Act Like Jackie Chan

The Cinematic Legacy of Jingju Training Schools in Hong Kong

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When the National Went Local

Jingju (京劇), also referred to as Beijing Opera or Peking Opera, is one of hundreds of genres of traditional Chinese theatre. In the late 18th century, it first emerged as a hybrid form drawing on several northern genres; it developed into a sophisticated, independent form in Beijing. In the first two decades of the 20th century, as a result of efforts by some dedicated intellectuals and practitioners, jingju was “nationalized” as representative of traditional Chinese culture. Its status as the “national drama” (guoju, 国劇) of China is still recognized within the country and internationally.

As an imported theatrical genre with northern origins, jingju has never been popular in Hong Kong, especially when compared to the local genre of Cantonese Opera. Nevertheless, thanks to the community of mainland immigrants who formed a core audience base, jingju has successfully maintained a secure place in the local cultural spectrum. Between the 1940s and the 1970s, jingju made considerable progress in putting down roots in Hong Kong as a genre of traditional Chinese theatre that was available to local spectators. I designate this a formative period for two reasons: first, local (as opposed to touring) performers based in Hong Kong began to participate; second, some of them established a recruitment system for jingju, which included training schools and private lessons that were open to local people.

Local jingju training schools flourished between the 1950s and 1970s, the same period during which Jackie Chan, the internationally renowned movie actor, studied at one such school. The story of his training in the China Drama Academy (Zhongguo Xiju Xuexiao, 中國戲劇學校), an active jingju school at the time, details how the school operated, and shows the significance of jingju training schools to local students and society at large. There were great obstacles to being a professional jingju performer in Hong Kong in this period, a determining factor in the phenomenon of training school graduates entering the movie industry instead. By making this move, these graduates—Chan being the most well known globally—greatly impacted the industry with what they had originally learned for a jingju career.

In addition to Chan’s autobiography (1998), my research is also informed by Li Juhua (李菊華), a senior-level student with Chan at the China Drama Academy, whom I interviewed during fieldwork in Hong Kong in 2015.

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Jingju in Hong Kong?

Jingju is a traditional Chinese theatre genre with an archaic performing language of “Mid-land” dialect, so the question is: Was there an audience for jingju in Hong Kong, where most locals only spoke Cantonese?

Indeed, despite the warm reception of occasional guest performers from the Chinese mainland—which, I argue, mostly reflected local spectators’ spontaneous curiosity about what was to them an exotic genre—jingju was hardly a popular local choice for entertainment. Unless the featured play was based on a famous Chinese myth or legend, the locals could barely understand the lyrics and dialogue or, consequently, make sense of the narrative.

Ye Shaode, a Cantonese Opera scriptwriter, comments that local spectators usually were drawn by the stories of the plays and rarely by the skills of performers or the niceties of the art form (in Li Jian 1993:91–92). If that is the case, one can imagine how difficult it would be for locals to enjoy jingju.

Nevertheless, changes in the local ethnoscape in the late 1930s also changed the story of jingju in Hong Kong to a certain degree. In particular, the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and the Second Chinese Civil War (1946–1950) led to large-scale emigration from the Chinese mainland to Hong Kong. Among the migrants were skilled jingju practitioners, who sought opportunities to perform, to give private lessons, and to establish training schools in order to earn a living. The community of mainland immigrants in Hong Kong created an audience base for jingju, many of whom arrived in Hong Kong with a cultural background in the popular performance form. In particular, many of these immigrants were from Beijing and Shanghai, where jingju was considered a major theatrical genre. For the same reason, language did not pose a problem for this group, even though the archaic performing language of jingju might have been different from the standard Mandarin or other Chinese dialect they spoke.

Figure 1. Yuan Hong (元紅) and Jackie Chan (right) in Cuiping Shan (翠屏山, in Cuiping Mountain). Hong Kong City Hall, 1967. (Photo from Qixiaofu 2009:49)

1. Jingju is performed mainly in Mid-land dialect, which originated in the mid-region of ancient China. The region covers the modern province of Hunan.
More importantly, social factors contributed to the community’s enthusiastic support of jingju in Hong Kong. Many reports comment on the social aspect of jingju performances. For example, a column in the Xinseng Wanbao (新生晚報, New Life Evening Post) reads:

For the purpose of budget control, the troupe has to book the slot from half past nine in the evening. The film that started at half past seven has not ended yet, and spectators have to wait outside the theatre. To all intents and purposes, it looks like a “Shanghai-nese clansmen gathering.” People appear to be constantly shaking hands with each other, to the point where they end up shaking hands with the same person twice, but they still seem to want more [...]. Although the performance is proceeding, spectators do not sit properly, and face backward, because this position enables them to conveniently greet friends sitting a few rows back [...]. Rather than just a jingju performance, it may be more exact to describe the event as a social gathering. (Xinseng Wanbao 1957)

For the immigrant community, who had to adapt to a new place, a new society, and a new culture, jingju was a site of nostalgia where community members maintained their connections in the diaspora: the desire to remain connected with a familiar past was an incentive for attendance.

