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**Foreign Villains Shape our Worlds: Transnational and Global Antagonists within
the Martial Arts Film Trilogy *Ip Man***

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Abstract

This paper explores how foreign antagonists are portrayed and positioned within the *Ip Man* trilogy directed by Wilson Yip. Typically, protagonists such as Ip Man are the focal point of research, but this paper will examine the historical and contextual use of foreign antagonists such as the invading Japanese, the corrupt and condescending British, and the rapacious American in the *Ip Man* trilogy and how their portrayals are transmitted transnationally. The examination of these foreign antagonists in relation to the protagonist Ip Man expose themes such as nationalism, national identity, and victimhood to a Chinese diaspora. They also expose a non-western spotlight to be transmitted to audiences who may be accustomed to western centered films and culture.

A film analysis and qualitative discourse when examining the foreign antagonists in the *Ip Man* trilogy deepens the understanding and exploration into the Hong Kong martial arts film genre that so heavily focuses on protagonists. Examining other Hong Kong martial arts films such as the martial arts films that Bruce Lee had pioneered, and the *Once Upon a Time in China* quadrilogy directed by Tsui Hark, gives greater context relative to the examination of the *Ip Man* trilogy. The focus on foreign antagonists in these films allows for the transmission of this genre on a transnational level to be relatable by similarly oppressed or victimized audiences and creates a sense of empowerment within them.

Keywords: Ip Man trilogy, Nationalism, National Identity, Foreign Antagonists, Victimhood, Empowerment

Introduction

Film reinterprets life; reinterpretation breeds curiosity; curiosity breeds inquiry; inquiry breeds research. Film is the miracle that propagates curiosity within an inquisitive mind which prompts the will to learn and as well as education and perhaps even research. Film's effects on culture on a transnational level, especially towards a diaspora or a community willing to educate themselves, speaks volumes. How films depict characters between protagonists and antagonists can essentially make or break the success of the film. In the following pages, I'll use a discourse analysis on how portrayals and positioning of foreign antagonists have shaped the *Ip Man* trilogy directed by Wilson Yip. We will see that both foreign and domestic antagonists create a nationalistic narrative that is relatable to a transnational audience.

A trilogy that has grossed over \$200 million USD world wide presents foreign antagonists such as the invading Japanese army in 1930's China, corrupt British officers during British colonialism in late 1940s and early 1950s Hong Kong, and also greedy American capitalists exhibited through an American property developer in the late 1950s. These



Donnie Yen in *Ip Man* (2008)

antagonists are all positioned as foreign and villainous towards a nationalistic representation of China through the character Ip Man.¹

This paper will examine the moral ambiguity, or lack thereof, of foreigners in relation to other films within the Hong

Kong martial arts genre. Foreigners within this trilogy are generally depicted as wicked, however, this paper will examine the depictions of not only foreign but also domestic antagonists and their character arcs to juxtapose the foreign antagonists within the *Ip Man* trilogy in order to provide contextual comparisons.

This discussion will prove that one-dimensional portrayals of foreign antagonists in the *Ip Man* trilogy generates a simplistic yet sympathetic relationship with a transnational audience. The focus will be on the Chinese diaspora in the West along with the imagined communities that resonate with the idea of victimhood, oppression, marginalization, and other unhappy situations

¹ "Ip Man," *Box Office Mojo*, 2009. http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/intl/?id=_fIPMAN01.; "Ip Man 2: Legend of the Grandmaster," *Box Office Mojo*, 2014. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=main&id=ipman2.htm>.; "Ip Man 3," *Box Office Mojo*, 2017. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=intl&id=ipman3.htm>.; "Ip Man 2: Legend of the Grandmaster (2011)," *The Numbers*, May 2011. <https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Ip-Man-Legend-of-the-Grand-Master#tab=box-office>.; "Yip Man 3 (2015)," *The Numbers*, February 2016. <https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Yip-Man-3#tab=box-office>.; "Ip Man (2008)," *The Numbers*, 2010. <https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Ip-Man#tab=summary>.

that this trilogy evokes. These communities include the black community in apartheid South Africa and African Americans, both of whom have been oppressed in many ways and would resonate with not only the *Ip Man* trilogy but the genre of martial arts films as a whole. We will not dive too deep into China's domestic relationship with the film, but rather examine how themes of Chinese nationalism are exuded in the film to be transmitted transnationally.

Foreign Antagonists vs. Domestic (Chinese) Antagonists

Foreign Antagonists

Antagonist: “a person who is opposed to, struggles against, or competes with another; opponent; adversary.”² The portrayals in this trilogy presents foreign antagonists and domestic antagonists quite differently. When examining the trilogy as a whole we see greater character arcs for domestic characters, such as an overzealous martial arts master turned gangster turned family man, a businessman/martial arts master under the thumb of the British, or a struggling martial artist hungry for fame. While in comparison, foreign antagonists are portrayed through Japanese officers, a corrupt British superintendent, a racist boxer, and a greedy American property developer, who are all portrayed in a more one-dimensional uncomplicated manner where you never question their villainy or morality. Foreign antagonists in this trilogy do not exhibit any moral ambiguity, while domestic characters do show a moral evolution, providing a very discernable divide between the Chinese and the foreigners.

Ip Man (2008) uses the Marco Polo Bridge Incident and the Japanese invasion of China as a historical catalyst to bring upon the foreign antagonists of the Japanese army and their own

² “Antagonist,” *Dictionary.com*, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/antagonist>.

colonialist intentions during the 1930's.³ Within an intertitle, the film states, "Japan invaded China, robbing people of their livelihoods, and causing rampant starvation across the country." The intertitle continues on to say, "Ip Man's home was confiscated and turned into Japanese Army's headquarters. Ip's family was rendered homeless and forced to live in abject existence."⁴ Japanese villainy in this first installment was transmitted through characters General Miura and his right hand man Sato.

