

SIGNING WITH A SWORD:  
SIGNATURE SIGN PATTERNS OF SEMIOTICS  
AS CONNOTATIVE CONSTRUCTS APPLIED  
TO CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS CINEMA

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Cinematic semiotic signs and their respective grammar are a constantly evolving language, changing with each new generation of films. As such, signs are either adopted, modified, or absent from later films. Yet the formation of specific sign patterns can be retrospectively traced to a singular origin within the film's production. Things such as studio house-style, auteur theory, genres, star systems, and national cinemas all use these previous sign patterns to formulate their own pattern of signifiers. While semiotics has developed a method of recognizing and analyzing individual signs, no such method exists for a comprehensive analysis of the patterns of signs. This paper will propose that a new method be added to the semiotic theory: signature sign patterns. Signatures are patterns of signs that can be attributed to a key figure or influence of the film that gives the film an overarching connotative set of signs and gives the audience a connotative reference for the film, by placing it within the context of a group of films with similar sign patterns.

Signatures can be used to pinpoint the origin of the films' major influences, which allows the audience to umbrella label films based on the major stylistic influencer, and thus connotatively read the film based on these canon patterns of film style and form. These reoccurring features, aesthetic tendencies, editing patterns, and specialized special effects are some of the ways in which to determine the essence of any style of film. Signatures can be recognized by the audience based on their most prominent name or feature to them, such as: these are 1930s Warner Bros films, this is a Tim Burton film, these are martial arts films, etc. Signatures, not being limited to studio-style, auteur, stars, or genres, allow for a flexible signifier to determine the underlying cause of the vital signs for the created signature.

This new method of semiotics and signature signs will be used to explore the major signatures of Chinese martial arts cinema from the 1960s onward. As these signatures can be

used to differentiate between similar films based on their specific signifiers, this thesis will demonstrate this semiotic approach by applying it to a specific sub-set of films through a historical analysis. The parameters of how to identify the signature of a film based on the sign patterns will be used to explore four major signatures of Chinese martial arts cinema: the Shaw Brothers era, Bruce Lee films, Jackie Chan films, and the New Wave era. The specifics of each signature will be broken down into major sign components and analyzed on the sign use within the films. Through historical analysis and application of these techniques, I will identify the sign patterns in four distinctive signatures of Chinese martial arts films post-1967, and demonstrate how these signature signs were constructed due to the major influence of the films.

#### SEMIOTICS TERMINOLOGY

The word “signature” was chosen to represent this new method within semiotics as it signifies an imprint upon the film, with patterns of signs specific to the creator of the signature. Signatures in daily life are used to imprint our name upon things in a pattern particular only to the one signing. These filmic signatures occur when the creator “signs” a discernible pattern imprint on the film that can be connotatively traced back to the creator. This signature can be found quite literally in films, for example, the signature of the director on Silent Era inter titles that signifies their stamp on the film, or the animated title signature of Walt Disney. In both of these literal signatures, a semiotic connotation is established between the signed name and the movie that follows.

By applying semiotics through signature signs, it becomes a viable and practical method, revitalizing a theory many have abandoned in favor of less complicated and more fashionable theories. The focus of semiotics for cinema studies has often been on the relationship of film as

language being either connotative or denotative, based upon linguistics or images, deconstructing and analyzing film grammar or film narrative, or the semiotic indexing of film language and image types. These focuses have shown that film cannot be fully comprehended through denotation alone, or be analyzed by a comparative linguistic model, when the narrative is the largest component of the film comprehended by a spectator. As these factors have been established, the semiotic focus in this thesis will be less on the analysis of singular facets of films, and instead, towards analyzing the films as a comprehensive whole. This new approach includes denotative and connotative signs, using the established linguistic model to analyze images, all stemming from an understanding that film grammar adds to the mental and emotional comprehension of the film narrative. This depth of previous knowledge is required for analysis as films are not just linguistic models or singular image types - they are a fluid, complex, and culturally based system of signs that require this layered analysis method in order to fully understand the multifaceted meaning of the film.

In my research into semiotic film theory, I discovered that the former semiotic approach of applying linguistic analysis ignores the fact that films are not made in the same fashion as a language is spoken or written, but, rather through the fabricated model of a cinematic language system. Semiotic languages form naturally by the repetition of the younger generations learning the signs and significations unique to their culture which can alter through the course of time. Alternatively, films are made not *by* a culture, but *within* a culture.

As films are made by specific groups of people within a language, culture, and sign system, it is natural to think that any message conveyed by said people would be done in a format already known to them. In relaying a narrative, symbolic meaning, or tangible idea, it must be done through a sign system; this is no different in cinema. What differs from film to film

is the method through which this is accomplished. For films, this sign system is created through a process in which many individuals take part in the construction of an adapted sign system into cinematic form, though, certain individuals can specifically and intentionally affect the signs in reoccurring patterns unique to them; signatures. This could be a specific person such as the director, screenwriter, or star, or, a larger umbrella, such as a genre, studio, or mode of address. This vernacular of the signature of a film is already in use when we group films based on their outstanding feature: John Wayne, martial arts, etc. Describing films this way pulls on the largest influence in the film to relay specific information to the spectator about the film through honing in on a specific sign pattern.

