

Hot Wars on Screen during the Cold War: Philosophical Situations in King Hu's Martial Arts Films

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Abstract

King Hu's (1932-1997) wuxia film *Dragon Inn* (King Hu, 1967) screened for a record-setting sixty-five days upon release in Taipei, out-pacing both domestic and imported films by earning NT\$445,000 and breaking records in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia as well. At the same time, director Zhang Che's (1923-2002) famous kung fu film *One-Armed Swordsman* (Che Zhang, 1967) was in theaters, solidifying the genre's influence and appeal. This paper situates King Hu's notable films within a Cold War socio-political and historical context, rather than exclusively within the wuxia tradition, in order to examine the brilliance and popularity of the director's films by exploring the philosophical situations located in King Hu's martial arts films in a manner which invites further conversation and inquiry. To do so, I first set up the parameters of the discussion in terms of the context of the Cold War, the

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biography of King Hu, and a brief discussion of the philosophy of King Hu's films. Like blockbuster films today, Hu's films presented straightforward and accessible narratives crammed with action-packed sequences which are displayed on a grand scale. In these ways and more, fascinatingly the catastrophes King Hu depict mirror actual concurrent Cold War conflicts. As a result, we discover how Hu did not only reimagine and invigorate an enduring wuxia tradition, but also captured the imagination of the Cold War era, rendering both its fears and fantasies visible and concrete. (This text uses the international standard Hanyu pinyin romanization system with an exception of names already familiar in the manner in which they most frequently appear romanized in the Wade-Giles system, such as King Hu and Chang Cheh, and locations such as Taipei.)

Keywords: King Hu, Taiwan cinema, Cold War, film and philosophy,
Philosophy

King Hu's Martial Arts Films: Philosophical Situations in Cold War Pop Culture

King Hu's (1932-1997) martial arts films, both powerhouses at the box office and groundbreaking aesthetically, echoed concurrent Cold War crises in a second, parallel universe that represented political posturing and the fear of a nuclear catastrophe. Like attendees of blockbuster movies today, audiences could buy a ticket in order to escape reality or experience metaphorical representations of their world at large—depending on whether or not they wanted to deal with both at the same time. In Taiwan, the appeal of *Dragon Inn* (King Hu, 1967) resulted in the film being screened for a record-breaking sixty-five days, out-pacing both domestic and imported films by earning 4,450,000, and breaking records in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia as well. At the same time, director Chang Cheh's famous kung fu film *One-Armed Swordsman* (Chang Cheh, 1967) was in theaters, solidifying the genre's influence and appeal.¹

King Hu, who worked for Voice of America as an announcer and scriptwriter while in Hong Kong before moving to Taiwan, was a primary contributor to the Taiwan and Hong Kong film industries during the Cold War. Along with fellow Hong Kong “defector” (thus labeled simply because he left Hong Kong's filmmaking community in order to make films in Taiwan in the 1960s) Li Hanxiang, King Hu directed stunning adventure and martial arts films in Taiwan that were produced with high production values—and

¹ See Lin, Wenchi, “From Wuxia Legend to National Allegory: Comparison of Narratives in *Come Drink with Me* versus *Dragon Inn*,” accessed February 3, 2018, http://www.academia.edu/2368097/_2010_8-25_

imitated poorly by Taiwan's Central Motion Picture Corporation (CMPC) as displayed in *The Ammunition Hunter* (Shanxi Ding, 1971), replete with poor editing and an insipid representation of something the KMT would never accomplish: liberate China.² These escapist texts allow direct access into the ways Cold War politics unfolded in startlingly real ways on the silver screen, reveal how character desires matched audience fantasies at the time, and present resolutions linked to geopolitical conflicts both inherited and concurrently in motion. As film scholar Wenchi Lin writes, regarding *Dragon Inn*: "the film narrative emphasizes minor-scale conflicts and opposition to tyranny, which echoes Taiwan's position in the 1960s vis-à-vis Mainland China geopolitically and ideologically during China's Cultural Revolution; Taiwan presented itself as the protector of Chinese culture by way of its ostensible democracy and fiscal policies while the destruction of traditional culture on the mainland spread like wildfire."³

This essay briefly foregrounds the philosophical situations in four of King Hu martial arts films. While an immanent critique of the basic dilemmas in King Hu's films appears to be quite simplistic on the surface, in fact the symptomatic connection of these situations to the historical-material condition

² It is common knowledge that Taiwan's Chinese Nationalist Party (*Guomindang*, KMT) film apparatus did not depict the events that occurred on the island of Taiwan in the 1960s directly nor represent its corollary concerns. Certainly, the state had plenty of fires to put out besides the potential conflagration that might result if socio-political events were depicted from the perspective of the marginalized within Taiwan's borders and if films directly represented conflict with neighboring governments; moreover, the KMT's methods were quite successful when viewed from the state's perspective of marketing the island as a land of prosperity. See Wicks, *Transnational Representations: The State of Taiwan Cinema in the 1960s and 1970s*.