**Jingju Training Schools in Hong Kong**

**1950s–1970s**

Some jingju practitioners who migrated from the mainland during the immigration wave tried to continue their professions by establishing training schools in Hong Kong. Inevitably, they faced challenges, the language of the form being the primary point of hesitation for locals. Initially, the audience base of the genre consisted mostly of mainland immigrants, which still comprised a relatively small portion of the Hong Kong population. It may not have seemed wise to join one of the schools from a career perspective. Nevertheless, the tough economic environment in Hong Kong in the post–World War II period inadvertently provided an opportunity for these immigrant practitioners to break through social barriers with financial incentives. By the late 1950s they managed to establish a sustainable recruitment system for jingju in Hong Kong, based on the long, successful history of recruitment on the Chinese mainland.

**The Recruitment System of Jingju on the Mainland**

**1790s–1950s**

From the 1790s to the 1860s, as jingju developed into its mature form in Beijing, a recruitment and training system for the genre also emerged. Teachers bought boys of seven or eight years old for training in Beijing, depending upon their personal needs, or at the request of troupe leaders, to fill specific roles. The scope of the trade involving potential students was nationwide, as many boys from southern provinces—especially Anhui and Jiangsu—were also bought and taken to the capital. In my view, the far reach of the trade to the south was probably due to the continuing domination of erhuang (二黃) and kun (崑) singing modes in jingju at the time, which were not local to Beijing. It was practical for troupes in Beijing to look in Anhui and Jiangsu, the core areas of the two modes respectively, for boys who might have linguistic familiarity with the singing modes.

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2. All quotes from Mandarin, unless otherwise indicated, are my own translations.

3. A singing mode can be understood as a specific set of structural rules that govern melodic formation of musical lines in a traditional Chinese theatre play. These rules of melodic contour are highly dependent on linguistic tones of the performing dialect and, thus, singing modes are highly region-specific.
The student trade was based on an indenture system. Teachers would offer a boy’s parents an amount of money in return for the “ownership” of their child for a specific period of time. A preexpiration buyback clause applied, though the cost was usually way beyond what ordinary families could afford. Upon arrival in Beijing, the boys would either join a troupe or be resold to established performers. Regardless of where the boys ended up, they were trained through a traditional master-disciple relationship. The only difference was that those who were sold to individual performers, who were specifically termed xianggong (相公, literally “young gentlemen”), would also have the status of adopted sons of the performers. According to Colin Mackerras, the indenture system was facilitated by the population growth in China in the second half of the 18th century, which gradually backfired: the continued growth turned from an economic advantage generated by a growing labor force, into a problem of overpopulation and poverty (Ho 1959:270). It is in this social context that, Mackerras concludes, “it is not altogether surprising that poor people should have sought economic relief by selling a child for a given period” (1975:71).

The second phase of the development of jingju’s recruitment system began in the 1860s, with the Taiping rebellion of 1850 to 1864 as a prelude. The rebellion had caused great devastation in southern China, and disrupted the trading route between the southern areas and Beijing, including the trade of boys to the capital. In order to sustain their supply, troupes and individual performers turned their eyes more to the capital itself. Meanwhile, after decades of refinement, jingju had established pihuang (皮黄) as its major singing mode. The heavy local flavor of pihuang removed the linguistic advantage of the southern boys and paved the way for new talent to be obtained locally. This led to a major change in the recruitment system, as some troupe owners began to combine performing and training in one single institution/business, and established keban (科班, troupes-cum-training schools).

As the name suggests, these troupes-cum-training-schools not only trained jingju performers, but also produced commercial performances by their students. One well-known example of these dual-function schools was the Xiliancheng (喜連成) troupe, which trained some of the most renowned jingju performers in the 20th century, most notably Mei Lanfang (梅蘭芳, 1894–1961) and Zhou Xinfang (周信芳, 1895–1975). Contracts were still used as a form of agreement between schools and parents, but different terms from those in the old system applied. Parents no longer received money, but instead a guarantee of free training, accommodation, and meals for their boys, usually for a period of seven years (Shen 2006:269–76). The closure of Xiliancheng troupe in 1948 marked the end of this phase.

