

Long Hu Wu Shi (Kung Fu Stuntmen). 2020. Directed by Wei Junzi, 92 minutes. Hong Kong and Beijing, China: Hong Kong Stuntman Association and Acme Image (Beijing) Film Cultural Co.

Introduction

Long Hu Wu Shi (Kung Fu Stuntmen) is a documentary about the stunt industry in Hong Kong-made action movies. Released in 2021 in the People's Republic of China, it was co-produced by the Hong Kong Stuntman Association (HKSA) and Acme Image (Beijing) Film Cultural Co., Ltd.. The director, Wei Junzi (b.1978), is a film expert in mainland China with special interest in Hong Kong cinema. A first-time director, Wei has published several books on Hong Kong cinema. In 2016, he read an article on the closure of the last rooftop martial arts school in Hong Kong that inspired him to express his resentment in writing. Eric Tsang Chi-wai (b. 1953), a filmmaker and former stuntman in Hong Kong, really liked his essay and introduced him to Chin Kar-lok (b. 1965), the HKSA president and later the producer of this film. Chin invited Wei to the 2017 spring festival dinner of the association, where he met many famous and unknown action film heroes and then decided to make this documentary to tell their stories (Ka 2021).

Wei chose a fresh perspective—that of stunt stars rather than directors—to narrate a history of Hong Kong action film. He highly values the interviewees' own voices and more than thirty interviewees appear in the film. In fact, the film is filled with mostly interview footage with no voice-over narration and little use of intertitles. Most of the interviewees were born in the 1950s and became active in the stunt industry between the mid-1960s and early 1990s. While the film presents a large amount of information, a few dominant themes emerge: transmedia cultural production, histories of Chinese opera and action movies in Hong Kong, masculinity, and transnationality.

From Chinese Opera to Action Movie: Transmedia Cultural Production

Although the English title reflects that this is a story of Chinese-style stuntmen, it is not as revealing as the Chinese term in conveying the background of these stuntmen. *Long hu wu shi*, literally “dragon-tiger martial arts master,” refers to the supporting actors who specialise in somersaults and acrobatics in Cantonese opera. The film begins with this line: “‘Kung fu stuntman’ (*long hu wu shi*) is a traditional term that originates from the opera troupe, specifically, the Cantonese opera. The term was also used in film later on [*sic*].” This definition is provided by Sammo Hung Kam-po (b. 1952), a key interviewee in the film, who was trained as a Peking opera actor at an early age and later became a movie stuntman and action film director. Most of the interviewees in this film share a similar background.

In both the PRC and Hong Kong, the early history of film is closely related to Chinese opera. Cantonese opera was undergoing drastic changes between the 1920s and early 1940s. Its key figures, such as actor Sit Kok-sin (1904–1956) and playwright-director Mak Siu-ha (1904–1941), were also actively involved in the film industry. During

his stay in Shanghai, Sit was exposed to foreign movies and Peking opera. It is believed he was the first person to introduce Peking opera-style acrobatics and martial arts (“northern school”) into Cantonese opera performance (Yung 2006).

In the film, Yuen Siu-tin (1912–1979) is presented as a key figure of the first generation of stunt actors in action films. He is the father of Yuen Woo-ping (b. 1945), who is a globally renowned action choreographer and action film director. A Peking opera martial male role actor (*wusheng*) in Shanghai, Yuen Siu-tin and three other actors were recruited by Sit to perform in his troupe in 1937. Between the 1930s and 1950s, some Peking opera actors fled from mainland China to British Hong Kong due to political turmoil. Many ended up settling in Hong Kong, but their lives were not always easy. Since Cantonese speakers were the majority and Cantonese opera was the dominant genre there, these Peking opera actors had a hard time making a living on stage. Yet, as “northern school” performance had obvious appeal, Peking opera martial male actors were sometimes added as guest performers in Cantonese opera shows as a gimmick to boost ticket sales. This was especially the case when the troupes needed supporting actors for challenging acrobatic and somersault performances (Yung 2006).