#### TYPES OF SIGNATURE SIGNS

Signature signs can be used for any type of film, over the entire course of film history, for specific genres, semiotic auteur analysis, or other applications. Signatures themselves are comprised of technical, aesthetic, and industrial signs. Technical signs that apply to signatures are aspects of technology (cameras, lenses, CGI), and editing patterns (Soviet Montage, Kuleshov effect, continuity). Aesthetic signs are found in the cinematography and mise-en-scène. Industrial signs are found in facets of directors, the star system, studios, and genres. Through these three main pattern types of signature signs, the patterns within films can be analyzed by pinpointing the main influencer of these signs. These three sign patterns, technical, aesthetic, and industrial, form the semiotic basis which the four styles will be analyzed.

## APPLICATION OF SIGNATURE SIGNS

In this application, Chinese martial arts films will be discussed as this international genre has seen four distinctive signatures through the course of its history. Each of these styles contains different uses of technical, aesthetic, and industry signs to connote the signature of the film. The first signature that will be discussed, the Shaw Brothers, contains technical signs of technological advances and alteration of Soviet montage to create the sign patterns in this signature. Bruce Lee uses the industrial star power of the next signature to explore his own aesthetics. Jackie Chan uses industry in a different fashion, as this signature signifies his star power; one very different from Lee. The final signature to be discussed is New Wave (1980-present), which carries connotations from the previous signatures to create new aesthetic forms with newer technologies. These signatures will be analyzed through these three main signature sign patterns and through a historical analysis that gives the connotative basis for these signs.

## FOUNDATIONS OF CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS FILMS

Early martial arts films (1920-1940) drew from Beijing Opera, wuxia literature<sup>1</sup>, and popular folk tales to base wuxia and kung fu films.<sup>2</sup> Beijing Opera performances were crucial to the foundation and formation of early wuxia films as the choreography and performers transferred from on stage to on screen. The male opera stars were less likely to switch from the stage to cinema as it was not considered wise to leave the prestigious opera for a still developing cinema. As such, it was often the women opera performers who were the first to transition from

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<sup>1</sup> Wuxia is a genre of literature in China, dating back to the Tang Dynasty (618-906). These stories include a (typically female) knight-errant character and are based in martial arts chivalry, Confucianism, and swordplay.

<sup>2</sup> Kung fu is a recent term in the English language that typically refers to empty handed Chinese martial arts (though weaponry is often included in the films). This paper will use wuxia for the specific genre of knight-errants, kung fu for empty hand and other films, and martial arts for explaining both.

stage to screen and became the first stars of Chinese cinema as the central protagonists in their own right.

Early wuxia was filmed with typical long shots and takes and edited with post-production special effects of “palm-power”. This palm power was created by hand drawing white spherical shapes onto the celluloid to denote the energy attacks of the martial artists. Additionally, they would superimpose images of swords to have them fly through the air, seemingly by magic. The shot composition was similar to many of the early films in that it often replicated the viewpoint an audience would have at a theater: the majority of the set and characters in the frame. As filmmakers began to experiment with form, techniques were developed to film more complex stunts. One such technique for wuxia was filming the beginning and end of a jump to make it appear that the female knight flew a large distance.

In addition to wuxia films, period films about legendary martial artist, Doctor Wong Fei Hung, showcased not only his life, but also his martial arts style: Hung Gar. These stories were made into over 100 films by 1950. While these kung fu films used less special effects than wuxia films, their influence of realism in fighting (i.e., not using palm power or flight) can be found in later period cinema.

Due to lack of archiving and the destructions of war, a large portion of these early films only exist in fragments and stills. While the film techniques of early wuxia were an influence on the Shaw Brothers film style in regards to wuxia films portraying female knight-errants, and incorporating special effects, and kung fu films using minimal effects, these films did not gain the same level of global influence during its time that the Shaw Brothers did.

## SHAW BROTHERS

### THE FIRST CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS SIGNATURE

The Republic of China (1912-1949) decreed a ban on wuxia cinema in 1931 as it had “such extraordinarily low technical standards that they would be banned on this basis as well as for their advocacy of superstition and heresy.”<sup>3</sup> This ban forced wuxia and other traditional cinemas to find a new home in the British colony of Hong Kong (under British rule from 1862-1942). Among these filmmakers and studios, the brothers Runme, Runme, and Run Run Shaw moved with Tianyi Studio, a producer of martial arts films, from Shanghai to Hong Kong. The three brothers formed their own studio, Shaw Studio, in 1956.<sup>4</sup> As the Shaw Brothers Studios were under British rule, it allowed them to maintain traditional elements in their films while gaining international influence and audiences. The Shaw Brothers were highly influenced by Hollywood in the formation of their studio and built their own studio city. This city had apartments for all the crew and cast to live in permanently, meaning they could re-cast their actors, just like the big studios in Hollywood. They also built indoor and outdoor lots for maximum freedom and control in the building of their sets. These sets were constantly taken apart and rebuilt into similar structures, leading to several tropes or signs such as the battle at a restaurant, specific scenery, and bamboo battles. Although the Shaw Brothers made films of several genres prior to and after this move, it was in Hong Kong that their studio would draw influence from international cinemas, and later become known internationally as a producer of martial arts films.

