tongue or the

mountain god's army of dead soldiers, there is a great deal of circular motion and occasional sequences of complex, unbroken choreography with emphasizes on characters' postures and stances.

A Chinese Ghost Story also features action scenes that rely on spiritual and magical attacks. This is a sharp departure from Cheng's previous *wuxia pian* film, *Duel to the Death*, which relied on the characters' amazing physical abilities and skill with their swords. However, from a genre perspective, Cheng was able to take this new style of action that has relied primarily on special effects to make a visual impact on screen and incorporate it into his trademark style of action choreography that emphasized plausible physical action. Scenes in which Yin and Nie use their magical abilities in action scenes are physically manipulated to give them a strong sense of motion and visual flow. For example, Nie is able to use the sleeves of her dress as projectiles and for transportation. Rather than just show her sleeves extending, Nie begins her actions with circular arm motions and spins her body before using the flying sleeves on her dress. Similarly, Yin uses spiritual attacks throughout the film by biting his finger, using the blood to draw a Daoist symbol on his hand, and throwing spiritual projectiles at his enemies. These sequences have a strong sense of emotion and impact as Yin compliments his attacks with flips, spins, and circular arm motions.

While some would call it overly outrageous, the action in general is in line with the film's focus on horror and magic. As the principal villains are evil demons, it fits that they would have supernatural powers. Lau Lau uses his giant tongue to literally suck the life out of his victims. Existing in the underworld, the Lord of the Black Mountain

commands an army of dead warriors and hides a swarm of flying heads underneath his robe which he uses to attack his enemies.

Lastly, as in Cheng's and Hark's previous films, there is a creative use of weapons by the characters, primarily the swordsman Yin. While battling a demon in the underworld at the end of the film, Yin is struck in the shoulder by an axe, rendering his arm useless. In order to use his bow and arrow, he must roll over and catch the bow with his foot while pulling back the string with his good arm in order to strike the demon. The action in the shot is highly fluid and circular, characteristic of Cheng's creative approach to action aesthetics. Later in the same sequence, Yin thrusts his sword through his foot so as to anchor him to the ground, a shot which echoes Cheng's film *Duel to the Death.*

Swordsman II

Premiering at a time when *wuxia pian* films were considered a dying genre, *Swordsman II* succeeded in reviving and repopularizing the genre (Sanjuro, 2002b). Adapting martial arts novelist Jing Yong's popular novel *Xiao Ao Jiang Hu*, Cheng again relied on an established framework in which he and Hark (the film's producer) could rework conventions for a more modern audience. Cheng appropriated conventions from various other genres and applied his trademark choreography to an extremely compelling story with well-developed characters.

Genre Amalgamation

Continuing with his use of different genres in his previous films, Cheng combines various genres in *Swordsman II*. To begin with, the film has a strong romantic element, but it is deeper and more complex than in *A Chinese Ghost Story*. *A Chinese Ghost Story*

has a love-at-first-sight motif while *Swordsman II* is more about lust, secret love, and fiery passion. Ling holds feelings for Chief Ying, and their first on-screen encounter in the film makes use of their love theme that was played at the beginning of the film as well as long stares. When they are alone together, facing one another in a closeup shot, a large fire burns in the background between their faces, a symbol of their strong love for one another.

However, Kiddo harbors secret feelings for Ling, but her affections for him never come to fruition and their relationship remains as swordsmen, as brothers in arms. As Kiddo notes throughout the film, all Ling cares about is wine and women. This is seen in his various meetings with Asia the Invincible, whom, despite starting the film as a man, Ling mistakes for a woman and immediately lusts after. It is an incredibly complex relationship made more complex because of Asia's transgendered nature. As such, it questions notions of sexuality regarding hero archetypes in *wuxia pian* films. Is Ling still a heroic man for lusting after another man?

Elements of slapstick comedy films are again present in *Swordsman II*, much of it at the expense of the character Kiddo since her position as the only female among a group of skilled swordsmen is unique in *wuxia pian* films. In trying to look more feminine, she changes her hairstyle, using two buns around which to wrap her hair on each side of her head. Stunned at her new look, the other swordsmen can only laugh and look on in bewilderment. Later in the film, her rouge is accidentally mistaken for chili powder and used by Ling in a kettle of soup. He notices and replaces it with actual chili powder.

When Kiddo applies it later in the film, it burns her skin and she dives into a mud hole, eliciting laughs from her Wah Mountain brothers.

Themes of Conflict

At the heart of *Swordsman II* are themes of conflict and betrayal. Narration explains that China is currently suffering from civil war. During the conflict, Asia the Invincible took control of the Sun Moon Sect and began his quest to control China. As characters in the film point out, unrest is natural wherever there are people and forceful takeovers will result in future struggles. In a sequence where Chief Ying is informing Ling and his Wah Mountain brothers about Asia the Invincible seizing control of the Sun Moon Sect, the film cuts to two of the swordsmen as one says to the other, "Another story of a power struggle." The implication is that authority in general is something to distrust. This is solidified in the character of Wu. As the rightful leader of the Sun Moon Sect, he should be a primary protagonist in the film. However, his depiction as a despot condemns any quest for power. His desire to end conflict by gaining power is juxtaposed against Ling, a noble swordsman with no desire for power who simply wishes to retire to Ox Mountain.