Besides occasional appearances in Cantonese opera performances, Peking opera actors also had disciples and even founded private training schools. During the 1950s and 1960s, there were four Peking opera schools. Following the traditional practice of Chinese opera training, these schools were run like boarding schools, in which the masters took care of disciples’ meals and accommodation. Disciples entered the school at an early age. Most of them came from humble origin, and their parents wanted them to learn some skills at school to be able to make a living after growing up.

Kung Fu Stuntmen supplements the interviews with archival footage from the drama film *Painted Faces* (1987, dir. Alex Law). The latter focuses on the China Drama Academy (*zhongguo xiju xueyuan*), one of the four Peking opera schools, and the challenges Chinese opera actors faced during the 1960s and 1970s. The film is based on the life stories of the master of the Academy, Yu Jim-yuen (1905–1997), and his disciples (e.g. Sammo Hung and Jackie Chan). It also illustrates how Peking opera actors made their way into the film industry.

Kung Fu Stuntmen also presents a loose history of Hong Kong-made action film from the perspective of stunt actors and stuntmen-turned-directors (which I will not elaborate on here). The film focuses much on the impact Bruce Lee (1940–1973) had on the action film industry by comparing the stunt performances before and after Lee. Before the huge success of Bruce Lee’s *The Big Boss* in 1971, stunt actors had been cast in the Shaw Brothers’ swordsman films. Compared to Lee’s, the stunt performances done by Peking opera actors was not “real Kungfu.” While Lee’s movements were faster, more straightforward, and “practical,” the opera movements are more exaggerated and highly stylised because they are designed for stage display and dramatic effects. Several stunt actors discussed these stylistic differences but did not elaborate on the relationships between movements and music, especially percussion music (*luogu*). On an operatic stage,

percussion instruments are as important as melodic instruments because the former determine how fast actors speak, sing, and move. In combat scenes, actors rely heavily on percussion music to coordinate with each other and to punctuate sequences (Wichmann 1991:252–260). When the percussion music signals a pause, it is also the time when actors take a short break and strike a pose (*liangxiang*) before shifting to a faster tempo or next sequence of movements. It is unfortunate that interviewees in the film did not discuss how they coped with the absence of percussion music in their stunt performances. It would be interesting to know whether some internalised rhythmic patterns from opera training were used when they communicated and designed movements for action movies.

It is also noteworthy that, while most of the action films between the 1950s and mid 1970s focused on stories from pre-modern and early modern China, the setting of the new kind of comedy-action film that emerged in the late 1970s soon expanded to urban, modern settings. It becomes common to see even drama films filled with fighting scenes. Because the scripts of many drama films were short, directors would ask the stunt actors to do fights to fill up the time to meet the standard length of ninety minutes. Stunt actors were also trained to design their fights with different props in different settings, such as kitchen, grocery store, and hospital. Valuing actors' creativity and corporeal display as much as scripts is a traditional performance practice of Chinese opera (Wichmann 1991: Chapter 1; Yung 1989: Chapter 13). This is one of the traces of Chinese opera in Hong Kong cinema.

The Stunt Industry: Masculinity, Transnational Network, and the Future

Kung Fu Stuntmen provides rich insights into the neglected stunt industry. The industry was—and still is—a gendered small circle of people. Most of them are men. While specific years are not mentioned by most interviewees, I assume they mostly are talking about the prime time of the industry, which is from the late 1970s to mid 1990s. Whether their background was as a Peking opera actor or martial arts artist, they entered the industry through personal connections. Some more established stuntmen, like Sammo Hung and Jackie Chan, had their own teams. Team members highly respected their “big brothers” (team leaders). Trust and bonding often overshadowed fear. These stuntmen were never covered by insurance. If injured, they would receive a lump sum compensation from the film company. One of the interviewees even said his only “insurance” was his team leader because the big brother was his lifetime teacher and was supposed to be responsible for his future if misfortune happened to him. This strong sense of fraternity was also common in the Chinese opera circle in older days.