Overlapping with the second phase, the third phase began in the early Republican period of the 1910s, when Chinese society was in turmoil because of rapid modernization. Two schools stand out as examples of the new form of training schools in this phase: the Nantong School for Theatre Performers (Nantong Linggong Xueshe, 南通伶工學社) and the Vocational School of Traditional Chinese Dramas (Zhonghua Xiqu Zhuanke Xuexiao, 中華戲曲專科學校). The Nantong School was established by Zhang Jian (張謇) in 1919 and managed by Ouyang Yuqian (歐陽予倩). The school was progressive and offered a broad curriculum in addition to jingju training. Academic subjects such as Chinese language, mathematics, history, and geography were taught; performing skills in spoken drama were included in the curriculum; Western drama theories, as well as dramatists and their works were also introduced. In another dramatic change, physical punishment — traditionally, brutal disciplinary acts — were forbidden at school, as this was increasingly considered to be morally wrong among progressive factions of the society. Around the same time, the xianggong trade faded away after persistent condemnation of the system by the government and the public, whose evolving moral perspectives had begun to regard the practice as slavery and to consider sex between the boys and their masters as well as their patrons as morally inappropriate (Ouyang [1929] 1990:86–87).

The Nantong School closed in 1926 due to financial problems, but its progressive recruitment system was carried forward by the Vocational School. Established in 1930 by some
renowned jingju performers and enthusiasts, the Vocational School also provided a broad curriculum of academic subjects and, furthermore, adopted the management system used in regular schools. Staff committees were set up for academic matters and discipline. Most significantly, the Vocational School also adopted the admission system of regular schools, abandoning the indenture system and the use of contracts. The school continued the agenda of the Nantong School, eliminating what they considered inappropriate practices, and discouraged the practice of teacher-student homosexuality. According to Mackerras, to ensure compliance with this new policy, doors of the student dormitories were left open all night, and girls were also recruited into the school from the beginning (1975:75). In my view, the recruitment of girls was not only intended to repress homosexuality, but also reflected the loosening of restrictions on female performers and the gradual acceptance of them by jingju spectators.

The Childhood of Jackie Chan

Born in 1954, Jackie Chan was the second generation of a mainland immigrant family in Hong Kong. His real name, Chan Kong-sang (陳港生), literally means “born in Hong Kong.” Compared to their fellow mainlanders and locals, many of whom were living difficult lives in the ghettos, the Chan family was among the more fortunate. His parents found jobs soon after immigrating, both working for the French ambassador: his father as cook and his mother as housekeeper. They lived in the ambassador’s house on the Victoria Peak, among the rich and powerful. Chan’s childhood was secure in material terms. His family could even afford to send him to primary school—something not every family in Hong Kong could do at that time. However, Chan’s first year at school showed that he was not school material. He was a poor student, and notorious for being a troublemaker (Chan 1998).

Figure 2. Jackie Chan performing in Shixiu Murdering His Sister-in-law (Shixiu Shasao, 石秀殺嫂). Hong Kong City Hall, the 1960s. (Photo from Qixiaofu 2009:116)

4. Free primary education only became available to all in 1971.
When Chan was seven years old, after his first school year, his father received a job offer as the head chef for the American ambassador in Australia. He accepted the offer, but decided to go alone, fearing the uncertainties of relocating his whole family to a new place. His parents were worried that, without his father, Chan would have no one to discipline him. Out of concern that it might be too heavy a burden for a single mother to work and raise a growing boy at the same time, especially after Chan’s poor performance at school, his parents decided to send Chan to the China Drama Academy, a well-known jingju training school in Hong Kong at the time.

*Life in a Training School*

The China Drama Academy was established by Yu Zhanyuan (于占元, 1905–1997). Yu had been a jingju performer of the martial-male-role (*wusheng*, 武生) in Shanghai. In the late 1940s, during the second Chinese civil war, he fled with his first wife to Hong Kong. He established the Academy almost a decade later, in 1959. It was one of four jingju training schools in Hong Kong at the time—the other three were the Spring and Autumn Drama School (Chunqiu Xiju Xuexiao, 春秋戲劇學校) founded by Zhang Suqi (張素秋, aka Fen Juhua 粉菊花), the Eastern Chinese Opera School (Dongfang Xiqu Xuexiao, 東方戲曲學校) founded by Tang Di (唐迪), and the Chung Wah Chinese Opera School (Zhonghua Xiqu Xuexiao, 中華戲曲學校) founded by Ma Chengzhi (馬承志). No information about the latter three has been found to date, except their names and founders (Yamada and Udagawa 1998; Hong Kong Film Archive 1999:86).