³ See Lin, Wenchi, "From Wuxia Legend to National Allegory: Comparison of Narratives in *Come Drink with Me* versus *Dragon Inn*."

reveals exciting insights worth further inquiry. I first set up the parameters of the discussion in terms of the context of the Cold War, the biography of King Hu, and a brief discussion of film as a philosophical situation. This approach demonstrates that analyses of the director's films are not exhausted by accounts of important studios such as the Shaw Brothers in Hong Kong or Union Film (*Lian Bang Ying Ye Gong Si*) in Taiwan⁴, editing stylistics ("realistic" fighting sequences and the integration of a Beijing opera aesthetic)⁵, or social contextualization in terms of the rise of modernization.⁶ There is plenty left to uncover.

King Hu and Film as Philosophical Situation

King Hu, born in Beijing on April 29, 1932, moved to Hong Kong in 1950 where he worked at a printing shop as an assistant accountant and proofreader alongside Taiwan film director Song Cunshou.⁷ Later, he worked as a painter of advertising posters including movie posters. In 1954 he acted in a film entitled *Humiliation for Sale* (笑聲淚痕, Jun Yan, 1958), his first role on screen. At this time he was still in the service of the Voice of America

⁴ See Poshek Fu, *China Forever: The Shaw Brothers and Diasporic Cinema* and Huang Ren, *Lian bang dian ying shi dai* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

⁵ See David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁶ See Man Fung Yip, "In the Realm of the Senses: Sensory Realism, Speed, and Hong Kong Martial Arts Cinema," *Cinema Journal* 53, no.4 (2014): 76-97.

⁷ This information is a direct translation of the information previously available online at the Taiwan Film Archives website, accessed in 2008: "Hu Chin-Chuan/King Hu." Regarding Song Cunshou, see James Wicks "Gender Negotiation in Song Cunshou's *Story of Mother* and Taiwan Cinema of the early 1970s." In *A Companion to Chinese Cinema* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 118-132.

broadcasting station as announcer and writer. In 1958, thanks to his connection director Li Hanxiang,⁸ King Hu entered Shaw Brothers as an actor and screenplay writer, and he assisted in the direction of *The Love Eterne* (梁山伯與祝英台, Hanxiang Li, 1963).⁹ In 1964 Hu wrote and directed his first film *The Story of Sue San* (玉堂春, King Hu, 1964), an adaptation of a traditional opera.¹⁰

In 1965 Hu directed a resist-Japanese (*kangri*) film *Sons of the Good Earth* (大地兒女, King Hu, 1965) that the Shaw Brothers studio revised heavily due in part to the sensitive situation in Singapore and Malaysia. The following year Hu made the *wuxia* film *Come Drink with Me* (大醉俠, King Hu, 1966), initiating a new film style influenced by Beijing opera. After *Come Drink with Me*, King Hu left the Shaw Brothers to go to Taiwan to join the Union Film in order to make films, purchase film equipment, and train professional actors. In 1967 he directed *Dragon Inn* (龍門客棧, King Hu, 1967) which broke box office records in Taiwan as well as in Korea and the Philippines.¹¹ With the profits he earned and status he acquired he moved on

⁸ See James Wicks "Love in the Time of Industrialization: Representations of Nature in Li Hanxiang's *The Winter* (1969)." In *Journal of Taiwan Literary Studies*, no. 17 (2013): 81-102.

⁹ Popular reception of Li Hanxiang's film *The Love Eterne* reached mythological proportions in Taiwan that need not be repeated here. Due in part to the influence of Li Hanxiang and King Hu, the marketing of recognizable movie stars, and improving production standards, Taiwan's films were screened in over fifty countries. See Wicks: *Transnational Representations: The State of Taiwan Cinema in the 1960s and 1970s*.

¹⁰ The first film as a director according to Stephen Teo is *Sons of the Good Earth* (大地兒女, King Hu, 1965), which based on his description, depicts the war of resistance vs. Japan and includes imagery of the Nationalist flag.