Both General Miura and Sato represent the personification of Japanese villainy during the Japanese invasion of China. General Miura's respect for martial arts is outweighed by his loyalty to the Japanese army and his villainous behavior towards Ip Man and the Chinese people. Sato is depicted as an overzealous lieutenant more villainous than his superior General Miura. Both Japanese characters are shown to be willing to go to great lengths to terrorize the people of Foshan.⁵ General Miura's insistence on fighting Ip Man leads to his terrorization of factory workers, while Sato happily murders a Chinese martial arts master for keeping his reward after losing a second, three-on-one fight. The two Japanese antagonists are depicted as incapable of morality and are willing to murder up until the end of the film.

Ip Man 2: Legend of The Grandmaster (2010) presents antagonists based on the British colonialism in Hong Kong. Through Superintendent Wallace (though commonly referred to as foreigner and "devil"⁶), and British boxer Twister, do they exude their British corruption and

³ "Marco Polo Bridge Incident," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Marco-Polo-Bridge-Incident>.

⁴ Edmond, Wong, *Ip Man*, DVD. Directed by Wilson Yip. (Hong Kong: Mandarin Films Distribution Co. Ltd., 2008).

⁵ Foshan, a city in Southern China historically known for its martial arts and famously known for its relation to folk hero Wong Fei-Hung (Cantonese pronunciation) who is another commonly used martial arts master where many Hong Kong martial arts films borrow his name for their protagonists.

⁶ In *Ip Man 2: Legend of The Grandmaster* (2010) they refer to the British foreigners as 鬼佬 or "gwai lo" which directly translated means "ghost person" and its use as derogatory is contested. This term is most commonly used to refer to Caucasian westerners in the Cantonese language.

condescension towards all Chinese people in Hong Kong. The corrupt Superintendent Wallace extorts money through an unwilling martial arts master and businessman, Master Hung. Master Hung had tried to negotiate payment for an upcoming martial arts duel between himself and the British Boxer, Twister, but Superintendent Wallace had declared that Master Hung would fight



Twister in *Ip Man 2: Legend of the Grandmaster* (2010) in his duel against Ip Man.

for free. When approached by Master Hung asking to at least pay the workers who need money to feed their families, Superintendent Wallace said “Who do you think you are? You collect money for me, you don’t share it. Do as I say, you’re not qualified to make deals with me.”⁷ Twister, overhearing the bickering, scolds, “Will somebody get this yellow

piece of fat out of here. You’re making too much noise!” The two British characters are shown as condescending and racist, present to exploit the people of Hong Kong.

Ip Man 3 (2015) banks on the stardom of Mike Tyson as the key foreign antagonist in the third installment of the trilogy. Tyson plays an American property developer, Frank, who is eager to seize the land under a school through any means necessary including kidnapping children and violence. Frank sends a Muay Thai fighter from his underground fighting ring to “take care” of Ip Man because Ip Man continues to intervene and prevail in Frank’s attempts to acquire said land. Once again a foreigner is used in an antagonizing role to challenge the protagonist Ip Man, and Ip Man prevails once more. Despite a more minor role, the British

⁷ Edmond, Wong, *Ip Man 2: Legend of the Grandmaster*, DVD. Directed by Wilson Yip. (Hong Kong: Mandarin Films Distribution Co. Ltd., 2010).

officer Edward is also used as a corrupt figure protecting Frank from any legal issues and steers suspicious local officers away that hinder Frank and his goal of obtaining land.⁸

All foreign characters mentioned above are portrayed in a one-dimensional evil manner with no capability to grow morally. Murder, racism, kidnapping, etc. are all embedded in these foreign antagonists. Frank's character in *Ip Man 3*, is presented as a man with a wife a child, however, the fact that he has a family and is still capable of sending criminals to attack a school full of children and also kidnapping these children says a lot about his villainy. These foreign characters do little to stimulate any conversation on their own because they are not complex characters, but they serve a greater purpose when juxtaposed with a seemingly morally unbreakable protagonist in *Ip Man*, along with domestic antagonists that serve the purpose of showing that domestic characters are capable of moral growth.

Domestic (Chinese) Villains

One-dimensional foreign antagonists make a film uncomplicated. As for domestic antagonists, the *Ip Man* trilogy does better to portray them as complex characters with the capacity for moral ambiguity to shift from villainous intent to characters with integrity. Domestic antagonists juxtapose foreign antagonists in the *Ip Man* trilogy because they are capable of becoming upstanding human beings while foreign antagonists are not portrayed to have this capacity for change. All three films exhibit complex domestic antagonists that maintain character arcs that foil Ip Man, but these specific characters all maintain the capacity for moral integrity.

⁸ Edmond, Wong, *Ip Man 3*, DVD. Directed by Wilson Yip. (Hong Kong: Mandarin Films Distribution Co. Ltd., 2015).

Catalysts such as familial anchors, or moral and nationalistic re-discovery allow for these



Jin in *Ip Man* (2008) with his gang of thieves.

characters to evolve from their previous transgressions. Familial anchors are catalysts for evolution for domestic antagonists such as Jin and Tin-Chi to evolve into moral characters. Jin is a brash northerner who has his eyes set on starting his own martial arts school but insists that his northern style is superior to the southern style of

Foshan where Ip Man and many martial arts masters reside. Jin boldly defeats all the martial arts teachers in Foshan but loses to Ip Man in

an embarrassing fashion. Post Japanese invasion has Jin turning to crime, but is yet again defeated by Ip Man. We see

Jin's transcendence to integrity in *Ip Man 2: Legend of The Grandmaster* (2010). Jin saves Ip Man and his pupil from a gang of competing martial arts students. When



Jin in *Ip Man 2: Legend of the Grandmaster* (2010) running to save Ip Man and Ip Man's pupil from a beating.