Fearless masculinity is also a recurring theme throughout the film. One of the interviewees states the powerful line that “stuntmen never say no,” which is echoed by many other interviewees. In this highly gendered industry, it was a norm for stuntmen to let bravery and strength overcome doubts, rational thinking, and fear. Under peer pressure, they often suppressed their instincts and ability to evaluate the potential risk.

It was shameful to quit on the spot or demand safety protection. When they were lucky to survive the shots, many felt motivated to take riskier challenges next time. Stuntman Donnie Yen criticises this mentality of risking one's life to prove that you were the best in the stunt industry and called it unhealthy and irrational. However, many stuntmen found pride in it. Stunt work has only recently been viewed as a profession until recently. Even during the peak of the stunt industry and action film when stuntmen were making money easily, they were often associated with unemployed hooligans. It was in the action film that they could feel like a hero with dignity and respect. This film does an excellent job discussing how the issues of masculinity and social stigma intertwine.

The transnational nature of the stunt industry is another underlying theme in the film, which reveals the role of Hong Kong cinema as a hub to connect talents from different places. The stunt communities are both transnational and local, and both rooted and rootless (Steimer 2021:5). For example, Yuen Woo-ping is a son of and a disciple of Yu Jim-yuen. Both Yuen Siu-tin and Yu were Peking opera actors who moved from Shanghai to Hong Kong in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The Yuens had a successful career in Hong Kong cinema before the son became a famous choreograph director in Hollywood in the late 1990s. A second example is Bruce Lee. The son of a Cantonese opera star in Hong Kong, Bruce Lee was born in San Francisco in 1940. He grew up in Hong Kong in the 1950s where he was cast in movies and learnt different kinds of martial arts. He then studied at the University of Washington in 1961. During his stay in the U.S., he set up studios and taught Americans his style of Chinese martial arts. His last Hong Kong-made action films turned him into an international star and ambassador of Chinese martial arts in the early 1970s.

The last third of *Kung Fu Stuntmen* explores the recent developments in the stunt industry. Many interviewees share the same thought that the computer-generated imagery (CGI) is a major reason for the decline of the industry. Stunt performance can now be enhanced, if not replaced, by CGI so that stunt training is no longer as rigorous as before. Interviewees discussed a few other factors that made the industry impossible to sustain. First, the society has changed. Rather than going through tremendous hardship to become a stunt performer, the younger generation may prefer focusing on their schoolwork for a more stable life. This factor is also frequently mentioned by Cantonese opera actors when they discuss the decline of the opera. Second, many agreed that Hong Kong cinema has passed its prime time now that the major local film studios have closed down (Shaw Studio in 1980 and Golden Harvest's Hammer Hill Studio in 1998). A stunt performance usually needs a larger space and longer time to set up, rehearse, and shoot. Hong Kong filmmakers would choose to film in mainland China because the cost of space and manpower are lower there. As action films require huge investment, generous investors in Hong Kong are hard to find these days, and most of the grand productions are supported by mainland investors.

Conclusion

As a first-time director, Wei Junzi has done impressive work in telling the untold stories of Hong Kong cinema. While the mass media and scholarly works tend to pay more attention

to directors and a few notable action choreographers and stunt artists, this film features the voices of many lesser-known stunt artists. But I want to end by discussing a few weaknesses of the film that may have been overlooked by the production team.