¹¹ In the 1960s the economy in Taiwan began to be strengthened due to land reforms, foreign investment (including the receipt of millions of dollars in aid from the United States from

to the even more ambitious film *A Touch of Zen* (俠女, King Hu, 1971) in 1971. It took Hu three years to make. The film eventually won a Technical Grand Prize award at Cannes, thus placing him within the world's upper echelon of film directors. In 1975 he made a fourth film in the genre, by far the weakest in terms of ingenuity and style, entitled *The Valiant Ones* (忠烈圖, King Hu, 1975). Then in 1978 he completed two films shot in Korea, namely *Legend of the Mountain* (山中傳奇, King Hu, 1978) and *Raining in the Mountain* (空山靈雨, King Hu, 1978), that arguably demonstrate an intention to avoid the constraints of the *wuxia* genre. In 1981 King Hu produced a contemporary period piece and in 1983 co-directed the portmanteau film *The Wheel of Life* (大輪迴, King Hu, 1983) alongside Taiwan directors Li Xing and Bai Jingrui. In his later career he initiated film projects that did not fully come to fruition, directed stage plays, and presented his paintings at an art exhibit. At 65 years of age, King Hu passed away on January 14, 1997, in Taipei, Taiwan.

To consider the philosophy of King Hu's spectacular, entertaining films, I follow the lead of Alain Badiou. Initially, we might approach the philosophy of films as an examination of "a particular ethical point of view or [to] raise questions about skepticism or the nature of personal identity."¹² However, in his essay, "Cinema as Philosophical Experimentation" Badiou describes how a viewer does not need a particular philosophy or theory to analyze film, but rather a film itself transforms philosophy (and thus it may transform the viewer as well) by exploring new possibilities, including rejecting outdated,

1951 to 1964), and profits from exported goods. See Wicks: *Transnational Representations: The State of Taiwan Cinema in the 1960s and 1970s*.

¹² Damian Cox and Michael P. Levine, "Why Film and Philosophy," in *Thinking through film: doing philosophy, watching movies* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 3.

no longer viable, choices. In such a way, “cinema is a philosophical situation.”¹³

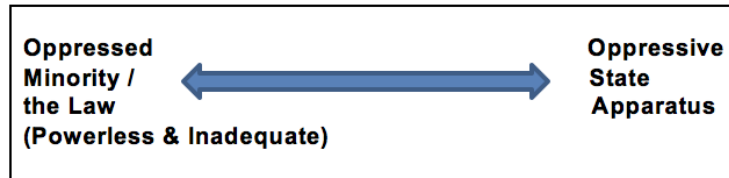
According to Badiou, a philosophical situation exists when one locates a “paradoxical relationship,” namely, two mutually exclusive and points of view; thus, a choice must be made, or a third way must be discovered, which is an exception to each of the untenable positions. The conflicts presented within the narratives of films in general, Badiou argues, and in this case King Hu’s martial arts films specifically, clarify the distance between the choices presented to the protagonists. In Hu’s martial arts films we discover on the one side, an oppressive state apparatus, and on the other an enclave of righteous protagonists, yet the law they defend and stand for is powerless and inadequate in the face of their great adversary.

As illustrated in the below, King Hu’s films reveal the distance between these two choices. Both choices are unsatisfactory and untenable. Since Hu’s films stage an event, a situation, an ethical conflict, it is within this event/situation/conflict that a rupture occurs in which an exception to the rule becomes apparent. Depending on the circumstance, Hu’s characters make choices within each particular paradoxical relationship, discovering new opportunities. For example, in the case of *Come Drink with Me*, King Hu’s characters arguably conclude that it is by way of creating strategic alliances that their desire for revenge and justice might be satisfied.

Table 1: A “Paradoxical Relationship” in King Hu’s martial arts films.

¹³ I use this approach not because I believe that films can be reduced to a simplistic binary relationship, nor because I believe that films “think” on their own. Rather, this approach elegantly foregrounds the way simplistic narrative plots, apparent in an immanent (aesthetic) analysis of the film.