speaking to Ip Man's hot headed pupil, Jin says, "Look at him. He's just like me in the old days. If you want him to be good, find him a wife. Like me, a family with wife and kids, will make one down to earth"⁹

Ip Man 3 (2015) provides us with Tin-Chi Cheung, a struggling martial artist who fights in underground fights in hopes to save enough to start his own school. Tin-Chi is presented as a

⁹ Edmond, Wong, *Ip Man 2: Legend of the Grandmaster*, DVD. Directed by Wilson Yip. (Hong Kong: Mandarin Films Distribution Co. Ltd., 2010).

rival that is willing to go to great depths in order to start his own school. Tin-Chi goes as far as hospitalizing a former martial arts teacher in exchange for money from Sang.¹⁰ However, when Sang had kidnapped Tin-Chi's son (within a group of other school children) and was willing to give him back due to their prior interaction, Tin-Chi was content to leave with his son with no sympathy for Ip Man or any other child who was kidnapped. However, his son and moral integrity does not allow him to just sit by as he intervenes to fight along side Ip Man to save the kidnapped children from Sang.

Jin's transcendence from cocky martial artist to aspiring criminal and his final evolution to family man shows his character's journey and ability to change into a man with integrity and morality. Jin even credits his family as the catalyst for his transcendence to morality. Tin-Chi's son is the familial catalyst for Tin-Chi's character shift from monetary driven violence, to a man that has the potential for integrity by being able to save the kidnapped children from Sang. Familial anchors such as Jin's wife and child and Tin-Chi's son provide moral stability for these characters who previously waived in their behavior.

Re-discovery of morality along with ties to Chinese identity also lie heavy with Li in *Ip Man* (2008) and Master Hung in *Ip Man 2: Legend of The Grandmaster* (2014). The catalyst of re-discovering their moralities is highly conducive to these two characters no longer being able to succumb to foreign antagonists controlling them or their condescension towards Chinese people as a whole. Moral re-discovery with these two characters are also closely tied to a re-discovery of national identity or their sense of Chineseness. In Hsu-Ming Teo's 2011 piece "Popular History and the Chinese Martial Arts Biopic" she states, "Chineseness serves the

¹⁰ Sang is a former martial arts disciple of the Master Tin and, Master Tin was embarrassed by the fact that Sang had followed orders of Frank to attack the school for its land. When Sang was confronted by Master Tin (accompanied by Ip Man) he had attempted to stab and kill his former teacher, Master Tin, and was stopped by Ip Man and the local police.

purposes of cultural nationalism...It restores dignity to China's humiliating history of military defeats and colonial exploitation because it cedes to the nation, its culture, and its people the moral high ground."¹¹ Teo's commentary of Chineseness especially in martial arts film states the connection of morality and the authenticity of being Chinese which shines through in both Li and Master Hung.

Li was the kind of antagonist that stirs the pot. Before the Japanese invasion, Li worked for the local police that liked to flaunt his authority. However, after the Japanese had invaded and occupied Foshan, Li became a translator for General Miura, and baited down and out Chinese martial arts masters to fight at General Miura's dojo which resulted in the death of two martial artists. Li is portrayed as a lapdog for the General with little concern for the Chinese people. However, Li grows a conscience after a few beatings and a long scolding from Ip Man. Li not only helps harbor Ip Man when General Miura and Sato are looking for Ip Man, but also turns Sato's gun on Sato when he had tried to murder Ip Man. Li's re-discovery of his morality stems from nationalistic guilt and his realization of his previous immoral behavior that had put Ip Man, his family, and other Chinese locals in Foshan in danger. The reason this guilt is perceived as nationalistic is due to Li's interactions with Ip Man and Ip Man as a representation of China. Ip Man's accusations that Li has become a traitor working for the Japanese has made him a lapdog for the Japanese betraying his own countrymen begins his moral evolution. His crescendo of moral re-discovery empowers him to prevent Ip Man's murder while turning Sato's own gun onto Sato.

Master Hung, a business man and martial arts master in *Ip Man 2: Legend of The Grandmaster* (2010), had been forced to collect payments from other martial arts masters to

¹¹ Hsu-Ming Teo, "Popular History and the Chinese Martial Arts Biopic," *History Australia*, 8 no. 1, 2011, 57. doi: 10.1080/14490854.2011.11668356.

surrender to the corrupt Superintendent Wallace. Master Hung presented obstacles for Ip Man's desire to become a martial arts teacher with ceremonial duels, battles with pupils, and forced payments. Despite his antagonizing of Ip Man, Master Hung also showed reluctance to collect for the British, and despite any transgressions, he did what was best for his pupils and his workers. During Master Hung's fight with Twister he suffered an asthma attack but refused to surrender. Despite Ip Man's advice to concede, Master Hung said, "I can't let that foreign devil insult us... I won't let him insult Chinese martial arts!"¹² Master Hung's moral re-discovery stems from his nationalistic pride, but was previously suppressed to survive. Master Hung however, could no longer succumb to the condescension and corruption of Superintendent Wallace and was unwilling to display weakness in his duel with the racist boxer Twister. Master Hung becomes a martyr to prove the inherent moral strength in the Chinese people.

In the case of foreign antagonists versus domestic antagonists the trilogy does not complicate foreign antagonists with the capacity for morality. Foreign antagonists are willing to kill, rob, abduct, and commit any crimes necessary with no sense of morality. Domestic antagonists are depicted to have at least the capacity to evolve and display moral integrity. The use of historical context elevates the consequences of Ip Man's interactions with the foreign antagonists which draws sympathy from audiences. Whether it is the invasion of the Japanese Army, British colonialism in Hong Kong, or the greed of American capitalism, this trilogy uses these historical facts as a basis to paint a simple and uncomplicated picture of good versus evil and us versus them.