The institutional setting of the Academy was much like a second-phase (1860s to 1948) training school. It was not affiliated with a jingju troupe—in fact, at the time there was no jingju troupe in Hong Kong at all. All students were locally recruited; and the school used modified terms in its contracts with parents, which obliged the Academy to take care of the young students in lieu of a monetary payment to the parents. Meanwhile, it had a characteristic of a third-phase (1910s to 1950s) school, in that it was co-ed. Also, it allowed prospective students and parents to try out the school. According to Chan, his father brought him to the Academy several times to see if the boy liked the school before the contract was signed. The story goes that Chan, a young and active boy, was reluctant to leave the Academy after each visit, and this convinced his father to put Chan in the Academy. Eventually, his father signed a 10-year contract with Yu, the longest possible contract Yu would offer to a new intake.

*Core Values: Discipline and Pride*

A characteristic of institutional jingju training in general was the intensive and highly demanding training, the only way to a successful career, according to the professionals. Yu adhered to this philosophy in the Academy in two ways: he was a strict disciplinarian regarding training at the Academy; and he instilled a sense of pride in students as representatives of the Academy. Discipline and pride were like the two sides of a coin, in which discipline controlled the students, while the assertion of pride empowered them. Together, this motivated students to keep up with the rigorous training.

Every student was given a stage name upon joining the Academy. The names contained two Chinese characters and shared the common character “Yuan” (元), which was taken from the master’s name (Yu Zhanyuan). For example, Chan was named Yuan Lou (元樓) and Li Juhua was called Yuan Fu (元甫). For troupes with more students, different “common characters” were used to indicate seniority. This naming practice gave the students a collective identity.
which helped control the students’ behavior because anything they did, in or out of the school, affected the reputation of their entire peer group and, more importantly, the school. The stage name could become a lifelong identity and many students of the academy kept their stage names after graduation.

Yu required absolute obedience to the demanding daily schedule of the Academy. As Chan and Li recalled, the routine started at five in the morning with running several laps around the flat rooftop of the building where the Academy was located—an apartment that functioned as both the training ground and residence, where only the master had his own bedroom while all students slept on the floor of the training space. After the run there was a simple breakfast, usually a bowl of congee. Then came the morning training session, which usually lasted five to six hours without a break. Students practiced all core skills in jingju performing, including footwork, martial arts, and acrobatics. Then lunch time and the first toilet break—there was no toilet break allowed before lunchtime, as Yu believed that all toxins should have been sweated out during the wake-up run and the morning training, and any needs to go to toilet before lunchtime could only mean that the student was not exercising hard enough.

After lunch came flexibility training. Insiders considered this the most important training because it was the foundation of most performing skills in jingju. The training consisted of different kinds of body stretching, and was considered by the students to be the most horrible part of the daily routine. The practice included full leg-splits—both horizontally on the ground, and vertically by holding one leg above one’s head. Students also had to learn to execute a perfect handstand and were expected to hold the position for at least a half hour at a time. In Chan’s words, “As soon as the exercises began, the room would be full of howling, because frankly, it hurts like hell” (1998:42). After the flexibility training, students were divided into groups. The majority were given housekeeping work, while a select group received special training in singing and movement combinations with prop weapons. This lasted until evening dinnertime, after which students were given lessons in reading, writing, Chinese literature, and Chinese history. Sometimes after the lessons, Yu would give extra lessons on other practical matters in jingju, such as face painting, props, or costumes. The daily schedule ended at midnight.

If the daily schedule did not push students to their limits, the harsh physical punishments certainly did. While these practices had been abandoned by that time on the mainland, Yu persisted with his brutal disciplinary measures. In the 2009 publication Xiaonian Chu Yingxiong (少年出英雄, From Youngsters to Heroes), which was dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the Academy’s establishment, almost all contributing former students recalled Yu’s merciless beatings during their training (Qixiaofu 2009). In fact, one of Yu’s admission requirements was accepting a term in the contract that read “No complaints if [the student is] beaten to death” (dasi wu yuan, 打死無怨) (15). According to Chan, the first heavy beating for every new student, usually on their buttocks after a punishment-free first week, became a sort of “welcoming ritual” at the Academy. Sometimes, beatings were collective, in which a mistake by one student would cause suffering for all. This was another measure to strengthen the students’ collective identity. According to Chan, it apparently worked: they would help each other in training to avoid being punished for another’s mistakes, and they would also work harder because they didn’t want to be labeled troublemakers (51–52).

