
I WAS A TEENAGE SURFER ZOMBIE FROM MARS

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO CULT CINEMA

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Week 6: Mexican Wrestlers and Kung Fu Killers

Luchador Films

- Luchador (or Lucha Libre) films are professional wrestling/science fiction/horror movies
- They starred some of the most famous Mexican Wrestling figures of the era
- Perhaps the most famous example being El Santo (Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta) "The Saint"

El Santo (Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta)

- Born on 23 September 1917, in Tulancingo, Hidalgo
- By the second half of the 1930s, he was established as a wrestler, using the names "Rudy Guzmán", "El Hombre Rojo" ("the Red Man"), "El Demonio Negro" ("The Black Demon") and "Murciélago Enmascarado II" ("The Masked Bat II")
- The last name was the same as that of El Murcielago Enmasacarado ("The Masked Bat"), and after an appeal by Murciélago to the Mexican boxing and wrestling commission, the regulatory body ruled that Guzmán could not use the name
- Made his debut, donning his full silver face mask, at the Arena Mexico in 1942
- El Enmascarado de Plato - The Silver Masked Man became a cultural Mexican cultural icon
- The silver masked man has become as ubiquitous as the sugar skull or the Virgin de Guadeloupe
- In 1952, a motion picture serial, The Man in the Silver Mask was proposed
- It was supposed to star El Santo, however, he deemed that it would be a commercial failure, so he turned the offer down
- Instead, they gave the lead to El Medico and the 'Silver Masked Man' became the villain of the piece
- In 1958, El Santo was again approached to star in movies and this time, though he was reluctant to give up his career in the ring, accepted.

Santo Versus the Evil Brain (1961)

- Directed by Joselito Rodríguez
- Written by Fernando Osés and Enrique Zambrano
- Produced by Jesús Alvaríño, Jorge García Besné, Carlos Garduño G. and Enrique Zambrano

Plot

- Santo is overpowered and taken to the laboratory of a crazed Doctor Campos (Joaquín Cordero) and turned into a docile servant of the mad doctor through a series of injections and electric shocks.

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Shaw Bros

- When the lights go down in your living room or favourite arthouse den of choice and the screen explodes with that fabulously cartoonish Eastmancolor SB badge, flanked by the words SHAW SCOPE, we know that what will follow will be both magically familiar and brain smashingly unpredictable.
- Formed in 1925 by the four Shaw siblings, Runje, Runde, Runme and Run Run, the entertainment company Tiayni, (Unique) initially based in Shanghai, sought to tap into overseas Cantonese speaking Chinese markets.
- By the 30s, with the outfit now largely run by Run Run and Runme, the wider company and off shoots, had created links between China, British Hong Kong and South East Asia to form a profitable transnational network.
- However, though the company continued to expand through to the second world war, and recovered quickly afterwards even though many of its practical operations were destroyed during the conflict, rival company Cathay Organisation with its film production branch, The Motion Picture and General Investment Group, based in Hong Kong, was beginning to erode the dominance of the Shaw family empire.
- Though the company produced a whole range of movies intended for the Mandarin speaking Chinese audiences and other international markets, for most, they will undoubtedly be associated with the bombastic martial arts movies of the 60s and 70s.
- Run Run himself relocated to Hong Kong, bought out his brother and established the Shaw Brothers Studio (HK).
- And while many releases from the company up until that point had been Cantonese speaking productions, Run Run also recognised that there was and ready Mandarin speaking audience waiting to be tapped into.
- With China under the control of communism, the mainland market for Mandarin speaking movies had been blocked to many overseas companies meaning that Mandarin film production went into serious decline.
- However, Shaw Brothers already had an established network allowing it to exploit many Mandarin speaking markets unreachable to other organisations.

Shaw Bros CONT...

- Run Run also recognised that to establish a new post-war cinematic national identity, in the face of much 'yellow-peril' style foreign antagonism, the productions they would make would have to underline the region's differences to other cultures, not their similarities.
- By emphasising exotic lavish spectacle and highlighting specific elements of Chinese storytelling and its distinctive charm, Shaw Brothers particularly, with its beautifully crafted Kung Fu epics and wuxia style features became, a byword for uniquely colourful, fast paced movies, heavy on tradition but also fresh and unquestionably entertaining.

The Chinese Boxer and the Context of the Wuxia Film

- Wuxia, a Chinese genre of fiction encompassing theatre, opera and more lately television, video games and of course cinema, sought to highlight the mythic, the magical and the ancient, its stories often focussing on lone warriors, or ungoverned wandering swordsmen, who like the errant knights from European folklore, followed a strict code of ethics.
- From the 1920s onwards, this tended to be showcased in lavish action-packed tales of romance, chivalry and battles between good and evil forces.
- Real martial arts skills would be enhanced through special effects like speeded-up camera work, and actors would utilise wires and trampolines so that the fight scenes would take on a kinetic, faster than fast quality allowing the stars of these features to exhibit almost superhero-like attributes to exaggerate their genuine physical prowess.
- This typically manifested itself in work like the two-part *The Book and the Sword* (1960), *The Iron Buddha* (1970) or *Brothers Five* (1970).
- And while this genre, in terms of the silver screen, has never really gone away, in recent years for example international successes such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) or *The House of Flying Daggers* (2004) have proved the lasting appeal of wuxia, with echoes of the art form being present in western productions like *The Matrix* (1999) and countless others.
- But in the early 1970s, a different approach to the martial arts feature was taking shape.