With complex domestic antagonists and one-dimensional foreign antagonists, the films create an un-nuanced trilogy that does little to detail the complexity of history. As Joseph Jon

¹² Edmond, Wong, *Ip Man 2: Legend of the Grandmaster*, DVD. Directed by Wilson Yip. (Hong Kong: Mandarin Films Distribution Co. Ltd., 2010).

Lanthier points out in his review of *Ip Man* (2008) for “Slant Magazine”, he says of the Japanese army’s portrayal as a “purposefully un-nuanced portrayal of Japanese barbarism (the gun-toting, toothy-grinned guards are meant to be controversially intimidating, but severed from political context they feel like freeze-dried stereotypes waiting to be made wet and menacing).”¹³ The *Ip Man* trilogy puts a twist on Edward Said’s “Other”. “Other” where the simplification of something that may be judged as morally inferior be portrayed in a way to simplify the unknown yet also define oneself as better than the “Other”.¹⁴ Said’s analysis of the West’s point of views of the Orient in the past was that they were unstable or exotic, and the *Ip Man films* provide a 180-degree pivot in order to mirror this rather simplistic point of view. In the instance of the *Ip Man* trilogy, the “Other” becomes foreign antagonists who are morally inferior to the Chinese. This juxtaposition of morality serves to better define the moral superiority of the Chinese people as the Chinese people are the ones who are portrayed as morally capable while foreigners or “Others” are portrayed as incapable of morality.

Ip Man vs. Foreign Antagonists

Lu, Qi & Fan in their article, reference Wallis’ 2011 piece “Bruce Lee representative of Chinese nationalism and masculinity?” stating, “Legendary Wushu masters are depicted as patriotic heroes who use Wushu to ‘triumph over villains representing the colonial oppressors of China and showcase a cultural identity’.”¹⁵ Despite *Ip Man*’s choice of martial arts style of Wing

¹³ Joseph Jon Lanthier, “Ip Man,” *Slant*. September 27, 2010. <https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/ip-man>

¹⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 1-2.

¹⁵ Zhouxiang Lu, Qi Zhang, and Fan Hong, "Projecting the ‘Chineseness’: Nationalism, Identity and Chinese Martial Arts Films," *International Journal Of The History Of Sport* 31, no. 3, February 2014, 331. doi: 10.1080/09523367.2013.866093.; Keziah Wallis, “Bruce Lee representative of Chinese nationalism and masculinity?,” *Ethnographerapprentice.wordpress.com*, 2011, <https://ethnographerapprentice.wordpress.com/2011/06/06/bruce-lee-representative-of-chinese-nationalism-and-masculinity/>.

Chun instead of Wushu, Lu, Qi, and Fan's statement still applies as Ip Man is more than just another martial arts fighter. He is also a patriotic hero who defeats colonial oppressors as villains, to establish the nationalistic cultural identity of the nation.

Ip Man as a character is also portrayed as an incorruptible and the personification of morality. In Confusion terms he'd be the quintessential *junzi* which is a moral exemplar. Matt



Ip Man in his now iconic scene defeating 10 Japanese black belt students in *Ip Man* (2008). When General Miura had asked for his name, Ip Man replied with, "I'm just a Chinese man."

Stefon writes for Britannica Encyclopedia, "*junzi* is not a commander of or ruler over inferior subjects but rather a moral person who leads by his character and conduct."¹⁶

Right versus wrong is a simple concept and it easily translates to good versus evil

or moral versus immoral. Ip Man's virtue and the lack of moral complexity of foreign antagonists provide a simple and easily

digestible film. Ip Man's ideal morality portrayed in this trilogy is also one-dimensional and there is little evidence of Ip Man's imperfections. Jeremy Heilman of *MovieMartyr.com* says of Donnie Yen's portrayal of Ip Man, "...he has been asked to portray a one-dimensional character, though, one would hope that the supporting cast would be more colorful to make up for the deficit. Alas, they are a collection of familiar stereotypes who do little to enliven the film."¹⁷ Mr. Heilman does well to allude to the lack of complex character development, however the

¹⁶ Matt Stefon, "Junzi," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/junzi>.

¹⁷ Jeremy Heilman, "Ip Man (Wilson Yip 2008)," *Moviemartyr.com*, June 28, 2010, <http://www.moviemartyr.com/2008/ipman.htm>.

simplicity of a well executed one-dimensional character serves to exude a simple message; that Ip Man is the exemplary portrayal to represent China as a whole.

Ip Man's foreign antagonists are personified representations of China's global interactions. Ip Man as a character serves as a vessel for the moral virtue that is China and their battles against foreign injustices over the years. Historical events such as the the Japanese invasion, the British colonization of Hong Kong, or even concepts such as capitalism and greed, are personified in this film and represented through one-dimensional foreign antagonists which make for a universally simple understanding of good versus bad. Ip Man as a representation of China serves to exemplify their struggles and their ability to persist through such tragedies. The use of one-dimensional foreign antagonists to represent antagonists relative to China's history paints a black and white picture with a simple narrative of China's plight during the late 1930s to late 1950s.

Addressing colonialism, nationalism and transnationalism is nothing new in the martial arts genre as a whole. Kin-Yan Szeto refers to directors Ang Lee, John Woo, and actor Jackie Chan promoting, "the history of displacement, including colonialism, nationalism, imperialism, and Western Orientalism, results in geopolitical perspectives that are political in the sense that the subjects' embodied histories and experiences result(ing) in cosmopolitical interventions."¹⁸ Szeto implies that history is inescapable and its basis for martial arts films make for proper settings for characters to intervene in a historical narrative. Ip Man as a real life martial arts master of an international icon set in a volatile period in history for the Chinese makes for great theater. The use of Ip Man as a one-dimensional protagonist continuously-but-temporarily foiled

¹⁸ Kin-Yan Szeto, *The martial arts cinema of the Chinese diaspora: Ang Lee, John Woo, and Jackie Chan in Hollywood*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), 7-8.

by one-dimensional foreign antagonists that are easily understood as villains, makes for a smooth, digestible, uncomplicated narrative.