Chan’s experience at the Academy was unique. He received harder training and heavier punishment than his peers, partly because of his family situation. A few years after his admission, his mother decided to join his father in Australia. Worried about his behavior while he was alone in Hong Kong, his parents asked Yu to be his godfather. Yu accepted the request. On the one hand, Chan benefited from his new status as the godson of the master. For example, when he entered the academy he was one of the last to get his share of food at meal times—where one sat and when one got food was determined by seniority—but his new status moved him to first chair. On the other hand, Yu expected more from Chan. He had to train much longer than the others, with higher standards for every move he learned, and received double beatings when he made mistakes.
The Beginning of the Seven Little Fortunes

The Academy had two financial sources for maintaining its daily operations. The first was donations from local Christian churches in the form of rice, milk powder, and clothes. This material income was particularly significant during the early period of the Academy, as students were still working on their basic skills and were not yet ready to present commercial performances. However, already in 1960, just months after its founding, the Academy received its first work offer—not for a jingju performance, but for an acrobatics show in a club called the Happy Palace (Legong Liu, 樂宮樓).6 This gig was arranged by Sun Shenghai (孫勝海), who was then both a teacher of academic subjects in the Academy and the manager of the Happy Palace. Seven students were selected for the show, and the group was named Seven Little Fortunes (Qixiaofu, 七小福) after a 1961 movie of the same title. The show, also called Seven Little Fortunes, received high acclaim among club guests, and was restaged regularly both in the Happy Palace and several other venues. At some point there were three teams of students staging the Seven Little Fortunes show at different places on the same evening (Li Juhua 2015). This success was a huge step for the development of the Academy. It brought financial relief by utilizing what the students were capable of at that point; the show also promoted the Academy, which helped to secure future performance opportunities.

It took the students in the Academy about three years of basic training before Yu put them in commercial performances. In 1963, Yu secured a contract with the Lai Chi Kok Amusement Park for daily performances in one of the park’s theatres.7 He immediately stopped all the Seven Little Fortunes shows and made the park’s performances the Academy’s sole obligation. The students debuted on 2 August 1963 for two weeks before becoming the resident troupe on 16 March 1964. The engagement lasted for almost five years, with select students performing every evening from 8:00 to 11:00 p.m. The Academy was at its peak during this period. For example, the daily park programs, which were included in the park’s daily newspaper advertisements in the New Life Evening Post, show a gradual expansion of the Academy’s repertoire from 1964 to 1966 (Xinsheng Wanbao 1962–1969). The Academy’s status was especially evident in the increased number of full plays (quanben xi, 全本戲), which required a troupe to have a large and

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6. The Happy Palace was a Chinese restaurant in daytime, and a nightclub in the evening that mainly served foreigners.

7. There were nine theatres in the Park, staging a wide range of entertainments such as movies, variety shows, Cantonese Opera, and jingju.
strong cast of performers. This indeed reflects the growth of the Academy from a certain perspective. At some point during this period, Yu also restaged the Seven Little Fortunes’ acrobatics shows in local clubs. In addition, the group also occasionally performed on makeshift stages, providing entertainment at special events like festival celebrations and private parties (Chan 1998:98; Qixiaofu 2009:59).

As another measure to encourage hard work from his students, Yu made the park performances and the Seven Little Fortunes shows exclusive to the best in the Academy. Only top students would be chosen for those performances, regardless of seniority. The starting group was given material incentives in addition to the sense of pride in representing the Academy. For example, they were given extra pocket money for each performance, and occasionally Yu would bring the group to a restaurant for a luxury meal. At the same time, he constantly changed the rosters for these performances—signaling to the starting group that they could be easily replaced if they failed to do their best onstage.

Yu’s system worked because he trained his students differently than in traditional schools. First, instead of the conventional specialization in one role-type, Yu trained his students to play a range of roles. For example, Li Juhua learned to perform in the senior-female-role (laodan, 老旦), martial-male-role (wusheng, 武生), and even the painted-face-role (jing, 淨) (Li Juhua 2015). Second, Yu always trained two to three students for each character in every play, ensuring that no one in the Academy was irreplaceable. In short, Yu gave every student a common goal to fight for—to get into the starting group. The desire to be in the elite group and be able to let go of some of the fear of being beaten or replaced was incentive for every student to keep up with the intensive and demanding training (Qixiaofu 2009:86–87).