Character Types

The character types in *Swordsman II* are more complex than in previous *wuxia pian* films. More so than other films of the genre, *Swordsman II* really begins to question the genre's conventions when it comes to characters. The concept of a hero is routinely brought up by the characters, as are themes of good and evil and what it means to be a man and a woman. In the story, Asia the Invincible hijacks the Sun Moon Sect, a clan

claiming authority over China. Its rightful leader, however, is Wu (Yen Shi-Kwan). In conspiring with the Japanese and seizing control of the sect, Asia the Invincible would appear to be the villain, but her motives are based on the desire for motivation and out of feelings of nationalism. Wu, however, is depicted as a bloodthirsty maniac hell bent on regaining control of his sect.

Themes of gender are also explored to a great degree. The character of Kiddo is tomboy, yet she harbors secret affections for Ling. Similarly, Asia the Invincible begins the film as a man, but becomes a woman after castration. From their first meeting, even before he underwent castration, he is lusted after by Ling. Questions of gender and sexuality are therefore raised and characters in the film specifically ask what it means to be a man and a woman.

Finally, the film questions traditional heroic archetypes with the development of Ling from a carefree swordsman into a hardened warrior. Ling, wishing to avoid conflict and retire to Ox Mountain with his brothers in arms, is forced into combat only after Asia the Invincible kills all of the Wah Mountain swordsmen except for Kiddo. Ling is therefore not a hero by choice. Rather, he is forced into his position and comes to the pessimistic realization that conflict is inevitable among people.

Action Aesthetics

As with *Duel to the Death*, *Swordsman II* features Japanese characters wielding Japanese weapons. The style of action is therefore reminiscent of Japanese *chambara* films, characterized by specific stances and weapon strikes. However, going further than Hashimoto in *Duel to the Death*, Cheng takes Japanese style choreography and enhances

it to fit in with his overall action design for the film. It becomes less stoic and more animated, less reliant on quick duels and individual strikes and more reliant on extended action and continuous motion.

Continuing with the action aesthetics of *A Chinese Ghost Story*, there is a strong emphasis in *Swordsman II* on outrageous action design. Using a combination of models and complex wire-work, characters lift enormous pieces of land and destroy entire buildings with their abilities. However, as with other films in this analysis, the action is portrayed as wholly believable in the story world. The characters' abilities are never questioned in part because of the exactness of their motions and performances, but also because of the energy inherent in the action design.

Production Aspects

As Bordwell (2000) explains, Hong Kong New Wave films had a minuscule budget compared to their Hollywood counterparts with which they were in direct competition. As such, complex visual effects and elaborate action sequences in Hong Kong films did not have the visual gloss of Hollywood films, though that did not effect the visual flair and energy inherent in every scene. They also had shorter production times and were quickly released into theaters. As the Hong Kong film industry was highly commercial during the 1980s, a major criticism of Hong Kong cinema, films of all genres operated within a specific mode of production that worked to guarantee profits and the continuation of Hong Kong cinema by providing audiences with films that were essentially visual representations of life in a more fast-paced Hong Kong.

The Butterfly Murders

Forging a new visual and epic direction for Hong Kong cinema with *The Butterfly Murders*, Hark relied heavily on complex visual effects within an attention-grabbing story to attract audiences. It is for this reason that he is often referred to as the Steven Spielberg of Asia. The film contains many scenes in which large swarms of butterflies attack people, with the trick being to make the butterflies both appear dangerous and as if they are actually attacking the actors.

Outdoing his use of thousands of butterflies, the martial arts choreography in *The Butterfly Murders* set Hark on the road to increasingly elaborate action scenes. While some of the action is ground-based and relatively standard in terms of the physical expectations, other action scenes rely heavily on wires and pyrotechnics. Finally, much of the film, both the action scenes and non-action scenes, takes place at night or in underground caverns. As such, a great deal of lighting was necessary to properly illuminate the film. Bordwell (2000) claims these elements made *The Butterfly Murders* a difficult film to produce.

However, operating within the Hong Kong mode of production, Hark was able to make the film cheaply, in part because production was moved overseas to Taiwan (Bordwell, 2000), but also because the emerging New Wave necessitated quick production if Cantonese language films were to compete with overseas imports. The language element is an important production aspect of *The Butterfly Murders*. By this time in Hong Kong, the film industry was dominated by Mandarin-language production and imports from Japan and the West. Cantonese-language films were not viable

competition prior to the New Wave in 1979. Therefore, there was no mode of production that relied on proven and popular Cantonese-language stars to attract audiences. Lau Siu-Ming, who plays Fong in the film, was a dance instructor in Hong Kong when Hark approached him to take on his first acting job in *The Butterfly Murders* (Chen, 2002a). Considering the lack of star power in the film, Hark's fantastic visuals became the film's primary selling point.

Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain

In making *Zu* a more fantastic *wuxia pian* film, Hark employed special effects technicians from the United States (Bordwell, 2000). The result, aside from the presence of more elaborate special effects in Hong Kong cinema, was a shift in the dominant mode of production that placed great emphasis on frenetic pacing, outlandish visuals, and a more epic feel. Following the narration at the opening of *Zu*, a grand Wagnerian score accompanies the credits, which fly toward the screen, and continues throughout the film. This really gave the film an epic feel that had not been seen before. According to Bordwell (2000), the production budget for the film was a then massive HK$30 million. While it did not completely recover its production cost, it nevertheless set the stage for future big budget productions, influencing Hark to establish his own film production company a few years later.