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition*, (Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2009)

<sup>4</sup> Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: Extra Dimensions* 6-7

## SHAW SCOPE

The first signature in Shaw Brothers films appeared during the opening of all of their films after 1961: Shaw Scope. (FIG 1) This inter-title was used to signify the use of widescreen in the Shaw Brothers Studios. Widescreen was introduced by Japanese cinematographers, who were hired on by the Hong Kong based Shaw Brothers for the then current higher technical standards.<sup>5</sup> Anamorphic projection of their films was done by filming on 35mm film, a 1:1 ratio, with a wide screen lens, and projecting the film through a distorted lens to stretch the image to widescreen on the screen. This method was used as it was cheaper to buy 35mm film, as opposed to widescreen film, while still allowing the cinematographer to use the widescreen in their shots.<sup>6</sup> This widescreen use is an aspect of their cinema style. (FIG 2) This first sign in the Shaw Brothers signature is similar to those of Silent Era and Walt Disney films: their name on screen indicating a signature sign which still holds significance for filmmakers today for films of this signature style.<sup>7</sup>

## FLYING WITH MONTAGE

The technical sign pattern of the Shaw Brothers signature is the adaptation of Soviet montage to show characters flying in an aesthetic sign method. Shaw Brothers montage style was used to infer aspects of the fight that would have required significant additional stunt work and wirework to film had montage not been used. It is not the traditional Soviet montage in the sense that dialectical images are meant to create meaning through editing, but instead to imply the

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<sup>5</sup> Silas Lee, "An Interview with He Lanshan", in *A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies: The 8th Hong Kong International Film Festival*, ed. The Urban Council (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1984), 120.

<sup>6</sup> David Bordwell, "Another Shaw Production: Anamorphic Adventures in Hong Kong", David Bordwell, Oct 2009, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/essays/shaw.php> (accessed January, 20, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> In the Quentin Tarantino film *Kill Bill Vol. 1* (Tarantino, 2003), the film opens with the Shaw Scope logo, even though they were not directly involved with the making of the film, as T wanted to pay homage to these early makers of the iconic martial arts films.

supernatural events through the combination of dialectical images with editing. Traditional Soviet montage created meaning by editing dialectical images together to create a new symbolic meaning through the conflict in the images. The montage elements found in the Shaw Brothers signature uses the conflict found in the dialectical images in order to create physical meaning of implied action, as opposed to symbolic meaning. Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein used the juxtaposition of shots to form symbolic meanings of the images based on the montage as a whole,<sup>8</sup> while Kuleshov said montage elicited an emotional reading.<sup>9</sup> Shaw Brothers took the concept of combining images to imply action through “glimpses” of action.<sup>10</sup> Stephen Teo, a martial arts film scholar, states that, “in avoiding using ‘trickery’ to achieve his effects, Hu has achieved something else altogether - the creation of a total effect through the juxtaposition of plastic materials of film.”<sup>11</sup> This technique was used extensively by director King Hu during the forest fight scenes in *Touch of Zen* (Hu, 1971).

Through various uses of stunts, wirework, and Shaw style montage, the implication of flight and opponents flying back is a signature sign in Shaw Brothers films. Flight was a common stunt that was created through montages, editing short clips together to imply flight from the juxtaposition of the movement on screen. The montage begins the jump with a range of shot lengths to establish the character. The flight is then implied through editing cuts of the actor on a trampoline, wirework, or low camera angles. The final cut is of the character landing, often with a close up on the feet. (FIG 3) Additional use of montage is found in the sword prowess of the characters. Montage allowed these flights and swordplay to be implied without the need for

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<sup>8</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, “Film Form”, in *Film Theory & Criticism*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2009), 24-40.

<sup>9</sup> Lev Kuleshov, a Soviet film theorist, experimented with film form in what is now known as the Kuleshov Effect, by showing a close up of a man’s emotionless face, cut to either food, a child playing, a woman, and then cut back to his face. Based on the image in the center, spectators read the facial expression as signifying different emotions.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Teo, *A Touch of Zen*. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 72.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

extensive wirework or other effects. This gave the actions and fights a level of realism, as the spectator views only movements found in this physical reality, with the supernatural implied. These fight scenes additionally used quick edits, often under a second in length, to hasten the pace along with the flight. In *Touch of Zen* the cuts are every 0.25-3 seconds, and this speed increased the visual spectacle for the audience.

## ZOOMS

Zooms were the second technical and aesthetic choice in Shaw Brothers films that punctuated the scene at regular intervals, to make this film-form a crucial part of their signature. The typical zoom is done during a 4-7 second shot, often after a series of 2-5 quick cuts, in ranges from close ups on the eyes to an extreme long shot, and a mid-shot to a long shot. These are most often done zooming out to gain a better view of the fight after emphasizing one strike or character. Zooms were typically done in outdoor locations as the light requirement for zoom lenses of the time was greater than the Shaw Studios indoor lighting could create.<sup>12</sup> This changed as the lenses used became faster, and were able to zoom with less light.