Reception of *Ip Man* Trilogy

“*Ip Man* (2008) and *Ip Man 2: Legend of the Grandmaster* (2010) were directed by Wilson Yip and became huge hits across Asia, transforming their lead actor, Donnie Yen, into a major star and spreading the *Ip Man* name far and wide. *Ip Man* remains the most financially successful of the movies that have appeared during the craze.”¹⁹ At the time of Hendrix Grady’s 2013 article quoted above, *Ip Man 3* (2015) had yet to come out. Individually, *Ip Man 3* (2015) alone garnered over \$150 million USD worldwide, with the China market accounting for over \$120 million USD and Hong Kong accounting for over \$7 million USD.²⁰ The *Ip Man* trilogy has grossed over \$200 million USD, which proves its financial success with a few different adaptations of *Ip Man*’s story with films such as *Ip Man: The Final Fight* (2013), *The Legend is Born: Ip Man* (2010), *The Grandmaster* (2013) and many others hopping on the bandwagon that is *Ip Man*’s popularity.

Reviews of all three installments have been generally positive as the films do well to provide the action and fight scenes expected in a Hong Kong martial arts film. As LA Times writer Michael Rechtshaffen notes, “The concluding installment in the hit martial arts trilogy “*Ip Man 3*,” set in Hong Kong circa 1959, combines the customary, inventively choreographed

¹⁹ Hendrix Grady, “A Brief History of the *Ip Man* Movie Craze,” *Film Comment* no. 5, 2013, 57.

²⁰ “*Ip Man*,” *Box Office Mojo*, 2009. [http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/intl/?id=_fIPMAN01](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/intl/?id=_fIPMAN01;).; “*Ip Man 2: Legend of the Grandmaster*,” *Box Office Mojo*, 2014. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=main&id=ipman2.htm>.; “*Ip Man 3*,” *Box Office Mojo*, 2017. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=intl&id=ipman3.htm>.; “*Ip Man 2: Legend of the Grandmaster* (2011),” *The Numbers*, May 2011. <https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Ip-Man-Legend-of-the-Grand-Master#tab=box-office>.; “*Yip Man 3* (2015),” *The Numbers*, February 2016. <https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Yip-Man-3#tab=box-office>.; “*Ip Man* (2008),” *The Numbers*, 2010. <https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Ip-Man#tab=summary>.

action with an unexpected emotional depth, proving as hard to resist as its entertaining predecessors.”²¹ The trilogy at its simplest is a set of martial arts films, but it also provides a lens into the history of China and the basis of Chinese victimization.

The financial success of the *Ip Man* trilogy proves to have staying power in the genre. The success of the franchise has spawned a 4th installment, being filmed as of April 2018. Donnie Yen had posted via Instagram a video with cast mates captioned “I believe Ipman movies inspired millions not because we had created a hero, it's because it was about the spirit and the integrity of a man, a man who loves his family and country, April 7, first day of shooting, from the first three episodes, I'm again continuing this 4th and probably the last missionary journey!”²² Donnie Yen believes the *Ip Man* franchise goes beyond the traditional idea of a hero but is the embodiment of what represents China and that is what he believes resonates with the domestic audiences. However, this well perceived reception goes beyond domestic applause and this paper also wants to continue to examine the transnational effects of the films.²³

The *Ip Man* trilogy being a co-production of mainland China and Hong Kong explains the simplicity and one-dimensionality of many of the characters. Despite many domestic films being co-productions between mainland China and Hong Kong, Shi Jianfeng writes that, “To film critics and moviegoers, the quality of Mainland-Hong Kong co-productions has been on the

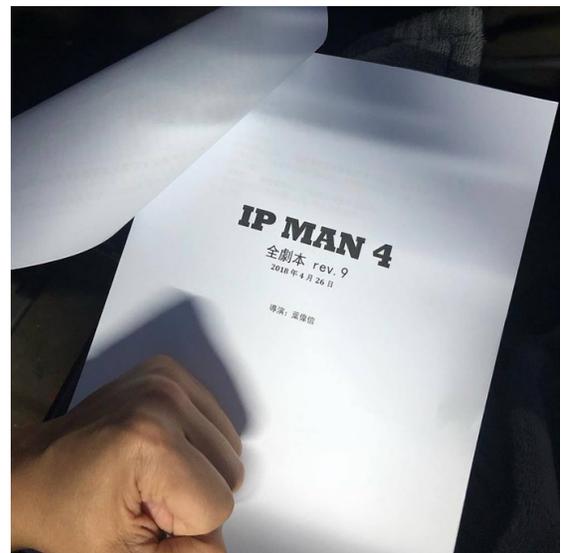
²¹ Michael Rechtshaffen, “‘Ip Man 3’ has all the right moves to end martial arts trilogy,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 10, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-mini-ip-man3-review-20160122-story.html>.

²² Ryan Scott, “Ip Man 4 begins shooting, Donnie Yen shares first video,” *Movieweb*, April 10, 2018, <https://movieweb.com/ip-man-4-production-start-date-donnie-yen-video/>; Donnie Yen, Instagram Post, April 9, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BhWeJXpncM/?taken-by=donnieyenofficial>.