Another shift in Hong Kong cinema's mode of production no doubt had to do with the entry into the film industry of a new crop of talent. *Zu* stars Yuen Biao and Sammo Hung, and the fight choreography was done by Yuen Biao and Cory Yuen. All three were members of a Peking Opera troupe that also included Jackie Chan. Their

fluency in varying styles of martial arts as well as acrobatics allowed filmmakers like Hark to compose fight scenes that relied on perfect timing, complex acrobatics, and exaggerated physical actions, but in a much more animated and flexible manner compared with other martial arts films before it. This new style of choreography was instrumental in changing the production of Hong Kong action filmmaking as Yuen Biao, Sammo Hung, Jackie Chan, and Cory Yuen went on to choreograph hundreds of films during and after Hong Kong cinema's New Wave, their signature styles of physical action and comedy proving an effective draw for audiences.

Aside from influencing *wuxia pian* production, these new stars became recognizable icons of Hong Kong cinema. In any film industry, stars are needed as visual representations of the industry itself. They are the most visible parts of a film industry and are there to attract larger audiences. In addition to exciting new martial arts stars, *Zu* features a key role filled by Brigitte Lin, already a film star in her native Taiwan at a young age. Her youthful appearance and piercing gaze as the Countess of the Jade Pool Fairy Fortress made her an instant star in Hong Kong, forever identifying her with the *wuxia pian* genre. As such, *Zu* was essential in establishing a star system in the Hong Kong film industry.

Duel to the Death

Duel to the Death is significant in this analysis as it is one of two films to feature Japanese characters and Japanese-style action aesthetics. However, unlike other films that would come later, such as *Swordsman II*, all of the Japanese characters are played by actors from Hong Kong and all of them speak in Cantonese. Additionally, scenes of the

Japanese characters often feature gross exaggerations of Japanese character types. One sequence sees samurai in a geisha house, furiously drinking bottles of sake. The character of Hashimoto, however, is represented as an overall honorable man with dignity and is worthy of respect. Furthermore, Japanese fencing is depicted as a powerful, deadly, and beautiful martial art, reflecting Cheng's admiration for action aesthetics in general. This admiration leads to both Ching Wan and Hashimoto as being very similar in terms of their abilities and their sensibilities.

Despite the transnational flow of action, language is another issue. Although the film features Japanese characters, Cantonese language was essential for identification with local audiences in the early years of the Hong Kong New Wave. This also reflects the commercial sensibilities of the time in that if a film were to be marketable to Hong Kong audiences eager for Cantonese-language productions, then the spoken language had to be Cantonese.

Although the film did not benefit from having big name stars or rising stars, *Duel to the Death* set a new standard for action choreography. Cheng's approach to action aesthetics quickly turned him into one of China's and Hong Kong's premiere action directors. He has even made a name for himself in the West by choreographing the most high profile films from both Hong Kong and China. He choreographed *Shaolin Soccer* (2001) for Stephen Chow and it quickly became the most successful Hong Kong film up to that point. In mainland China, Cheng choreographed *Hero* (2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006). All of the films were directed

by Zhang Yimou, China's most famous director, and all went on to become box office successes in China and other parts of the world.

A Chinese Ghost Story

Made in 1987, *A Chinese Ghost Story* premiered at a time when Hong Kong films were becoming increasingly commercial in nature. This had effects on both the overall look of films and on the new crop of stars that was beginning to emerge. First, the production value of the film was extremely high for a Hong Kong film, benefitting from increased budgets for films and increasingly sophisticated filmmaking processes. The sets are extremely organic, there is a great deal of attention paid to scene composition, and visual effects were becoming more varied and more believable. According to Bordwell (2000), the sharp increase in production values was related to the marketability of Hong Kong films in Taiwan, a guaranteed market. This had a positive effect for many films to come in the late 1980s and early 1990s, such as *Swordsman II*.

Finally, film capitalized on the commercial craze with the casting of pop superstar Leslie Cheung and Joey Wang, a newly discovered sex object from Taiwan. The film went even further than Zu in establishing and maintaining a star system in large part to its music. Featuring a powerful score from James Wong, *A Chinese Ghost Story* also featured two popular songs. The first was sung by Leslie Cheung, the film's star, and the second was a more romantic love song by Sally Yeh, a popular actress and singer.

As Bordwell states, "the same dialect makes stars perennial fixtures of any popular cinema" (2000, p. 156). Now that Cantonese-language stars were becoming popular, audiences demanded more of them. Leslie Cheung's dual role as actor and singer

was, and still is, characteristic of many of the stars at the time who had film as well as music careers, filling audiences' desire for as much localized popular culture as possible.

Swordsman II

From the perspective of a star system, *Swordsman II* was a phenomenal success. Brigitte Lin was already familiar to Hong Kong audiences through her previous *wuxia pian* films as well as *Police Story*, Jackie Chan's seminal police action film. Her performance as Asia the Invincible is considered her career-defining role and earned her a nomination for Best Actress at the 12th Annual Hong Kong Film Awards. Jet Li was riding on a wave of success after starring in Tsui Hark's 1991 Wong Fei-hong epic *Once Upon a Time in China*, a landmark film that earned four awards at the 11th Annual Hong Kong Film Awards. Supporting roles by Rosamund Kwan and Michelle Reis, both recognized as famous beauties in the Hong Kong film industry, added both recognition and sex appeal to the film.