First, why was Jackie Chan, as an iconic action film superstar, not interviewed? This question has been asked by many others, such as audience members in the post-screening Q&A and mass media. The producer Chin Kar-lok explained that Chan was very supportive throughout the production process. However, after seeking legal advice from his lawyers, the production team decided to remove his interview footage due to copyright issues (Chin 2021; Zhang 2021). I believe that the documentary would appear more professional if this explanation were provided in the end. Second, most of the interviewees speak in Mandarin during the interviews. I assume Wei Junzi had limited proficiency in Cantonese and conducted the interviews mainly in Mandarin, but as filmmaking and stunt work can be culturally specific, some knowledge, aesthetics, and techniques may be better described in their vernacular language. I wonder whether some nuances are missing when the interviewees communicate in Mandarin. This point links to the next weakness: typos are found in both the Chinese and English subtitles, and mistranslations and grammatic mistakes prevail throughout the film. Professional translation and proofreading of the subtitles may make the film more accessible and impactful, especially in English. Fourth, as a documentary and oral history material, some reference dates should be provided by the production team. Although interviewees rarely mention the exact years when recalling particular incidents or persons, supplementary background information in intertitles or in subtitles would make the narratives clearer. Fifth, interview footage and archival footage from action films interweave throughout this documentary, but no source information of the latter is provided. If the footage is not originally produced by the director, it is necessary to show at least the film titles of the sources. Sixth, towards the end, the film tries to offer some hope for Hong Kong stunt performers by featuring the training courses offered by the Hong Kong Stuntman Association in 2015. Although the film covers some footage of the training and interviews of two of the three dozen students, I wish it had included some updates of these young stunt students to know about their recent employments and trainings five to six years after the inception of training courses.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, *Kung Fu Stuntmen* is an excellent documentary on the stunt industry and its roots in opera backed by rich first-hand materials. It will benefit both scholars and film aficionados, who are interested in transmedia cultural production, the interplay between traditional performing arts and modern technology, and Asian masculinity.

References

- Chin, Kar-lok. 2021. "Jilu Dianying Longhu Wushi Yinghou Fenxianghui@Yuanfang" (*Kung Fu Stuntmen* Post-screening Q&A at Elements). *Facebook*, 30 October 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/chinkalok/videos/1219863275090580>.

- Ka, Sheng. 2021. "Longhu Wushi: Meiyou Tamen, Jiu Meiyou Xianggang Gongfu Dianying De Huangjin Shidai." (*Kung Fu Stuntmen: There would have been no golden time of Hong Kong kungfu films without them*). *Sanlian Lifeweek (Sanlian Shenghuo Zhoukan)*, 21 September 2021. <https://www.lifeweek.com.cn/article/138521>.
- Steimer, Laura. 2021. *Experts in Action: Transnational Hong Kong–Style Stunt Work and Performance*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Wichmann, Elizabeth. 1991. *Listening to Theatre: The Aural Dimension of Beijing Opera*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Yung, Bell. 1989. *Cantonese Opera: Performance as Creative Process*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Yung, Sai-shing. 2006. "Moving Body: The Interactions Between Chinese Opera and Sction Cinema." In *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*, ed. Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li, and Stephen Chan Ching-Kiu, 21–34. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Zhang Guoji. 2021. "Longhu Wushi Chenglong Man Paixi Wu Chuxian? Qian Jiale Jiehua Zhi Ju Xi Muhou Gongcheng" (*Kung Fu Stuntmen: Jackie Chan was not interviewed because he was too busy with his own films? Chin Kar-lok explained that Chan was a fervent supporter behind the scene*). *HK01*, 11 November 2021. <https://www.hk01.com/sns/article/681996>.

PRISCILLA TSE

doi:10.1017/ytm.2022.13

Priscilla Tse is Lecturer at the School of Chinese Opera, Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, Hong Kong, China. Her research interests include identity, gender and sexuality, and cultural diplomacy. She is a recipient of the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship, Association for Chinese Music Research Rulan Chao Pian Publication Prize, and Association for Asian Performance Emerging Scholars Award. She previously held lectureships at Johns Hopkins University, University of Illinois, and Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Playing the Flute in Shanghai: The Musical Life of Dai Shuhong [沪上箫声·戴树红先生的音乐人生]. 2021. Directed by Helen Rees and Aparna Sharma, 84 minutes. In Chinese with English subtitles. Colour, DVD. Produced by Pan Records, PAN 9609.

Honoured at the Chinese Ethnographic Film Festival and the International Music Ethnographic Film Exhibition, this award-winning documentary is directed by Helen Rees and Aparna Sharma, two faculty members at the University of California, Los Angeles. Sharma, who is a professor in the department of World Arts and Cultures/Dances, puts her professional filmmaking skills at the service of a smart visual style that