The Chinese Boxer (1970)

- *The Chinese Boxer*, under the control of its star and writer Wang Yu, aided by action director Tong Gaai, cut across the grain of many traditional martial arts pictures, scrapping as it did the idea of mystical forces for a more 'realistic' approach.

The Chinese Boxer (1970) CONT...

- And though it retains some of the techniques used in earlier wuxia productions, its imagery is bleaker, bloodier and bone-crunchingly-bereft of the sword and sorcery influences of the past.
- There is nary a hint of any long-haired be-whiskered mystic, this is a world without magic, but one dogged by back-breaking labour, corruption and inequality, where one must fight to be free.
- It is also one tainted by the hangover of wartime colonialism. The deeply immoral baddies of the piece are Japanese interlopers, a stark reminder of Hong Kong's 1940s annexation by that very country.
- The simple story focuses on Lei Ming (Wang Yu) the underdog member of a boxing school, who takes on a crooked band of foreign mercenaries who are hell-bent on raping and robbing their way across his beleaguered hometown.
- But his bitter trail of vengeance comes at a price, many of his friends and fellow students fall prey to the cruelty of this bunch of evil-doing visitors, and the hero has to hone his skills, via highly disciplined, body-busting forms of physical preparation, to stand any chance of beating the invading gang.

The Chinese Boxer (1970) and Rocky (1976)

- Not only was the movie a direct influence on a host of other Hong Kong efforts, echoes can be gleaned in later Hollywood fare.
- *Rocky (1976)*, adheres rigidly to the ethos of *The Chinese Boxer*, Robert 'Rocky' Balboa (Sylvester Stallone) follows a similar path to Lei Ming, as his rise to 'victory' also comes at a severe cost, and while he isn't forced to kill he certainly must battle with societal forces, poverty and overwhelming odds.
- Not only that, the working-class boxer's famous training montage strongly mimics that of Lei Ming's intensive regime. Rocky's knuckle bruising routine pummelling the flesh and bones of dead cow carcasses, seems to reiterate *The Chinese Boxer* and the protagonist's painful suffering as he carries out his fist hardening methods by pounding barrels of red hot sand.

***The Chinese Boxer* (1970) and *Rocky* (1976) CONT...**

- But both *Rocky* and *The Chinese Boxer* present us with lead characters who are stretched to their mental and physical limits in a searing demonstration of bloody-minded determination.
- Minds though aren't the only things bloodied in this fast-paced production. Wang Yu presents us with an exquisitely choreographed, violently graphic dance of death.
- Brutal fight scenes which flit between lethal-looking wrangles and more fanciful set-pieces, drip with savage fury and are spattered with lashings of scarlet Kensington gore.

Legacy

- Wang Yu's visceral form of action bleeds its way into the future. Tarantino's *Kill Bill Vol. 1* (2004), especially Uma Thurman's scrap with the Crazy 88s is an obvious homage.
- Like the Italian *A Fist Full of Dollars* (1964), which launched a succession of brilliant and not so brilliant copy-cat spaghetti westerns, *The Chinese Boxer* essentially became the template for dozens of martial arts pictures to follow. The Lee starring *Fist of Fury* (1972), being an obvious re-imagination of Wang Yu's original.
- But while the foundations of a genre or sub-genre can often be lost in a deluge of imitators, rendering the archetype as dated or irrelevant, something about this particular first outing remains forever fresh.

'Jimmy' Wang Yu

- Though Bruce Lee will be better remembered by the average cinemagoer, it's worth remembering that Wang Yu was the first and arguably best martial arts superstar.
- Though *The Chinese Boxer* may be less epic or flashy than later productions, it retains an unfaltering appeal, something about its rawness, coupled with its magnificently composed imagery, incorporating brilliantly edited photo-play, with an immediacy of action and spellbinding fight sequences, create a bloody and unforgettable silver screen experience.
- While Wang Yu's appearance in the wuxia style movie *The One-Armed Swordsman* (1967) had placed him firmly in the public eye, it was *The Chinese Boxer* that truly catapulted him into fame and fortune.
- His personal life would lead him down some dark paths, not least of which a murder charge, later dropped, and a crippling stroke, from which he made an unprecedented recovery.
- And though it is an extremely good martial arts picture, one of the best, it is also much more than that. It is a film of warmth, humanity, tension and gob-smackingly brilliant action set-pieces, delivered within a beautifully wrapped package, intelligent, stylish and wonderfully entertaining.