The film also enjoyed a substantial budget because of its stars, many of whom were popular in foreign markets like Japan and Korea. Bordwell (2000) explains that part of the appeal of the casting process for *Swordsman II* was the casting against type. In other words, casting Brigitte Lin to play both the male and female halves of Asia the Invincible was a bold move when compared with the idea of casting both a male and female actress to fill the gender roles. It added a layer of depth and complexity to her character that earned her a great deal of recognition and new admirers. Similarly, Jet Li's role as a swordsman who falls in love with Asia even before his castration questioned sexual norms within the genre, proving to be an effective draw for audiences.

Concluding Remarks

This section analyzed five films for their visual styles, genre conventions, and production elements. However, a comprehensive analysis of each element is beyond the scope of this thesis as it would require an exorbitant amount of detailed analysis. In analyzing these *wuxia pian* films for their contributions to Hong Kong's national agency during the 1980s, I have focused on those elements I deemed to be most important based on their frequency, visual impact, and unique nature. As such, there are elements of these films that are not covered. Regardless, this provides a strong foundation for a discussion of how these films contributed to Hong Kong's national agency.

V. DISCUSSION

Since starting their careers in Hong Kong with *wuxia pian* films, both Hark and Cheng have expanded their careers to include Hollywood, Europe, and other Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea, primarily in the action film genre. In doing so, they have contributed to the globalization of action aesthetics and made Chinese martial arts a very marketable international product. However, their earlier efforts in the *wuxia pian* genre are more significant for their attention to Hong Kong audiences with national elements such as local stars, themes, and language. This attention to local audiences was all the more significant in the context of foreign competition and the domination of Mandarin-language cinema that overshadowed Hong Kong cinema.

Prior to the rise of Cantonese-language films, Hong Kong was described as a city in search of an identity (Bordwell, 2000; Kar, 2001). It was not until the mid-1970s that questions about history and identity became serious topics of discussion among Hong Kong audiences (Kar, 2001). Hark and Cheng produced films that directly addressed Hong Kong's position as a hub of international influences, focusing specifically on internal and external conflict, Hong Kong's relationship to China, and a definition of what it means to experience life in Hong Kong during the period of transition in the 1980s and early 1990s. Using a national agency approach, this thesis explores the

contribution of *wuxia pian* films by Hark and Cheng to Hong Kong's national agency in terms of their visual, generic, and production elements.

A Hong Kong Identity

The first research question was how the *wuxia pian* films under discussion maintained a distinct Hong Kong identity despite being highly influenced by international filmmaking styles. In other words, how were these films able to speak to a very cosmopolitan, affluent, and local audience with a very international product? The answer lies in these films recognizing and directly addressing concerns that Hong Kong was a city in transition with a fast-paced and ever-changing society in search of an identity. I arrived at this conclusion because action choreography, casting, and prominent themes within the films such as self-discovery and a distrust of authority signal a local Hong Kong cinema for a more contemporary audience. With increased production values, action choreography became increasingly complex and creative, a visual metaphor for the fast-paced world of Hong Kong, and a star system emerged that satiated the desire for local talent. Furthermore, with the resurgence of Cantonese-language cinema, relevant themes could be addressed using the common language. Therefore, while these films were influenced by other filmmaking styles and genres, their content and visual style reflected life in Hong Kong and the films themselves proved popular with contemporary Hong Kong audiences.

Action Choreography

In order for Cantonese-language films to compete with both Mandarin-language films and foreign imports from Hollywood and Japan, it was necessary for production

values to sharply increase. With *The Butterfly Murders*, Hark raised the bar for future films by creating a sophisticated and striking *wuxia pian* film that fused a variety of film genres and maintained a dark and ominous tone. Action choreography, courtesy of Chen Tien Loong, is highly expressive and stylized, characteristic of a more affluent and cosmopolitan society. This was a sharp departure from the often sterile displays of form and style found in previous martial arts and *wuxia pian* films, particularly the heroic bloodshed films from Zhang Che and the Shaw Brothers studio. In addition to aesthetic novelty, the highly stylized action scenes, combined with numerous cuts and subjective cinematography, served to visually reflect the society of Hong Kong which was going through a major transition as a hub of international influences. As such, *The Butterfly Murders* set the standard for future films made for local Hong Kong audiences.

Despite the importance of *The Butterfly Murders* to New Wave *wuxia pian* films and its critical success, it was not a financial success. Bordwell (2000) notes that Hong Kong films had to remain excessively commercial to appeal to all audiences. As such, future films featured increasingly complex choreography amidst a wider fusion of genres. The choreography in *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* is more visually appealing in that it is often about physical comedy as Hark fused slapstick humor with expertly choreographed and performed actions. Similarly, with *A Chinese Ghost Story*, Cheng used process shots, pixellation, and large-scale prosthetics and models to make the film stand out as a shining example of early sophisticated Hong Kong special effects. These effects made a culturally understood past seem more real and the stylized action choreography continued to reflect Hong Kong society, becoming even more outlandish in

the face of a looming changeover. As such, *A Chinese Ghost Story* became a huge financial success upon its release.