²³ Donnie Yen receiving more roles in Hollywood films as of late such as *Star Wars: Rogue One* (2016) and *xXx: The Return of Xander Cage* (2017) bodes well for Donnie Yen’s visibility on an international level. Despite his previous encounters into Hollywood film in *Blade 2* (2002) and *Shanghai Knights* (2003), Yen had never had the popularity he does now, which extends the international reach of the upcoming fourth installment of the *Ip Man* franchise.

decline.”²⁴ Shi Jianfeng isn’t necessarily targeting the *Ip Man* film franchise in particular, but is noting that investment structures and the mentality of film makers are key to the perceived decline in quality. Shi also mentions that investment coming from the mainland affects how film makers must hedge their bets and take fewer chances, and how the “primary goal is to make money and that single mindedness can affect the quality of the product.”²⁵ Additionally Shi adds, “Changes in script to meet Mainland censorship requirements can be a drag on quality too.”²⁶ This implies that co-productions between mainland China and Hong Kong must sacrifice taking chances with complex characters and also implies that due to censorship that a certain narrative can be put in place in order to attract sympathetic audience members.

The *Ip Man* franchise may be criticized for their poor development of complex characters, but their financial success proves Shi 's point about prioritizing financial success and potentially a certain narrative ahead of what Shi proposes about quality. Despite the fact that quality in film is subjective, the feedback, overall positive reception, and monetary gain of the *Ip Man* franchise proves why there will be a fourth installment. With the Chinese market growing into the second largest film market following North America, it is easy to see why Hong Kong film makers would want to appease this market.



Ip Man 4 script, taken from Donnie Yen’s official Instagram page

²⁴ Jianfeng Shi, “New episode for Hong Kong co-productions,” *HKTDC Research*, October 18, 2012, <http://economists-pick-research.hktdc.com/business-news/article/International-Market-News/New-episode-for-Hong-Kong-co-productions/imn/en/1/1X000000/1X09PRXU.htm>.

²⁵ Shi.

²⁶ Shi.

Impact on Communities

Benedict Anderson defines nation as, “an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”²⁷ Anderson then goes on to state that, “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”²⁸

This paper’s inclusion of a transnational audience speaks to how the *Ip Man* trilogy alongside the Hong Kong film genre has crossed borders to affect imagined communities beyond a single nation state. This imagined community is capable of resonating with the sympathetic nationalistic narrative set forth by the writers and director of the *Ip Man* trilogy. Primarily focusing on the imagined community of the Chinese diaspora in the West, how those transnational audiences may interpret such narratives and themes is the next topic of this study.

The genre of Hong Kong martial arts film is commonly associated with action and fights and this speaks to a large audience. Kin-Yan Szeto refers to Zhang Che in her 2011 book, *The Martial Arts Cinema of the Chinese Diaspora: Ang Lee, John Woo, and Jackie Chan in Hollywood* stating that “Action is a world language”.²⁹ Cobus van Staden says in his 2017 academic journal "Watching Hong Kong martial arts films under apartheid", “many key martial arts films can be read as performing a symbolic decentring of the West and a positioning of Asia as the centre of meaning.”³⁰ The worldwide dissemination of the *Ip Man* trilogy provides a Chinese centered narrative where Chinese people are in control of their destiny, but also provides

²⁷ Benedict Anderson, “Imagined Communities Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,” (New York: Verso, 2006), 6-7.

²⁸ Benedict Anderson, “Imagined Communities Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,” (New York: Verso, 2006), 6.; Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States: An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism*, (London: Methuen, 1977), 5.

²⁹ Kin-Yan Szeto, *The martial arts cinema of the Chinese diaspora: Ang Lee, John Woo, and Jackie Chan in Hollywood*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), 1.

³⁰ Cobus van Staden, "Watching Hong Kong martial arts film under apartheid," *Journal Of African Cultural Studies*, 29, no. 1, March 2017, 59. doi: 10.1080/13696815.2016.1236720.

a lens into a microcosm decentered from a more commonly Caucasian centered narrative distributed through mainstream Hollywood films. The Hong Kong martial arts genre exhibits storylines and characters that are dissimilar from the Hollywood norm of Western protagonists dealing with Westernized issues from a Western point of view.

Impact on Apartheid South Africa

Cobus van Staden describes in his article the issues of censorship and policing of film and television during apartheid in South Africa. specific genres were censored from viewers and police were physically present during specific films. van Staden describes the bias towards Hollywood film to push forth a white-centered narrative. He also points out how “racially targeted censorship aimed at keeping violent films away from black audiences” but due to Hollywood bias, “Hollywood westerns flowed into South Africa in great numbers and were widely watched by black audiences, despite their violent content.”³¹ Despite policing and censorship, the trickling of genres less policed such as exploitation, horror, and martial arts films began to enter South Africa and grew in popularity thanks to the VHS boom in the 1980s. van Staden notes the attraction of the action and fight scenes in Hong Kong martial arts films along with the high policing of their viewable content as keys to draw in black viewers t the time. Hong Kong martial arts films were not as high profile as Hollywood films but their underground growth popularized through a community that was constantly oppressed during apartheid. This oppressed community was eager to view media that was not filtered through a Western or Caucasian lens. The growing popularity of Bruce Lee throughout the 60s and 70s helped the genre spread to a transnational audience such as the black community in South Africa who were

³¹ Cobus van Staden, "Watching Hong Kong martial arts film under apartheid," *Journal Of African Cultural Studies*, 29, no. 1, March 2017, 49. doi: 10.1080/13696815.2016.1236720.

able to see black characters such as Kareem Abdul-Jabar or Jim Kelly in films that did not prioritize a Western-centered narrative.

van Staden finishes with “Hong Kong martial arts cinema represented a crucial, but overlooked, break between cinema and the technologies of Western control in Africa”.³² He provides a glimpse into the effects of apartheid and censorship on the consumption of film in apartheid South Africa. It would not be a stretch to theorize the black community in apartheid South Africa resonating with the *Ip Man* films as the films’ narrative paints an antagonistic picture of colonialism and invasion. The *Ip Man* films also fall in line with van Staden’s conclusion that “both the attractionist structure of these films and their ‘Chinese’ (and therefore non-Western) setting aided audiences whose skills in resistant reading had been honed through years of westerns, to take maximal viewing pleasure from films which combined attractionist violence with explicitly antihegemonic narratives.”³³

Impact on Chinese Diaspora & African American Culture

Looking into the Chinese Diaspora in the West, and African American culture, it is evident the impact of the Hong Kong martial arts genre on shaping identities and cultures. Kin-Yan Szeto reworks Immanuel Kant’s universal moral politics or cosmopolitics, to say:

“I want to posit the notion of the cosmopolitical as a transnational, interactive, and complex emergent identity and consciousness that human agents assume and deploy strategically in their navigations of multiple dislocations. ... An individual’s cosmopolitics arises from the experiences of multiple shifts in consciousness that occur in the process of acquiring the tactical knowledge

³² van Staden 59.