The End of the China Drama Academy

As noted, the Academy was in its prime during the period of the mid-1960s, when its students performed regularly at the Lai Chi Kok Amusement Park. In 1965, Yu even purchased another apartment and expanded the Academy. However, things went downhill from that point on. As a regular participant in the park performances, Chan witnessed the dwindling of the genre with a persistent drop in attendance. The number of full plays onstage declined as did the number of different programs performed toward the end of the 1969 park engagement, both indicating that the Academy was struggling to sustain its performance level at the time, probably due to the diminishing roster of new students (Xinsheng Wanbao 1962–1969). The declining park
program was devastating to the Academy, as it relied heavily on the income from this engagement. Noticing the rise of Hong Kong martial arts movies at the time, Yu tried to cover the loss from the park performances by lending his students more often to movie producers as extras and stuntmen.

Right after the end of the contract with the Lai Chi Kok Amusement Park in March 1969, Yu stopped all performances and acrobatics shows in Hong Kong, and brought all remaining students to Taiwan for a nine-month tour. Later on, in 1970, he organized another tour to Thailand. Finally in 1973, Yu sold the two apartments the Academy owned and led the whole school to the United States. His original plan was to tour the US for a year and make this a grand finale of the Academy’s history. Unfortunately, the tour was never finished, cut short when the organizer on the US side disappeared with all tour earnings and all operational funds. In the end, Yu and some students decided to stay, while the others were sent back to Hong Kong with the help of the Hong Kong government. The 14-year history of the China Drama Academy officially ended in the United States (Qixiaofu 2009:67). Notably, the other three training schools closed at roughly the same time, marking an end to the short history of jingju training schools in Hong Kong.

**Jingju Training Schools and Hong Kong Martial Arts Movies**

**The Rise of Martial Arts Movies**

As interest in jingju dwindled in Hong Kong, the 1960s brought a new trend in the local movie industry. The era of romantic movies had passed, replaced by a craze for martial arts movies. Here I use the term “martial arts movies” as an umbrella genre that includes three subgenres: *wuxia* (武俠) movies, kung fu movies, and action-comedy movies.

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8. This subgenre was also referred to as "swordsmen" movies. Ho-Chak Law offers a sufficient explanation of the term *wuxia*: "Wu, denoting militaristic or martial qualities, and *xia*, meaning chivalry, gallantry, and qualities of
The rise of wuxia movies began in the mid-1960s. According to Stephen Teo, as Hong Kong’s influence in the global economy increased, local people gradually shook off their old subordinate status as colonial subjects. As they became more confident of their identity as citizens of Hong Kong, the swordsmen heroes in the movies reflected this newfound pride. In addition, when the import of Japanese samurai movies became a big hit in the Hong Kong market, local producers were inspired and tried to make their own versions of samurai movies, inspiring the wuxia genre (Teo 1997:97–98). At the time, kung fu movies were also part of local movie offerings, including popular productions such as the *Wong Fei Hung* (黃飛鴻) series. However, these were less popular than wuxia movies.

The watershed moment came in 1971, when the Golden Harvest Company released *Tangshan Daxiong* (唐山大兄, *The Big Boss*), a kung fu movie featuring a Chinese American actor named Bruce Lee. The movie was a huge success in the Hong Kong market, and had a massive impact on the audience’s taste—with fist-fighting replacing sword-fighting. The year 1971 was an intersection point for the two subgenres. As kung fu movies were on the rise, interest in wuxia movies waned. It is worth mentioning that there was also a transitional period, probably around 1970, after which the news of Bruce Lee’s hit circulated in Hong Kong and interest in kung fu movies increased. To cater to the changing audiences’ taste, local producers started making hybrid forms of wuxia and kung fu movies. Movies of this kind still adopted a wuxia movie setting, but fist-fighting scenes were added. For example, a fight between the protagonist and the antagonist would first start with swords, and at some point they would drop the swords and fight with their bare fists (Teo 1997:99).