Casting

Much like in Hollywood, the presence of a star system in Hong Kong allowed for differentiation among film genres, created star personas which often dictated film roles, and provided audiences with identifiable local stars. Unlike *The Butterfly Murders*, which had little star power, *Zu* capitalized on the popularity of actors and action choreographers Sammo Hung and Yuen Biao as well as actress Brigitte Lin. Sammo Hung and Yuen Biao, already accomplished martial artists, would soon become more famous for their unique styles of action choreography. As a renowned beauty throughout Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China, Brigitte Lin provided a human element of beauty to complement the film's spectacular visuals and special effects. Furthermore, *Zu* saw Yuen Biao both star in the film and choreograph the action, a trend that would continue in future Hong Kong films in which many of stars have multiple duties as actor, actress, singer, action choreographer, writer, or producer. This ensured a saturation of popular and rising stars to satiate the desires of local audiences.

Going further than previous *wuxia pian* films, *A Chinese Ghost Story* fits in with the concept of *ge-ying-shi*, or music-film-TV (Bordwell, 2000). In other words, performers were heavily encouraged to publicize themselves through a variety of mass media in order to saturate the market with local talent. The lead actor in *A Chinese Ghost Story*, Leslie Cheung, was heavily promoted through his music, which consisted primarily of romantic pop songs, film roles, and television appearances. Not only did he star in *A*

Chinese Ghost Story, but he also performed the film's opening song. His role in *A Chinese Ghost Story* also cemented his leading man status and helped transform him into a romantic icon of Hong Kong cinema. Furthermore, the lead actors and actresses in films such as *Duel to the Death* and *A Chinese Ghost Story* are not formally trained martial artists, yet they can be seen performing amazing actions on screen. This attention to choreography for the sake of the star system enhanced the popularity of Hong Kong stars.

While *A Chinese Ghost Story* is notable for its typecasting which saw Leslie Cheung as a romantic lead and Joey Wang as an ethereal beauty, *Swordsman II* was popular in part because of off-casting, or the casting of actors and actresses contrary to their usual type (Bordwell, 2000). Not only did *Swordsman II* challenge traditional Chinese definitions of gender, but, on a more surface level, it was entertaining to see actors such as Jet Li, Brigitte Lin, and Michelle Reis, all of whom were well-established stars in the Hong Kong film industry by 1992, portray characters contrary to their typical roles. This off-casting served to maintain the creative nature of Hong Kong cinema in the eyes of local audiences and to differentiate *Swordsman II* from other films of the genre. Particularly with Brigitte Lin, off-casting paid off financially and critically. *Swordsman II* was her first *wuxia pian* film since *Zu*, and her performance as a transgendered villain re-popularized the genre and led to future roles in *wuxia pian* spoofs such as *The Eagle Shooting Heroes* (1993) and post modern critiques of the *wuxia pian* genre such as *Ashes of Time* (1994).

Relevant Themes

Hong Kong New Wave *wuxia pian* films are significant because they directly addressed relevant local themes such as distrust of authority and self-discovery during the 1980s and early 1990s. I argue that *The Butterfly Murders* deals with authority in a pessimistic manner due to the uncertainty of Hong Kong cinema and society at the start of the 1980s. The film's central figure of authority, Master Shum, deceives the characters in the film by luring them to Shum Castle in his quest to eliminate powerful martial artists. Furthermore, he does this only after faking his own death in order to maintain the deception. Likewise, *Duel to the Death* depicts a strong distrust of authority on both the Chinese and Japanese sides. In the film, the Japanese Shogunate conspires with Master Han of Holy Sword House, an alliance that effectively betrays the strong trust that both Hashimoto and Ching Wan placed in their superiors. Through analysis and research, I maintain that these themes resonated with local audiences as the Hong Kong government was often seen as manipulative and inadequate in dealing with local affairs (Bordwell, 2000; Chen, 1996).

However, films such as *Zu* and *A Chinese Ghost Story* deal with distrust in a more comedic manner. Groups and individuals claiming authority are depicted in the films as imbecilic and ultimately inconsequential. Local magistrates prosecute suspected offenders by beating them into submission without a trial and warring clans roam the towns assuming everyone is a criminal. In this context of distrust, it is up to individual characters to rise above the circumstances which have been thrust upon them as well as their own limitations to discover their inner strength. For example, in *A Chinese Ghost*

Story, Ning realizes his love for a female ghost and travels to the underworld to save her, despite his lowly status as a traveling tax collector, and his trials and tribulations render the heartbreaking ending all the more powerful. Likewise, in *Zu*, Ti Ming-Chi soon realizes that conflicts within the real world are secondary to the spirit world. In the end, he must fulfill his destiny and destroy the Blood Demon. I contend that this idea of independent self-discovery resonated with the generally more affluent and educated Hong Kong population which enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy under British rule.

No film deals more explicitly with self-discovery than *Duel to the Death*. Compared to Hark's films, the characters in Cheng's *Duel to the Death* are the embodiment of stoicism. Their relentless quest for self-discovery through combat and at the expense of their own lives is the film's central theme. As their quest for perfection ultimately leads to their deaths, it raises the question whether or not self-discovery is a positive pursuit within a chaotic environment. However, rather than argue that independence is undesirable, Cheng treats it as a necessity in the face of competition. Ching Wan and Hashimoto are confident as opposed to proud, and their desire to perfect their skills is honest and wholly in line with their character types. Therefore, their deaths are possible consequences of existing within a chaotic environment. In the end, the film's idea of self-discovery provides a strong metaphor for a new and extreme sense of independence in Hong Kong during the 1980s.