³³ Cobus van Staden, "Watching Hong Kong martial arts film under apartheid," *Journal Of African Cultural Studies*, 29, no. 1, March 2017, 59. doi: 10.1080/13696815.2016.1236720.

needed to operate from a number of geopolitical locations. Subjects embody cosmopolitical consciousness as they experience multiple dislocations through globalism, colonialism, and histories of diaspora and learn to navigate their temporal, spatial, and historical contradictions, surviving in the world and achieving their goals.”³⁴

Szeto’s reinterpretation of cosmopolitics takes into account the history of minorities living abroad and the experiences of a diaspora that shape their morality. The consumption of film is just one way that exposes culture to a learning community. As van Staden points out the attraction of the action within the Hong Kong martial arts genre provides a narrative not commonly displayed in the more popular Hollywood setting. Put simply the Hong Kong martial arts genre tells stories in ways that are understood differently from a community of minorities and diaspora that help shape the human beings they can and will become. Reiterating Li, Qi and Fan, on the effects of film characters such as Wong Fei-hung or Ip man displaying “patriotic heroes” who defeat “colonial oppressors of China and showcase a cultural identity” provide a nationalistic narrative.³⁵ Szeto, Li, Qi and Fan all acknowledge how film molds the moral compass and builds the identity of members within the Chinese diaspora. Ip Man as a character presents an ideal that a diaspora can strive to become such as a moral exemplar or *junzi*.

Why does it matter to reach such communities such as the Chinese diaspora in the West or even African Americans? For the Chinese diaspora in the West, a complex discussion has been brought up about representation of Asians in mainstream film as of late. The general

³⁴ Kin-Yan Szeto, *The martial arts cinema of the Chinese diaspora: Ang Lee, John Woo, and Jackie Chan in Hollywood*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), 6.

³⁵ Zhouxiang Lu, Qi Zhang, and Fan Hong, "Projecting the 'Chineseness': Nationalism, Identity and Chinese Martial Arts Films," *International Journal Of The History Of Sport* 31, no. 3, February 2014, 331. doi: 10.1080/09523367.2013.866093.

argument of how Asians have been portrayed in film has been generalized and stereotyped into very specific stereotypical characters who are disseminated into how society interacts with Asians. The discussion generally starts with the portrayals of Asians in Hollywood film such as Mickey Rooney's offensive portrayal of a bucktoothed Japanese man in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961). However, the growth of the Chinese martial arts films was just one of the stepping stones to shift the argument to where it is presently. Pioneers such as Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan popularized foreign Chinese martial arts films and brought their international popularity to the West, creating a reimagined societal narrative of stereotypical Asians. The argument nowadays has been furthered to a point where Asians in the West are clamoring for representation that presents Asians in a way that does not pigeonhole them into stereotypical caricatures as Asian people. Chinese, and in this case, Hong Kong martial arts films should be acknowledged as an instrumental factor in amplifying the argument. The genre should be respected in a way that builds social consciousness of how Asians are represented while still respecting the history of nations abroad. The popularity of the Hong Kong martial arts genre and its international appeal granted the capacity for stories to be told with Asians as protagonists while reconstructing how foreign antagonists can be perceived. Presenting characters such as Donnie Yen's Ip Man or Bruce Lee's Chen Zhen helps build the larger understanding of how Asian people can be recognized, while understanding their experiences through various contextual histories.³⁶ The goal of the complex discussion on Asian representation is to contextualize the experiences of Asians, especially in the West, and through such stepping stones such as the Hong Kong martial arts genre, complexities begin to arise. Acknowledging the historical stepping stone that is the martial arts genre which allowed this discussion to be possible needs to be recognized.

³⁶ "The Chinese Connection (1972)." *IMDB*. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0068767/>. This film is also known as the "Fist of Fury"

Transnational effects reach further than just the Chinese diaspora in the West as other communities, such as the African American one, become capable of resonating with the genre. Kin-Yan Szeto says “Bruce Lee’s antiracist and anticolonial sentiments found resonance not only among Chinese but with broader audiences, including Asians, Asian Americans, African Americans and other minorities in the United States, and Africans”.³⁷ A pioneer of the international Chinese/Hong Kong martial arts genre, Bruce Lee’s ability to present films that resonated with communities greater than the Chinese speaking audience allowed for the genre to propagate on a massive scale. Evidence of Bruce Lee’s influence can be seen through films such as *Way of the Dragon* (1972) and Crystal S. Anderson refers to *Way of the Dragon* (1972) in her 2013 book, *Beyond the Chinese Connection: Contemporary Afro-Asian Cultural Production*,:

“It shows the successful navigation of a racialized urban landscape shaped by an emerging global economy, thus providing a cross-cultural model that resonated with African Americans. They flocked to Lee’s film in metropolitan metropolises to see a man of color successfully challenge overwhelming odds that mirrored their own situations, contextualized by dwindling economic opportunities and serious rollbacks of civil rights gains of the 1960s.”³⁸



Leroy Green played by Taimak Guarriello donning the yellow and black jumpsuit in *The Last Dragon* (1985) made famous by Bruce Lee in *Game of Death* (1972)

The antagonized and oppressed experiences that are exhibited through Bruce Lee’s characters, easily resonated with the African American community. Discernable influences are seen in *The Last Dragon* (1985), an African American centered martial arts film that centers around an African American

³⁷ Kin-Yan Szeto, *The martial arts cinema of the Chinese diaspora: Ang Lee, John Woo, and Jackie Chan in Hollywood*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), 28.