## BRUCE LEE

### INTRODUCING THE DRAGON

Bruce Lee (1940-1973) was a martial artist and actor who became an international star, cultural icon, and signature on a film, a progression that began with the release of his Hong Kong/American co-production *Enter the Dragon* (Clouse, 1973). After Lee signed a two film deal with Golden Harvest productions, *The Big Boss* (Lo, 1971) made Lee a star in Hong Kong,

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<sup>12</sup> Lee, "An Interview with He Lanshan", 122

and the sequel *Fists of Fury* (Lo, 1972) and his own production *Way of the Dragon* (Lee, 1972) cemented his stardom in this market. After this success, Lee worked with Robert Clouse and Golden Harvest to make *Enter the Dragon*. This film skyrocketed Lee to a star in America, but he was unable to enjoy his success as he passed away shortly before the premiere. Lee's final film *The Game of Death* (Lee, 1973), remained only partly finished and the remaining film was shot with another actor supplementing as a stand-in for Lee. What Lee brought to the martial arts world was a modern hero, with transnational appeal, philosophical martial arts, and a new means of martial arts expression. As Lee himself said, "martial arts to me means honestly expressing yourself."<sup>13</sup>

#### HERO TYPE AS AN AESTHETIC

Lee's signature fighting style and hero type became the model for his Industrial star power, and greatly differentiated him from the Shaw Brothers signature. The Lee hero is not like the mythical wuxia heroes of chivalry and familial honor, but one of personal honor, individual power, and mastery over himself and the world. Modern heroes were needed more than mythical ones during this time, which Lee signified perfectly. In the 1960s American film and television industries, Asian actors were cast as either villains or submissive comedic relief. Lee's role as a powerful, masculine, martial artist in a contemporary setting was an entirely new character type for the time. This paved the way for future Asian actors to be cast in new roles.

The modern setting and plots are signifiers for Lee's hero and industrial star image, as it was a change in the mythology of Chinese martial arts films. In updating the time period of martial arts films to modern times, Lee brought about a new type of hero that was not bound to a

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<sup>13</sup> *Enter The Dragon*, Perf. Bruce Lee, (USA, Warner Brothers/Golden Harvest. 1973) DVD.

distant past, but one that drew individual power through the reinvention of traditions. This modern setting often is an urban or industrial one, or settings that have symbolic meaning already incorporated into them, such as the coliseum and traditional Chinese structures that were used in *Way of the Dragon* and *The Game of Death*. (FIG 4)

## MARTIAL ARTS

Bruce Lee created his own style of martial arts, Jeet Kune Do, based on his foundations in Wing Chun,<sup>14</sup> studies of other martial arts styles, and his own philosophical beliefs. His signature style emphasizes physical and mental training with a large incorporation of philosophy. Jeet Kune Do is a blending of different traditional martial arts styles that combines non-superfluous fighting techniques in a streamlined and street ready style. Lee thought that the combative moves should come from within oneself, and be an honest expression of the human body:

All knowledge is self-knowledge ... not so much to defend themselves ... rather, they want to learn to express themselves through some movement; be it anger, be it determination ... to show [themselves] in combative form, the art of expressing the human body.<sup>15</sup>

This gave his fighting style a more instinctual nature to it as the moves were not meant to be premeditated forms, but in the moment reactions. In order to train to allow for immediate responses, moves were repeatedly practiced until they became second nature.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Bruce Lee was taught wing chun by Ip Man, whose own life would be adapted into films following Lee's success. In this way, the lineage of Lee's signature is adapted retroactively in later signatures, creating a new mythos for Lee and Ip Man.

<sup>15</sup> "Bruce Lee in his own words", Enter The Dragon. Perf. Bruce Lee. (USA, Warner Brothers/Golden Harvest. 1973) DVD.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

Jeet Kune Do was an aesthetic sign Lee used in his films, and it displayed several distinctive qualities new to the screen. The fighting style of Lee in films appeared instinctual and reactive to whatever the opponent threw at him. Lee was fully self-confident and sure of himself, which was shown in each movement through direct, quick, and purposeful intent, and in response to the opponent. (FIG 5) As Lee explains, “... the opponent expands, I contract. When the opponent contracts, I expand ...”<sup>17</sup> In addition to empty handed fighting, Lee used a plethora of weaponry in his films. Miniature showoffs of fighting techniques during the stare down between Lee and opponent were common and added to the aesthetic visual spectacle.

#### SIGNATURE PROPS

Lee’s signature weapon was the nun-chucks, a weapon with two wooden handles connected by a short chain, which he showed complete mastery of in his films, and his signature outfit was a yellow tracksuit.<sup>18</sup> The nun-chuck was Lee’s weapon of choice in all his films, and was often used for his toughest opponents. It has been used retroactively to signify Lee in modern martial arts semiotic language. The nun-chucks and yellow tracksuit Lee wore in *Game of Death* are so incorporated into our modern culture that they are inseparable from the name of Lee. The yellow tracksuit is especially iconic as Lee only wore it for a short time in the film, as he passed away before the film was completed, thus immortalizing the image of himself in the tracksuit wielding nun-chucks. (FIG 6) It was paid homage in *Kill Bill Vol. 1* (Tarantino, 2003) with the main character sporting one while fighting.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> The other infamous outfit Lee wore was black pants and a torn-off shirt.