Distrust of authority is a very potent theme in *Swordsman II* and is dealt with in a more complex manner than previous *wuxia pian* films. Figures of authority are not simply portrayed as incompetent fools, but are more sinister and deceitful. The character of Wu

is the rightful leader of the Sun Moon Sect, but he is power hungry and persuades his followers to obey his commands with death threats and physical torture. That he is essentially the highest authority in the land, his depiction as a bloodthirsty tyrant signals disdain for all who would claim authority over Hong Kong. This more severe form of distrust and deception is not surprising as it comes just five years before the coming 1997 changeover. In other words, I maintain that anxiety over Hong Kong's future directly influenced the depiction of authority as untrustworthy in *Swordsman II*.

Also dealt with in a more complex and serious manner in *Swordsman II* is the idea of self-discovery, particularly as it relates to gender identification. Aside from being rooted in cross-gender performances in classical Chinese opera, the theme of gender identification resonates with a more cosmopolitan Hong Kong that was beginning to break from tradition in the wake of incoming values and ideologies. As the hero of the film, Ling should be masculine, yet he ignores the tomboyish Kiddo and instead unknowingly lusts after a man who castrates himself. Furthermore, Ling is a hero by circumstance, electing to fight only after his fellow swordsmen are slaughtered. A more complex character is Asia the Invincible who begins the film as a woman. Through castration, he goes beyond a eunuch to become a woman, wearing women's clothes and makeup while displaying more feminine mannerisms and qualities such as love and tenderness. What these characters suggest is that sexuality and the self are not stable human aspects, but rather they change and arise from circumstances. As such, *Swordsman II* reflects Hong Kong and its search for an identity amidst a context of competing influences.

Reflections on Research Question 1

The question asked in this section concerned *wuxia pian* films as maintaining a distinct Hong Kong identity. They maintain their identity through their unique action aesthetics, casting local talent in a variety of roles, and including relevant themes of independence and distrust of authority. The new style of action aesthetics identified them as Hong Kong products in that they are inventive, fast-paced, and highly stylized. Casting a new crop of stars allowed audience members to identify with the most visible parts of the films. Finally, themes of distrust and independence resonated with a more educated and aware Hong Kong population. An important point to mention is that many of these films were popular outside of Hong Kong (Bordwell, 2000). While they were indeed popular in the West as well as in other Asian territories, they represent the concerns and tastes of local Hong Kong audiences.

Hong Kong's National Agency

The second research question asked was how the *wuxia pian* films under discussion contributed to Hong Kong's national agency during the 1980s and early 1990s. How did they help Hong Kong construct an identity to deal with it being positioned between East and West? These films both defined life in Hong Kong during the 1980s and early 1990s and created a sense of urgency regarding an unpredictable future. The films' uses of color, themes of conflict, and visual juxtapositions correlated with the emergence of a voice for Hong Kong citizens in the form of local cinema in 1979 and uncertainty regarding future relations with China following negotiations between England and China in 1984. It is important to mention, however, that these films do not foster

overt pessimism. Instead, they encourage dialogue and cooperation and raise concerns that are relevant to local audiences through commercial means such as comedy and highly stylized action.

Color

Throughout the films, color is used to signal shifts in tone that coincide with the characters' entering unknown environments. In *The Butterfly Murders* and *Zu*, shifts in color schemes visually signal that the characters are entering new and unknown worlds. The beginning of *The Butterfly Murders* sees periodic bursts of color in the form of the characters' surroundings as well as in the costumes. When the characters arrive at Shum Castle, the shift into unknown territory is marked by a general lack of color, and therefore life. As the film was at the forefront of a Cantonese-language film resurgence, this color shift is an important metaphor for uncertain times in which Hong Kong found itself during the 1980s. In *Zu*, the shift from the natural lighting scheme of the real world to the vibrant lighting scheme of the film's fantasy world is also a powerful metaphor for Hong Kong's plight during the 1980s as it was entering a major period of transition and uncertainty. However, unlike the overt pessimism in *The Butterfly Murders* in which the characters enter a lifeless environment, the use of vibrant colors in *Zu* signals a more optimistic view that sees Hong Kong making progress in addressing local issues and concerns. This use of color shows that *Zu* was a more commercial film than *The Butterfly Murders*, yet I argue that it nevertheless reflected Hong Kong's period of transition and addressed local anxieties about the future.

A more explicit use of color is in the use of red to represent evil and imperialism. In *Zu*, the villainous *Blood Demon* emits an ominous red glow, a recurring metaphor for a large, abstract evil in the form of mainland China or imperial authority in general. *A Chinese Ghost Story* creatively and more subtly uses the color red to maintain an atmosphere of uncertainty and continue the motif of red as a metaphor for evil. Rather than depict the film's villains in stark red lights or wearing red costumes, red is the color of objects associated with evil, as in Nie's wedding dress. As the color of blood, red is splashed onto the character of Ning in the midst of a violent confrontation at the beginning of the film. Premiering three years after talks between England and China decided Hong Kong's fate in 1984, the use of red in *A Chinese Ghost Story* as the inevitable product of violence and a symbol for an unholy marriage becomes an important visual element in the film and a symbol for uncertainty. I assert that the use of red in *A Chinese Ghost Story* represented mainland China and untrustworthy imperial authority as Hong Kong was in a period of transition, was autonomous to a certain degree as a British colony, and the uncertainty of life under Chinese rule was cause for anxiety.