The phenomenon of kung fu movies and Bruce Lee did not last long, probably due to the sudden death of Lee in 1973. The “golden formula” of kung fu movies—the theme of revenge, knighthood and heroism, constitute what is known as *wuxia*: a type of narrative characterized by the themes and principles of xia (chivalry or knight-errantry), portraying the xia (warriors) and their styles of swordplay” (2014:25).
the excitement of fist-fighting and, most importantly, Lee’s charisma — was missing its key element, its star, and began to lose its magic. No matter how hard local producers tried to find a new kung fu icon, this subgenre remained under Lee’s shadow. The closest they came to finding “the new Bruce Lee” was Jackie Chan. He made several popular kung fu movies in the conventional style, including Xin jingwumen (新精武門, New Fist of Fury, 1976) and Shaolin Muren Xiang (少林木人巷, Shaolin Wooden Men, 1976). In 1978, Chan made two revolutionary changes in Shexing Diaoshou (蛇形刁手, Snake in the Eagle’s Shadow). He incorporated comedy elements into the conventional theme of revenge, and he choreographed the action sequences in an acrobatic manner in contrast to the more rigid style of Lee’s movies. This movie was a big hit in Hong Kong, and so were many of Chan’s later productions. After years of refining his work, Chan made a name for himself in the history of martial arts movies in Hong Kong with his contribution to the new subgenre of action-comedy movies.

From Jingju Performers to Movie Actors

Like their predecessors in the 1940s, Yu and his students in the China Drama Academy failed to build a sustainable environment for jingju in Hong Kong. As if the language barrier and the repetitive repertoire weren’t enough of a hurdle, the emergence of public broadcast television made the situation worse. Once Redifussion, a British broadcasting company, provided television services through wired relay networks in 1957, consumption habits in entertainment changed radically (Hampton 2011:308). And when Television Broadcast Limited had its first free-to-air broadcast in 1967, the impact of televised entertainment on domestic households was further amplified. The demise of jingju, which was already disadvantaged by its small audience base, seemed inevitable.

As noted above, one of the financial resources for the Academy was lending out students to movie producers. This connection across the two art forms did not start with the Academy’s need for revenue, but rather originated with the relation between Yu and King Hu (aka Hu Jinquan, 胡金銓, 1932–1997), a renowned director of wuxia movies. Deeply interested in jingju culture due to his Beijing origin, he befriended Yu and was appointed as a trustee of the Academy (Yamada and Udagawa 1998:61–63). Thanks to Hu, students in the Academy were given opportunities to appear in movies. During this period, Chan was one of the students who was very popular with the moviemakers. He made his film debut in Daxiao Huang Tianba (大小黃天霸, Big and Little Wong Tin Bar, 1962) in a sidekick child role. After several appearances for other directors, King Hu used him in two of Hu’s famous productions, Da Zuixia (大醉俠, Come Drink With Me, 1966) and Xianu (俠女, A Touch of Zen, 1971)9 (Chan 1998:327).

In 1971, Chan completed his 10-year contract with his master and left the Academy. He then followed in the footsteps of his senior Academy alums such as Wu Mingcai (吳明才, aka Yuan Ting, 元庭) and Sammo Hung and immersed himself fully in the movie industry as a junior stuntman. Later, the movie studios became a popular destination for the Academy’s graduates. They formed a big community in the martial arts movie industry, and shared more or less the same career path. They started as junior, freelance stunt performers and moved up the ladder of seniority, in competition for the rare contracted positions. Some would go on to be martial arts/action directors; and a very few, like Chan, ended up as actors and directors.

The Significance of Jingju Training Schools in Hong Kong

Before jingju fell out of favor in the 1960s, the China Drama Academy served its primary function well as an institution that provided human resources for the genre’s small artistic community in mid-20th-century Hong Kong. The Academy also had an impact on the local society, providing potential relief for at least some of those in the struggling financial lower class. Yu

9. Chan participated in the filming of these two movies in 1964 and 1968 respectively.
offered an opportunity for free room and board, care, and career training for children. In the two decades of the Academy’s history, the majority of students came from poverty-stricken families. They sent their children to the Academy as a way to relieve their immediate financial burdens; the career prospects for the students was a long-term incentive for the parents. It was indeed too good to be ignored by a society that was developing but not yet free from poverty. Still, the social impact made by the Academy was limited to a relatively small number of families, as there were only 48 students total in the Academy’s 14-year history. By the mid-1960s, the rising economy improved the standard of living for many in Hong Kong, which in turn lowered the financial incentive offered by the Academy.

Even as the changing economy and the fading interest in jingju was disastrous for the Academy, the school continued to help graduates get new careers in the martial arts movie industry, aided by the relationship between Yu Zhanyuan and King Hu. The students’ physical abilities achieved after years of intensive acrobatic training gave them a competitive advantage as candidates for stunt jobs. For example, there is an acrobatic move in jingju that requires a performer to jump down from a considerable height—usually off several tables stacked on top of one another—without any safety measures. The performer must be able to take the jump with a front or back somersault and land gracefully. As a master of this sort of acrobatic move, Chan once shocked everybody in the movie studio during his early years as a freelance stunt artist when he successfully completed a backflip off the balcony of a 15-foot-high building (Chan 1998:148–52). The Academy had prepared him and his cohort unexpectedly well to prosper in this new field.