Hot Wars on Screen during the Cold War:
Philosophical Situations in King Hu's Martial Arts Films



Here I again follow Badiou's line of thinking, for Badiou registered this particular dilemma when analyzing Hollywood westerns. Yet despite this uncanny similarity, which reveals yet another transnational connection between Taiwan and Hollywood film structure as many scholars have noted, Taiwan's philosophical situations do not exist within a vacuum. The Cold War in Asia set the parameters of Hu's philosophical situations just as the Cold War set the parameters of discourse in political, military, and economic circles. Reverberations from events such as the first hot war during the Cold War, the Korean War (1950-1953), the PRC's shelling of islands in 1954 and 1958 governed by the Chinese Nationalist Party (*Guomindang*, KMT), and the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident created ripples that influenced the currents of multiple industries, from communication between heads of state to the production of James Bond films.¹⁴ Taiwan's populace experienced the political and psychological ramifications of the political vacuum left by Germany and Japan in the aftermath of World War II and the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Truman Doctrine, Eisenhower's "domino theory"¹⁵, and the rhetoric of Mao Zedong. In such a framework, "Cold War films" need not

¹⁴ See Sandbrook, Dominic, "How pop culture helped win the Cold War," accessed February 3 2018, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/10441108/How-pop-culture-helped-win-the-Cold-War.html>.

¹⁵ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 123-124.

present the conflict directly, for the psychology of the era marks films made during the time period with identifiable aesthetic and narrative stamps.

The intersection of the Cold War and cinema is currently the subject of exciting new scholarship.¹⁶ Jing Jing Chang's work describes how Chinese mainland films screened in Hong Kong disseminated Chinese Communist Party (CCP) patriotism and served as a mouthpiece for the communist government in the 1960s. Hong Kong was a location where an ideological struggle took place between the KMT and CCP while British colonialists were "rearticulated as benevolent rulers"¹⁷ during the Cold War. Han Sang Kim's research uncovers the propagation of the free nation state by way of mobile propaganda screenings in South Vietnam and South Korea in his research of U.S. Information Service documents produced in the late 1940s. Man Fung Yip's research continues to reveal funding sources for studios in Hong Kong in the 1950s after the migration of directors from Shanghai to Hong Kong during the civil war. Funding included US investment in pro-Taiwan Hong Kong Mandarin cinema, while leftwing studios received support and control from Beijing. Leftwing films produced in Hong Kong were sold and screened on the mainland. Interestingly, Hong Kong distributors would distribute Soviet films, leading to the Southern Film Corporation requesting that "illegal parties" would not distribute its films. And film scholar Zhiwei Xiao has described the response of movie-goers in mainland China where films that

¹⁶ These sources are cited in the Bibliography. It was a pleasure to attend these presentations at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, 2014.

¹⁷ See Chang, Jing Jing. "The Cold War Project of the Southern Film Corporation: Film Distribution and Censorship in British Hong Kong" (Conference Presentation, Society for Cinema and Media Studies, Seattle, 2014).

intended to “manufacture ideological conformity” could not influence audiences who would rather be “entertained than enlightened.”

Come Drink with Me

Come Drink with Me, produced in Hong Kong in 1965, presents a group of bandits¹⁸ who kidnap a general's son in order to exchange their prisoner for the leader of their band of outlaws. Golden Swallow (Cheng Pei-pei), a female knight-errant, ventures on a quest to rescue the kidnapped man who is also her brother. It is the story of a family severed by conflict. Peter Brooks' analyses of the connection between desire and narrative systems observe that the pleasure principle *eros* guides audiences who identify with the protagonist; thus, characters function as “‘desiring machines’ whose presence [...] creates and sustains narrative movement through the forward march of desire, projecting the self onto the world through scenarios of desire imagined and then acted upon.”¹⁹ In this case, an immanent and symptomatic analysis

reveals how Golden Swallow's trajectory and the series of spaces she traverses aligns the cultural and libidinal desires connected to the material world in interesting ways. Thus, by bearing in mind both the nature of desire and the parameters established within the Cold War context, we might see Hu's famous tea house scenes in a new light.

To paint with very broad brush strokes for a moment, consider how Golden Swallow, surrounded by enemies within a tea house, imaginatively

¹⁸ Note that the term “bandits” was used by the CCP to label the KMT, including those within film circles in Taiwan in the 1950s. See Anon, “Taiwan's film and theatre circles are in a distressing struggle (臺灣電影戲劇工作人員在苦難中掙扎),” *Renmin Ribao*, Nov. 2, 1957.

¹⁹ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Vintage, 1984), 40-41.

connotes what it would be like to be a spy aligned with the “free world” while venturing into the center of the Eastern Bloc or Mainland China, yet like Golden Swallow, possessing the skillset to make it out of each situation safely.



Figure 1: Golden Swallow (wearing a large hat), invincible despite the odds.