The color red makes a more explicit return in *Swordsman II*, most notably with Asia the Invincible's costumes and the red lighting scheme often associated with Wu. Asia the Invincible's desire is to rule all of China. As such, he represents an authority figure and, by definition, a person not to be trusted. Likewise, Wu is power hungry after being freed from prison and uses his remarkable martial arts powers to regain control of the Sun Moon Sect. Therefore, both characters represent larger themes of imperialism, but Asia the Invincible is developed and humanized to a greater extent than Wu who is

depicted as a dubious character at best, perhaps the physical embodiment of China. Asia the Invincible's cosmopolitan nature is more characteristic of the city of Hong Kong itself, especially regarding uncertainty as to the nature of good and evil and male/masculine and female/feminine. His castration, resulting in the loss of a gender-specific organ as well as the loss of gender identity for Asia the Invincible, also symbolizes a larger loss of identity for Hong Kong and creates a need for greater cooperation and dialogue among citizens. This shows that anxiety over the changeover was high in 1992. Furthermore, Asia the Invincible's shift to a sympathetic villain in the film's bittersweet ending signaled a return to a form of pessimism that accompanied Hong Kong's New Wave.

Themes of Conflict

Conflict is dealt with in serious manners in *The Butterfly Murders* and *Swordsman II*. At the outset of *The Butterfly Murders*, it is stated through narration that China is in chaos due to internal conflict. This theme continues throughout the rest of the film, finally culminating in the deaths of both Tien Fung and Green Shadow. Perhaps because of this overt pessimism, the film was a failure at the Hong Kong box office. However, it laid the foundation for future *wuxia pian* films as it directly addressed local audiences with relevant concerns within a culturally understood genre. These themes resurfaced in a more commercial package in *Swordsman II*. Whereas *The Butterfly Murders* premiered at the beginning of Hong Kong's New Wave, *Swordsman II* premiered at the end, representing a full thematic circle in the space of 13 years. This return to a more critical examination of internal conflict signaled the end of optimistic possibilities and suggested

that Hong Kong, just five years before the 1997 changeover, was indeed in a state of severe uncertainty because conflict led to the death of the heroes in *The Butterfly Murders* and to the assumed death of Asia the Invincible, the physical embodiment of Hong Kong, in *Swordsman II*.

Other *wuxia pian* films dealt with conflict in a more comedic fashion. *Zu* and *A Chinese Ghost Story* feature the recurring motif of a desire to avoid conflict, resulting in humorous situations. Ti Ming-Chi and Chang Mei find themselves at odds with their superiors and other clans, elucidating the ridiculousness of petty, internal squabbles through self-reflexive dialogue and pretend duels. In this midst of internal conflict, the film offers cooperation as a solution many of society's problems. In *A Chinese Ghost Story*, the film excels in humor at the expense of the lead character who has no fighting skills. Ning shudders at the sight of blood and defeats his enemies through sheer luck. This reliance on humor signifies a move towards a more commercial form of film production. By treating different factions within China as bumbling imbeciles who clash swords for seemingly trivial reasons, the Hong Kong experience is defined without alienating audiences. In other words, while both *Zu* and *A Chinese Ghost Story* feature very humorous villains and struggles in a commercial package, they are infused with political and social commentary. However, comedic elements do not overshadow the depiction of conflict. Rather, their off-the-wall nature reflects contemporary Hong Kong society and ensured the films, and by definition their depictions of conflict, would be seen by larger audiences.

Where *Duel to the Death* differs is in its use of graphic violence to heighten the nature of internal and external conflict. Internally, at the expense of their best warriors, the Japanese and Chinese governments are willing to do whatever it takes to win the duel and claim superior martial arts abilities. External conflict in *Duel to the Death* is significant in that it is used to equalize both Japan and China, addressing a long standing rivalry between the two countries throughout history. These are powerful metaphors made more ominous through the film's uncompromising villains and sequences of graphic violence which include beheadings, exploding bodies, lacerations, amputations, and multiple stabbings. In the end, external and internal conflict profits both sides nothing but death. The film's violent content is a strong and perhaps over-the-top metaphor for Hong Kong's position in the early 1980s in that times were uncertain as Hong Kong was entering the world stage, yet it fits with Hong Kong cinema's commercial sensibilities at the time in that local themes were packaged with attractive visual elements.

Visual Juxtapositions

Visual juxtapositions in the *wuxia pian* films under discussion are used as metaphors for Hong Kong as a city in an uncertain state of transition. First, they call attention to Hong Kong as a chaotic environment and suggest clear thinking as a solution. For example, the style of acting in *The Butterfly Murders* and *Duel to the Death* is visually juxtaposed with the speed, chaos, and complexity of the performances in the films' action scenes and the action scenes in general. On the whole, performances are very rigid, relying on little movement to keep in line with the films' themes of pessimism and uncertainty. Additionally, in *The Butterfly Murders*, the color shift upon the entrance

to Shum Castle represents a juxtaposition in that the characters' costumes are starkly contrasted with their lifeless surroundings. As such, they are outsiders entering a new and wholly unfamiliar world and their stoic performances represent a need for clear thinking in times of uncertainty. For Hong Kong, juxtapositions within these three films highlight contemporary anxiety and advocate clear thinking and an evaluation of the anxious and cosmopolitan nature of Hong Kong.