The jingju training in the Hong Kong schools impacted the movie industry in other ways, providing more than just able stunt performers. Jackie Chan’s innovations in his action-comedy movies make this subgenre distinctive from mainstream action movies, and can be traced to his early training. Especially in his earlier movies, the action sequences, choreographed mostly by Chan or Sammo Hung, are very acrobatic. Body spins, rolls, and somersaults are frequently part of the sequences. One can easily associate these actions with similar skills found in jingju routines. The action sequences choreographed by Chan also show a great sense of rhythm, essential in jingju where performers have to synchronize actions perfectly with the music—in particular with the rhythmic patterns of the percussion section. A good example is the fight scene between Chan with his bare fists and his opponent with a long wooden stick in Zuiquan (醉拳, Drunken Master; Yuen 1978). The rhythm in this sequence is reflected not only in the fight actions, but also in pauses during the fight. The pause is another stylistic trick that Chan borrowed from jingju, in which a fighting sequence is interrupted by a pause as performers to strike a powerful pose (liangxiang, 亮相) before resuming the fight. The pause, both onstage and onscreen, serves to give spectators time to digest previous actions, and to build up their expectations for what comes next.

Chan often emphasized his comedic character by exaggerating his reactions to taking a hit in the action sequences. For example, in a fight sequence from A jihua (A計劃, Project A, 1983), when Chan’s punch is blocked by an antagonist with a thick, wooden chopping board, the dynamics of the sequence are suddenly interrupted. This interruption makes way for a shot of Chan rubbing his painful fist, a move that inevitably recalls the clown role (chou, 丑) in jingju. This sort of clowning departs quite boldly from the image of the invincible main hero that was typically featured in the mainstream action movies at that time.

The most significant reason that Chan’s action-comedy films are distinctive is that his solid action skills enable simpler and clearer frames in filming. According to Tony Zhou, on his website Every Frame a Painting, actors in most action movies do not have solid action skills. Hence, to enhance the intensity of action sequences, directors have to make a lot of camera movements when filming in order to create the illusion of quickness and violence. In contrast, as Chan emphasized in the documentary Jackie Chan: My Stunts (Lee 1999), he always keeps the cameras in his movies in a fixed position and employs a wide-angle lens to capture the whole scene in a
single frame. Specifically, he uses the scope format (aspect ratio 2.35:1), which shows everything of the sequence to the spectators and allows no room for the actor to cheat his actions with filming techniques (Gentry 1997:73). For traveling stunts such as car chases and jumps, he employs long shots that capture the whole stunt unedited. Moreover, he always shoots several takes of the stunt sequences, from different angles, and uses them in the final product. The end results of these filming techniques are single-shot, multangle stunt sequences that are clearly done by Chan himself. Particularly exemplary are the multistory glass slide in a shopping mall in Jingcha Gushi (警察故事, Police Story, 1985) and the car chase sequence in Jingcha Gushi Er (警察故事二, Police Story 2, 1988). This unique style, to paraphrase Zhou, shows all the elements involved in defining an “action”—actor, reactor, action, and reaction—in the same frame, unedited, and even from different angles. The stunt sequences in Chan’s action-comedies are more convincing and more impressive than in conventional action movies.

With the mainland immigrant community being the powerhouse, jingju in Hong Kong enjoyed a relatively short peak in activity between the 1940s and the 1970s. It not only added variety to local cultural offerings, but also made a social impact by providing local poor families with a way to survive in the challenging economy of mid-20th-century Hong Kong. Even as the popularity of the genre dwindled in the mid-1970s, when it lost its battle for popularity against modern forms of entertainment, it opened up another avenue for graduates from the

Figure 7. The fight scene, between Chan with his bare fists and his opponent with a long wooden stick, in Drunken Master. (Photo from Gentry 1997:92)
training schools who had an unexpected and substantial impact on locally made martial arts movies. Combining choreographed stunts, a distinctive sense of rhythm, the harmonious integration of action and comedy, and the single-frame filming of long stunt sequences, these films featuring Jackie Chan filled a void in the industry with a new aesthetic energy after the death of Bruce Lee. Chan’s success as a movie actor overshadowed his previous jingju background, which in fact hugely contributed to his later fame in the movies. The impact of an art form on a society is not necessarily determined in isolation, but possibly by its intertwined relationship with other performing arts.

References

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