## FOLEY AND SOUNDS

One of the defining signs of the Bruce Lee signature was the unique vocalizations that he made during a fight scene. These sounds punctuated the audio of the scene by giving the visual attacks literal volume. The vocalizations often occurred after a zoom in on Lee's eyes, as they are connotative of his instinctual reactions to the battle. Vocalizations work in tandem with Foley<sup>19</sup> to create an audio/visual fight experience. Foley was used to add sound to each attack, either empty handed or with a weapon, and sounds whip-like in nature. The combination of vocalizations and "whooshing" sounds led to an audio/visual signs that took advantage of both sensory experiences to create a technical and aesthetically specific signature for Lee.

## ZOOMS

In Bruce Lee films, the use of zooms was divergent from how they had been used in the Shaw Brothers signature in zooming out to see the action; instead, these were zoom ins to an extreme close up on Lee's eyes. This unbending stare is frequently found in Lee's films, and signifies his mental and physical mastery of martial arts. Zooms are not frequent during the combat, as other types of film technique make the majority of the fight. Instead, these stare downs either begin the fight or punctuate a turning point. In *Enter the Dragon*, the zooms during the first third of Lee's fight with Chuck Norris are zoom outs on both Lee and Norris. At this point in the fight, it appears that the two are equally matched. This changed during a long take of 15 seconds showing Lee getting back on his feet, with a zoom in to a mid shot, and then continuing to a close up of his stare. After this zoom in, the fight escalates, and Lee uses his signature fighting style to gain the upper hand. Zooms additionally are used to zoom in and out

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<sup>19</sup> Foley are the recordings of sounds, be it everyday or special effects, which are added to a film in postproduction.

of a close up or extreme close up. This type of zooming was accompanied by drum beats accentuating the pulsating camera movement. Zooms are vital to the technical sign pattern in Lee's signature as they signify his physical-mental prowess.

## JACKIE CHAN

### TRANSITION FROM DRAGON TO DRUNKEN MONKEY

Jackie Chan invented his own signature based on the underdog character type, acrobatic nature and comedic aspects of his fighting style, and his use of props. Chan did not try to replace Lee in the late 1970s by fighting in a self-assured manner, but created his own industrial star image by using comedy and his surroundings to his advantage against otherwise more powerful opponents. Chan was trained in Beijing Opera, which uses martial arts in shows, and is highly acrobatic in nature. Chan's aesthetic acrobatic martial arts combined with his comedic underdog persona to form his own star image. This character type and fighting style is the signature sign for his films. Chan used this to work in both Chinese and American studios, and has become a notable action star in and out of the martial arts genre. Chan became a global hit with his star persona, and continues to make films that showcase these elements of his style. He frequently works in China and America as an action star, and recently worked on a Hollywood rendition of a Chinese tale *The Forbidden Kingdom* (Minkoff, 2008).

### CHANGING THE HERO TYPE

The signature style of Jackie Chan in films is portrayed as the underdog hero who overcomes a more powerful foe by using comedic fighting. During the creation of his image, Chan was often cast as a slacker type that was misguided and bored. Chan was highly influenced

by Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, and his physical antics and near tramp-like character (underdog, means well, uses what is in front of him, sheer dumb luck, etc.) are industrial signs for the Jackie Chan style fighting, along with his exaggerated facial expressions.<sup>20</sup>

On a technical level, Chan's signature uses an affection-image, a semiotic interpretation of the film form used to relate this comedic martial arts acting to the audience. This connects the affection-image to the facial expressions of Jackie Chan in his movies, and how this expressive nature brings the audience into the fight more so than just mid/long shots would alone. This type of shot, proposed by Deleuze, is a crucial signifier for Chan as

[i]n the affection-image we might expect to see the person reacting physically to what they see. As an expression plays across their face, the micro-movements of their facial muscles are magnified, as though the face were a landscape reacting to events it perceives. Conventionally, the sequence is then concluded by an image of the action the character decides to take as a consequence of their encounter with the person or thing, an action-image.<sup>21</sup>

The affection-image heightens the comedic reactions of Chan in his fights and builds upon his star image. Chan's use of facial expressions incorporates "martial arts acting," a term used to describe the facial expressions needed to make a fight appear realistic on screen.<sup>22</sup> This combination of technical and industrial signs lends itself towards Chan's signature hero type.

## MARTIAL ARTS AND WEAPONS

Chan has been active in filmmaking since the 1970s. Yet despite some minor variations based on which decade and country his films were made in, the aesthetic sign pattern in his

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong* (USA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 160.

<sup>21</sup> David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze and World Cinemas*, (NY: Continuum International Pub. Group, 2011), 135.