³⁸ Crystal S, Anderson, *Beyond the Chinese connection: contemporary Afro-Asian cultural production*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 4.

martial artist in Harlem, New York City. *The Last Dragon* goes as far as to have the main character Leroy Green don Bruce Lee's iconic yellow and black tracksuit as seen in Bruce Lee's *Game of Death* (1972). Bruce Lee has paved the way for international superstars such as Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and now possibly Donnie Yen to reach such communities and create narratives that are rarely discussed in mainstream Hollywood films. More recent films such as the *Rush Hour* trilogy (1998-2007) presenting a buddy cop film starring Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker, where pairing a Chinese man with an African American man proved wildly successful.³⁹

Contrast/Juxtaposition with Other films

The *Ip Man* trilogy does well to provide a nationalistic narrative shining a spotlight on the injustices that China and Hong Kong has faced historically through the medium and character of Ip Man. However, there are films that also provide the same nationalistic narrative but with more complex characters. Primarily the *Once Upon a Time in China* quadrilogy (1991-1997) provides yet another folk hero in Wong Fei-hung who struggles with learning foreign culture.⁴⁰

This quadrilogy starring Jet Li provides more complex characters while still maintaining a



Wong Fei-Hung protecting Siu Kwan/13th Aunt in *Once Upon a Time in China 2* (1992).

powerful sense of nationalism. The protagonist Wong Fei-hung is constantly fighting larger than life battles both literally and figuratively, facing antagonists such as the Americans, local

gangs, governmental officers, Western

³⁹ “Rush Hour.” *Box Office Mojo*. 1999. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=weekly&id=rushhour.htm>.; “Rush Hour 2.” *Box Office Mojo*. 2001. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=weekly&id=rushhour2.htm>.; “Rush Hour 3.” *Box Office Mojo*. 2007. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=weekly&id=rushhour3.htm>. The three films combined for over \$800 million USD.

⁴⁰ Vincent Zhao takes the mantle of Wong Fei-hung after Jet Li for the the 4th and 5th installments, however, Jet Li returned to reprise the roll for *Once Upon a Time in China & America* (1997). For the sake of consistency, I will refer to the films as a quadrilogy and exclude the films starring Vincent Zhao.

culture, and so on. However, foreigners and specifically Western culture is presented as something to be learned and understood rather than wholly antagonized as seen in the *Ip Man* trilogy. Much of this learning is done through Wong Fei-hung's love interest throughout the films in Siu Kwan (but more commonly referred to as 13th Aunt). She is used as a medium to teach Wong Fei-hung about Western culture, as he starts the first film adamantly against foreign culture. These portrayals contrast with the *Ip Man* trilogy's simple good versus evil narrative when it comes to domestic versus foreign.⁴¹

Conclusion

This paper proves that the *Ip Man* trilogy presents a nationalist narrative through the use of one-dimensional antagonists while providing more complex domestic characters. The one sided story telling presents a simplistic narrative easily related to a transnational audience that has been previously fed a narrative seen through the eyes of Hollywood, who generally cannot truly comprehend the complexities of people of color. The one sided story telling done in the *Ip Man* trilogy simplifies a narrative but undermines an audiences' capability to comprehend the complexities of history. The *Once Upon a Time in China* quadrilogy still maintains a powerful sense of nationalism but does so through a narrative where foreign culture should be learned

⁴¹ *Once Upon a Time in China*, directed by Tsui Hark, Hong Kong, China: Golden Harvest, 1991, DVD.; *Once Upon a Time in China 2*, directed by Tsui Hark, Hong Kong, China: Golden Harvest. 1992. DVD.; *Once Upon a Time in China 3*, directed by Tsui Hark, Hong Kong, China: Golden Harvest. 1993. DVD.; Sammo Hung and Kar-wing Lau, *Once Upon a Time in China and America*. Hong Kong, China: China Star Entertainment Group, 1997, DVD.

The diversity of morality set in this quadrilogy exhibits the complexity of interactions that China and the rest of the world had during the late 19th century. *Ip Man* tells a one sided story while *Once Upon a Time in China* provides domestic characters that are purely evil along with foreign characters that can be purely moral. In just the first film this moral switch is exhibited through a local gang that is willing to harass Wong Fei-hung and get involved with Westerners in trafficking Chinese women, and the gang is presented as morally incapable of evolving. A foreign Jesuit Priest on the other hand was presented as purely good, and willing to serve as Wong Fei-Hung's witness to a crime when not a single Chinese person was willing to. Despite being decades older than the *Ip Man* trilogy, the *Once Upon a Time in China* quadrilogy contextualizes history as told to provide a much deeper understanding of how nationalism is told through these films

instead of whole-heartedly antagonized. However, more research can be done specifically on the *Once Upon a Time in China* series as the films had been released right before the British handover of Hong Kong back to China. Speculation can be made that films and media would be more friendly to foreign culture and foreigners as to not stir the pot and prevent the smooth transition of Hong Kong back to China.

Despite a one sided narrative as seen in the *Ip Man* trilogy, the films still maintain a dual purpose. They provide a transnational narrative that is not as commonly told relative to the narratives seen in mainstream Hollywood films, and they empower communities who resonate with such narratives. Through the analysis of foreign and domestic antagonists within the *Ip Man* trilogy, the intentions of the films become evident; to reinforce the moral integrity of the protagonist Ip Man with foils that represent larger than life battles that he, as a representation of China, must defeat.

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