Bruce Lee and Golden Harvest

- This new style of Hong Kong cinema, introduced a flood of copy-cat entries and no doubt encouraged former Shaw Bros execs Raymond Chow and Leonard Ho to set up their own studio, Golden Harvest.
- Rejecting the controlling in-house restrictions of their old company, the new outfit not only invited independent producers it also offered more lucrative pay packages for its stars.
- But while Shaw Bros had a number of screen favourites on its books, something about those existing stars, would remain, outside of Hong Kong at least, within the enclave of cult or limited fandom.
- However, what Golden Harvest had with Lee, was potentially a much more marketable international product.
- Already familiar, with the Hollywood landscape due to his appearances in prime-time American TV shows, most notably as Kato in the comic book caper *The Green Hornet*, Lee was also able to claim US citizenship due to being born in China Town, San Francisco when his parents were there on an opera tour.
- This potentially meant that he could be presented more readily as a partly American star, arguably giving him a much more commercial edge over many of his Hong Kong-based rivals and contemporaries. And of course, the mega international success of *Enter the Dragon* (1973) making Lee a worldwide superstar, proved this theory.
- But while it might be easy to suggest that luck was on his side, and that he was able to build on the work already established by the likes of Jimmy Wang Yu, Lee's contribution to the genre and to wider cinema cannot be underestimated.

The Legendary Weapons of China (1982)

- Furious fight sequences, magic, mysticism and be-whiskered baddies all parade about this dizzyingly confusing plot of mistaken identity, awesome weaponry and pantomime style theatrics.
- Death, destruction and poo jokes all share the same screen space in a wildly eccentric and thoroughly entertaining wuxia presentation.
- Even for an early 80s Shaw Brothers movie, the legendary studio, most notable for its Kung Fu epics, it's a brilliantly bonkers affair.
- The opening 10 minutes are insanely stylistic. Though known for their intricately choreographed performances, here that level of orchestrated artistry is pushed further than perhaps ever before.
- In the first few scenes, not one character is allowed to move or emote in a way that even resembles reality. Simply walking from one end of the room to the other becomes a highly-charged act of tightly controlled gymnastic flourishes.

The Legendary Weapons of China (1982) CONT...

- To the uninitiated, approaching a Shaw Brothers Kung Fu movie can be jarring particularly to those more used to Hollywood's production line narratives.
- Like many films which spill out of Japan or even modern-day South Korea, Chinese and Hong Kong-based filmmakers are often more willing to throw together powerful drama, comedy and slapstick.
- Tonally these kinds of pictures can, from a Western point of view feel awkward and clunky, but it's best to either let these elements slide or better yet learn to go with them.
- Tales are drawn from mythology and traditional culture, rather than well-oiled writing rooms which offer new and original conceptions.
- *The Legendary Weapons of China*, like many Shaw Brothers vehicles, is essentially a showcase of talent, ideas and beautifully composed violent sequences.
- The main talents on offer consist of established actors from the Shaw Brothers stable. Stars like Gordon Liu Chia, (*5 Shaolin Masters* 1974), and Chia-Yung Liu (*The Spiritual Boxer* 1975) provide the solid bones, while iconic martial arts pro Sheng Fu offers up some comic relief.
- Sheng Fu, who, had already suffered a series of on-set injuries, would die tragically aged just 28, a year after making this film.
- And though director Chia-Liang Liu AKA Lau Kar-Leung also takes centre stage, as mysterious pugilist Lei Kung, it is actress Kara Wai (billed as Kara Hui), that is arguably given most time to shine, particularly during the protracted pre-credit sequence.
- Playing character Fang Shao-Ching a feisty yet warm-hearted protector, with incredible stealth-like powers, Wai glows brightest during the many scenes she shares with Gordon Liu Chia.
- Together they become a forceful unit, agile, impossibly quick and able to hide in plain sight. But again, the slightly disconcerting aspect to western audiences might be the suspension of disbelief we must take when going along with the idea of her being a convincing male-impersonator.
- But though a ground-breaking movie like *The Chinese Boxer* (1970) had earlier stripped out the more traditional elements in favour of something more brutal and relatively 'realistic', *The Legendary Weapons of China*, moves back into a more magical realm.
- Strange capes, exploding fans and incredible death-defying techniques, all come into play in a dazzling array of cinematic bangs and whistles.
- But of course, at the centre of the story are the 'Legendary Weapons' – teased throughout and satisfyingly bought into play at the climax. The battle-axe, broad sword and a host of other gleaming arms and deadly instruments let fly in a whirling dervish of mind-warping visual stunts and spectacles.
- Almost the complete inverse of *The Flag of Iron* (1980), which made much of its weapons being fashioned from ordinary household items and the like, Chia-Liang Liu's movie tosses any idea of 'realism' out the window, preferring instead to rely heavily on the idea of mysticism and magic.
- Though set in a particular historical time frame, The Quing Dynasty, we are never in any doubt that what's on the table here is pure unadulterated fantasy. The kinds of droopy 'tached mentors which *The Chinese Boxer* had sought to carefully avoid, are very much back on the menu, in this early 80s retcon of the wuxia era.
- However, *The Legendary Weapons of China* certainly works best if you are already a Kung Fu fan, and it would be wrong to say this was the best starting point to experience this genre.
- But, a casual viewing of this oddly complicated and yet simplistic romp will deliver, at least on a surface level, some of the most weirdly effective and visually impressive set pieces you are likely to see from that waning classic era.