<sup>22</sup> John Kreng, *Fight Choreography: The Art of Non-Verbal Dialogue*. (USA: Thomson Course Technology PTR., 2008).

martial arts style has been consistent to his signature. One of the main signifiers for his fighting style is the acrobatic nature of his fighting. This aspect contains influence from his childhood training in Beijing Opera, which uses performance-based martial arts in its shows.<sup>23</sup> Chan is often seen doing flips, flipping over tables, swinging on things, and using the opponent as a springboard. (FIG 7 and 8) With this acrobatic nature, Chan's style is reactive in nature. Any signature fight scene of Chan's has the fighter react to an attack; he never instigates a fight. Chan responds intuitively to an attack, much like Lee, but without the power or confidence behind the reaction. Instead, Chan responds with unrefined defenses and attacks that use the opportunity of the present moment over prepared fighting instincts. The opportunist nature of these actions adds to the comedic effect of the movements on screen.

This reactionary fighting often led to Chan using any and all props around him as makeshift weapons. When Chan fought during the restaurant scene in *Drunken Master* (Yuen, 1978), Chan used the props around him as weapons against the stronger and numerous opponents. Chan's film *Drunken Master* includes a fight in a restaurant, a setting which was typical of the Shaw Brothers, but added his own twist to the setting trope by fighting with things such as chopsticks, bowls, and chairs.<sup>24</sup> This use of weaponry is dissimilar to the trained fighting found in Lee or Shaw Brothers films. Instead, Chan haphazardly uses the lay objects as weapons to fend off or stall the more skilled opponent. These signs signify to the spectator Chan's star persona, and an underdog hero that can overcome adversity by relying on his strength of character over physical/mental training.

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<sup>23</sup> Leon Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters: From Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger*, (Wallflower Press, 2003), 24.

<sup>24</sup> Jackie Chan, while using every prop as a weapon, is especially known for using the wine gourd in the *Drunken Master* series and later in the American production *Forbidden Kingdom*. (FIG 9)

## NEW WAVE

### SPECIAL EFFECTS TECHNOLOGY AND WUXIA

After the reign of the stars of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, a wave of film makers from the Chinese New Wave revitalized the wuxia genre with the new technologies available.<sup>25</sup> This New Wave started with *Zu Warriors From The Magic Mountain* (Hark, 1983), a film that combined traditional wuxia with Hollywood special effects. The flexibility presented in this new style comes from influences of prior materials, experimental film form, and the newer technologies available to make anything appear realistic on screen. The strength of having this flexibility in form and technique is that the new style takes on the auteur's vision with the influence of the past, and creates a new style for each director. While this lends towards new innovative stylistic approaches and blends, it makes it more difficult to pinpoint any singular overarching theme between them, aside from three consistent signs throughout the signature: computer generated images and special effects, the rearrangement of older signatures, and kinaesthetics. These three factors are present in the New Wave signature of Chinese martial arts films from 1980s through to the present; a signature that, unless a singular entity deviates enough to distinguish themselves with their own sign pattern, is likely not to change any time soon.

### COMPUTER GENERATED IMAGES (CGI) and SPECIAL EFFECTS (SFX)

The relationship between new physical training for actors, wirework, and special effects, along with the ability to use these things to morph the image on screen to fit anything the fight choreographer/cinematographer can imagine, has meant greater variety of shots and editing patterns than any previous incarnation of martial arts cinema. The only limit to current film

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<sup>25</sup> Wuxia had been secondary to kung fu films since the mass popularity of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, but found resurgence after historical epics in the 1990s and the wuxia tales in the 2000s.

conventions are the creative abilities of the people making the film. As such, the visual aesthetics created in these films are more auteur-based styles over any historical context, as the authors of the film (director, star, choreographer, and/or cinematographer) are the underlying differences between the aesthetic signs. The aesthetics become easily malleable to individual preferences with the new technologies available for CGI and special effects. The combination of live action special effects with postproduction CGI is often used to create the fantasy realism. Ang Lee used cranes and wires seventy feet high up in the bamboo for his scene in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and combined it with editing CGI and color correction. (FIG 10) As combination of live action and CGI is common in all New Wave films, the differences of styles are found within the creative production of the film, and more specifically, the work of choreographers and cinematographers. In *House of Flying Daggers* (Yimou, 2004), the flying daggers and arrows were added with CGI in postproduction.<sup>26</sup>

## HISTORICAL RESURGENCE

... we can escape from the symbolic field which we presently inhabit by first mastering its codes, and then recombining them to form a new one - moving from a passive to an active discursive position, from repetition to innovation. Segmentation thus provides more than an agency of *deconstruction*; it also offers the possibility of a radical *reconstruction*.<sup>27</sup>

New Wave films combine the visual aesthetics and supernatural powers of the Shaw Brothers with the realist elements of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan to create a style of fantasy realism. While the technical, aesthetic, and industry signs have changed considerably from the Shaw Brothers version of wuxia, the films of the New Wave signature borrow the mythical

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<sup>26</sup>Zhang Yimou, "Flying Colors", in *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (USA: Columbia University Press, 2005), 118.