Additionally, all of the films except for *The Butterfly Murders* deal with feelings of uncertainty and anxiety in more commercial ways within their action scenes. In other words, themes of overt pessimism are countered in the films' action choreography in which the action pauses to focus on characters' stances. Visually, these stances are indicative of fighting styles and represent distinct moments of clarity during action scenes in which a character such as Ti Ming-Chi in *Zu* re-evaluates his battle before launching his next attack. Thematically, they represent a critical re-evaluation of Hong Kong's position in the midst of a transitional period. However, whereas *Zu* and *A Chinese Ghost Story* operate amidst a comedic context, *Duel to the Death* and *Swordsman II* contain few moments of brevity. The action scenes are instead infused with urgency and graphic consequences, signaling a need for greater cooperation and cohesion.

Second, visual juxtapositions elucidate the role of ordinary citizens within Hong Kong society. In *A Chinese Ghost Story*, a striking element is the juxtaposition of the human world with the spirit world. Whereas Tien Fung travels to the lifeless Shum Castle in *The Butterfly Murders*, Ning literally travels to the underworld to rescue Nie. This stark contrast between the ominous atmosphere of the spirit world, complete with ghostly

blue lighting compositions, armies of dead warriors, and pixellated zombies, is an important element in the film because Ning is not a martial artist. Ning represents complacency within a chaotic society. While his quest is one of self-discovery, it is also a powerful metaphor for ordinary people and their importance within society. This is important to Hong Kong in the 1980s because residents were more educated, affluent, and aware of their contemporary surroundings and concerned with establishing a Hong Kong identity.

Swordsman II accomplishes this same juxtaposition through a complex analysis of its characters. Thematically, the characters themselves represent contrasts in that they go through specific changes by the film's end to become the opposite of what they once were. Ling, a carefree swordsman with a wish to retire, is thrust into battle once again and his perpetual smile is replaced with a look of determination. It is during battle when he finally becomes a truly heroic character. Asia the Invincible, however, undergoes the most dramatic changes in the film, first from a man to a eunuch to a woman and finally from a villain to a sympathetic character. These character shifts are important in that they question not merely genre types, but they also pose questions to audience members regarding their roles in times of uncertainty and chaos. I argue that these character juxtapositions again spoke to audiences wishing to establish themselves and a larger identity for Hong Kong as the films' characters discover their true selves amidst chaos and combat.

Reflections on Research Question 2

This section was concerned with the contribution made to Hong Kong's national agency by New Wave *wuxia pian* films. Color is used to symbolize larger, abstract ideas of evil and imperialism, most likely in the form of China. Themes of internal and external conflict, whether they are played out in a humorous or serious manner, symbolize that Hong Kong is in a state of transition and unrest for which cooperation and dialogue is an important solution. Finally, visual and thematic juxtapositions call attention to actions amidst chaos and raise questions regarding the role of ordinary citizens in the larger affairs of Hong Kong. However, the use of color, themes of conflict, and visual and thematic juxtapositions in the films do not foster an overwhelming sense of paranoia or fear. Rather, they call attention to the concerns of the city using commercial means and serve to foster dialogue about the future of Hong Kong. However, as in the case of *The Butterfly Murders*, *Duel to the Death*, and *Swordsman II*, directors Hark and Cheng sometimes approach their films in serious manners with explicit regard for local concerns.

Conclusion

This thesis considered the case for Hong Kong New Wave *wuxia pian* films as contributing to Hong Kong's national agency during the 1980s and early 1990s. In order to reach this conclusion, it was first necessary to understand how the selected films have maintained a distinct Hong Kong feel despite the influx of international influences and foreign imports into the city. By relying on local talent, unique forms of action choreography, and local themes related to authority and self-discovery, these five films

under analysis called attention to the futility of internal and external conflicts, the dangers of imperial authority, and the role of ordinary citizens in a time of transition and unrest.

What is more, the importance of Hong Kong New Wave *wuxia pian* films within the larger context of Chinese film can be seen in the Hong Kong Film Awards' list of the 100 best Chinese motion pictures, released in 2005. Of the films analyzed in this thesis, *The Butterfly Murders* placed at number 34, *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* placed at number 40, and *A Chinese Ghost Story* placed at number 50 (Hong Kong Film Awards, 2005). Furthermore, many other films to which Hark and Cheng contributed placed very high on the list, including *A Better Tomorrow*, *A Chinese Odyssey*, *The Killer*, *Once Upon a Time in China*, *Shaolin Soccer*, and others (Hong Kong Film Awards, 2005).

Despite the scope of this thesis regarding the number of films analyzed, the time span in question, and the research questions that were asked, there were limitations. Language is an extremely important aspect of these films, especially as they represent a microcosm of Cantonese-language film evolution following a period of Mandarin-language film dominance. However, this thesis was not concerned to a great extent with the use of language beyond cursory examples of dialogue, and the Cantonese dialect in these films as they do not fall within the scope of the methodology described in this thesis. Any future research would benefit from an inclusion of the Cantonese dialect as sole reliance on translated subtitles yields little information beyond general story elements. Furthermore, this thesis is a broad look at a number of elements common to these films. As such, much analysis was sacrificed for the interests of time and balance. A

singular focus on action choreography or production elements would surely yield stronger results in favor of my central claims.

Hong Kong New Wave *wuxia pian* films are exceptionally creative films made during a period of transition and uncertainty. As a result of the choices made by filmmakers such as Tsui Hark and Cheng Xiaodong within the larger Hong Kong film industry, these films have made a lasting impact on Hong Kong society and international action aesthetics. More importantly, directors Hark and Cheng did more than fashion action films; they helped to define Hong Kong.

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