<sup>27</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 249.

setting of wuxia to create a new mythos with more advanced technology. They do not rely on montage to infer the supernatural, but show the action through new special effect technologies and wirework. The camera moves around the scene more than any other style, while maintaining special relations of characters and setting, unlike Shaw Brothers camera work which jumped around. Within this age of the remake, some of the earliest Chinese martial arts films about folk hero Wong Fei Hung were retold in *Once Upon a Time in China* (Hark, 1991). This historical resurgence in the 1990s was the precursor to the wuxia renaissance in the 2000s. This borrowing can be found directly in the bamboo forest fight in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *House of Flying Daggers* both drawing upon inspiration from *Touch of Zen*. The aesthetic location trope is the same, a bamboo forest, and the characters are engaging in a flying battle through the trees while one attempts to flee, but the approaches of how this scene is filmed and staged are enormously different. *Touch of Zen* uses Shaw Brothers style montage in order to display the effects while the later films use extensive wirework and CGI. (FIG 11)

## KINEAESTHETICS

If the Shaw Brothers were realistic in their movements, Lee was quick and powerful, and Chan was acrobatic and hesitant, the New Wave movement can generally be described in a single word: flowing. The movements of the characters are flowing, their costumes flow, the bamboo flows, the ever-present wind makes anything and everything flowing in New Wave films. The fights may have powerful movements, acrobatic stunts, or realistic sword moves, but the overarching movement on screen is that of a flowing aesthetic. This aesthetic choice is especially found in all aspects of filmmaking (character movement, mise-en-scène, etc.) after the wuxia revival in 2001 with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and has lost no ground since then.

The characters post-1980 have systematically been more flowing and fluid than any previous signature.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have presented a new holistic approach of film semiotics that analyzes not only the linguistic application of semiotics, but also a system of sign patterns that are already present within the cultural semiotic system for a greater understanding of cinema semiotics as a whole. In the application presented within four of the major stylistic eras of Chinese martial arts cinema, a few examples of technical, aesthetic, and industrial sign patterns were selected to explore this semiotic approach. As such, I may have included or excluded any signs you as a reader might immediately associate with a style. The difficulty in former applications of film semiotics is that it attempts to segment the film into its smallest components in order to find an overarching linguistic meaning within the construction of these components. Yet, in breaking films down into these small components, the overarching themes of the film are lost. As semiotics are analyzing the sign systems constructed by the human mind, applying a technique that is already present in the spectator, such as signature sign patterns, is necessary for a filmic semiotic analysis. What I have presented here are a few of the seemingly endless examples in semiotics and in these films. The nature of my proposed signature signs also provide further exploration in the double application of films run through another theory filter.

Signature signs fill a void in the semiotic analysis of film, creating a new methodology in identifying and analyzing patterns of signs in films, by distinguishing connotative signifiers for the creator of the sign patterns. The identification of sign patterns is already in practice by spectators that determine the signature of the film. It is the academic determination of this

influence that was previously left to be pinpointed through the filtration of several theories, such as genre, star, auteur, and national cinemas. This semiotic approach that I have proposed is inclusive of these theories and allows for the defining factor to remain flexible in its application. Signature signs can thus be applied by other theorists in their own semiotic analysis of any genre, star, auteur, national cinema, character type, or sign pattern present in films. By analyzing technical, aesthetic, and industrial sign patterns in films, the film can be analyzed through a singular semiotic lens to discuss both the signs and creators of the signs in films. This signature semiotic approach can then be further extrapolated upon by previous semiotic theories of film grammar and image types to render a holistic semiotic approach that not only analyzes the film as a *product* with a linguistic model, but as a *production* within a sign system.

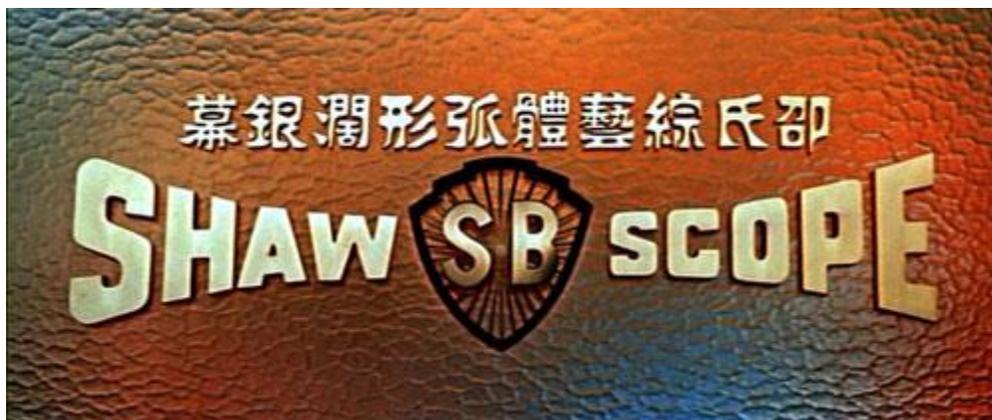


Figure 1 Shaw Scope Logo



Figure 2 Widescreen in One Armed Swordsman (Cheh, 1967)



Figure 3 Montage sequence from Touch of Zen (Hu, 1968)

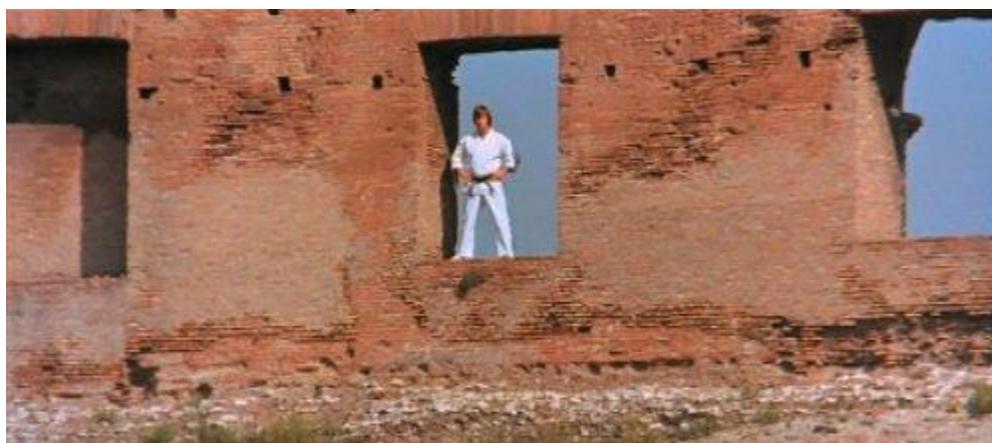


Figure 4 Coliseum from Game of Death (Lee, 1978)



Figure 5 Lee fighting in Enter the Dragon (Clouse, 1973)



Figure 6 Lee with nun-chucks and yellow track suit in Game of Death (Lee, 1973)



Figure 7 Chan flipping over tables in Drunken Master (Yuen, 1978)



Figure 8 Acrobatics in Snake in Eagle's Shadow (Chan, 1978)



Figure 9 Chan using gourd in Drunken Master (Chan, 1978)



Figure 10



Figure 11

## Filmography

*36th Chamber of Shaolin*. Directed by Liu Chia-Liang. 1978. USA: The Weinstein Company Home Entertainment, 2007. DVD.

*The Art of Action: Martial Arts in the Movies*. Directed by Keith Clarke. California: Columbia Tristar Home Entertainment, 2002. DVD

*Challenge of the Masters*. Directed by Lau Kar Leung. 1976. USA: Tokyo Shock, 2008. DVD

*Chop Socky: Cinema Hong Kong*. Directed by Ian Taylor. New York: New Video, 2004. DVD

*Come Drink With Me*. Directed by King Hu and Sammo Hung. 1966. USA: The Weinstein Company, 2008. DVD

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Directed by Ang Lee. 2000. USA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2001. DVD.

*The Deadly Duo*. Directed by Chang Cheh. 1971. USA: Tokyo Shock, 2008. DVD

*Drunken Master*. Directed by Yuen Woo-Ping. Performer Jackie Chan. 1978. USA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2002. DVD

*Drunken Monkey*. Directed by Lau Kar Leung. USA: Lionstage, 2003. DVD

*Enter The Dragon*. Directed by Robert Clouse. Performer Bruce Lee. 1973. USA: Warner Brothers/Golden Harvest, 2004. DVD

*The Five Deadly Venoms*. Directed by Chang Cheh. 1978. USA: Weinstein Company, 2009. DVD

*Forbidden Kingdom*. Directed by Rob Minkoff. Performer Jackie Chan. USA: Lionsgate Home Entertainment, 2008. DVD

*Game of Death*. Directed by Bruce Lee and Robert Clouse. 1973. USA: Bonzai Media Corp, 2008. DVD

*Hero*. Directed by Zhang Yimou. USA: Miramax Lionsgate, 2011. DVD

*House of Flying Daggers*. Directed by Zhang Yimou. USA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2005. DVD

*How Bruce Lee Changed the World*. Directed by Steven Webb. Performer Bruce Lee. (A&E Home Video, 2009) DVD.

*King Boxer: Five Fingers of Death*. Directed by Chang-hwa Chung. 1972. USA: Weinstein Company, 2007. DVD

*Legend of the Drunken Master*. Directed by Chia-Liang Liu and Jackie Chan. 1994. USA: Miramax Lionsgate, 2011. DVD

*Legendary Weapons of China*. Directed by Lau Kar Leung. 1982. USA: Image Entertainment, 2007. DVD

*Once Upon a Time in China*. Directed by Tsui Hark. 1991. USA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2001. DVD

*One Armed Swordsman*. Directed by Chang Cheh. 1967. USA: The Weinstein Company Home Entertainment, 2007. DVD

*The Promise*. Directed by Chen Kaige. USA: Warner Brothers, 2005. DVD

*Snake in Eagle's Shadow*. Performer Jackie Chan. 1978. California: Columbia Tristar Home Entertainment, 2002. DVD

*Touch of Zen*. Directed by King Hu. 1968. USA: Tai Seng, 2002. DVD

*Who Am I?*. Performer Jackie Chan. California: Columbia Tristar Home Entertainment, 1998. DVD

*Zu Warriors From The Magic Mountain*. Directed by Tsui Hark. 1983. USA: Image Entertainment, 1999. DVD

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