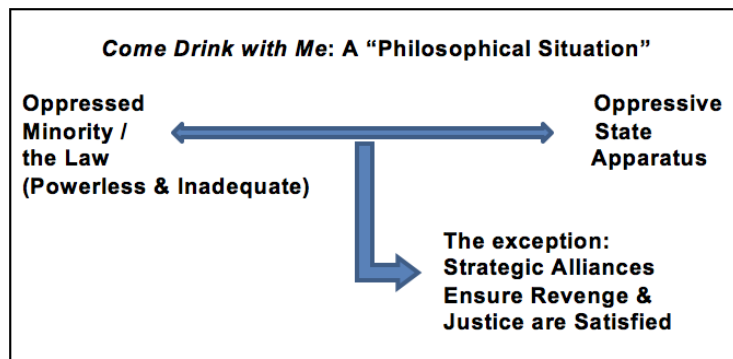
Not only does an analysis of the imagery reveal the ways in which Hong Kong and/or Taiwan are represented geographically as an isolated enclave within the Cold War setting, character choices within the filmic environment further reveal representations of political realities. Along the journey Golden Swallow discovers that she has an ally, for apparently virtuous individuals are certain to attract like-minded comrades. Taiwan film historian Huang Ren notes, “The most important thing is that Union Film emphasized that evil will not triumph over virtue. No matter how powerful the adversary, no matter how diabolic their intentions, evil is eventually defeated. Virtue is never alone, for it always has a neighbor who will encourage the upright person.”²⁰ In this case, Golden Swallow’s ally appears as a disguised beggar who is willing to offer his

²⁰ See Lin, Wenchi, “From Wuxia Legend to National Allegory: Comparison of Narratives in Come Drink with Me versus Dragon Inn.”

assistance. Since the beggar/kung fu master does not want to reveal his identity deep within enemy territory, he sings a song within the tea house for all to hear, yet he sprinkles his verses with clues that convey secret information only an ally, such as Golden Swallow, can understand.

Golden Swallow later uncovers the meaning of the mysterious tavern song performed by the beggar once she returns to the privacy of her own room. Namely, she learns that her kidnapped brother is entrapped within a temple. At the end of the film, the beggar creates a plan which he reveals to Golden Swallow. Yet Hu does not allow the audience to hear the beggar's delivery of his plans so that the audience must wait in suspense until the film's final showdown in order to see if it is successful or not. As expected, Golden Swallow's victory would have been impossible without her strategic partnership.

Table 2: The “Paradoxical Relationship” in *Come Drink with Me*



Come Drink with Me: A “Philosophical Situation”

Dragon Inn

However, *Come Drink with Me* and Hu’s follow-up success *Dragon Inn* do not simply present a mirror-reflection of the Cold War social context, rather Hu’s films omit dominant ideas, change the parameters of the discussion, and produce original content.²¹ One apparent contradiction between the film and its historical context is evident in the way the exception to the paradoxical relationship in the film, namely the way a strategic alliance ensures that the desire for revenge and justice is satisfied, appeals at its core to desire and wish fulfillment. In other words, the artistry and choreography of *Come Drink with Me* “bribes” the audience with aesthetic pleasure (as Freud writes), or one could say the film presents a “strategy of containment” (as Jameson argues) which serves to manage the social and historical anxiety by

²¹ Clint Burnham, *Fredric Jameson and the Wolf of Wall Street* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 46.

presenting a solution to conflict on the screen which in reality was difficult to realize.²²

King Hu's contributions to the martial arts film genre are inextricably linked to this discussion. On the one hand, the genre film entails a kind of contractual obligation, as Clint Burnham has written, an unspoken agreement, or social contract between filmmaker and audience associated with certain expectations. On the other hand, Hu's films fit into the historical lineage of the martial arts genre as variations on the imaginary *jianghu* (literally "rivers and lakes") world within the context of China's dynastic history. As a director and artist King Hu had his finger on the pulse of what would appeal to his audience aesthetically, and at the same time he thoroughly researched history. Consider the emphasis on the tea house, or isolated inn, in both *Come Drink With Me* and *Dragon Inn*. According to Stephen Teo, "the traditional Chinese tavern [serves] as a microcosm of the imaginary and the real."²³ In the case of *Dragon Inn*, it is the location where noble heroes defend the honor of an executed military official by saving the lives of his orphaned children.²⁴ While the adversaries' fortress is formidable, *Dragon Inn* is small and isolated. So, it is not difficult to suppose, by the extension, that the imaginary *Dragon Inn* stands in for the real Taiwan, a commonplace reading in numerous analyses of the film.

Interestingly, when I had the opportunity to ask the actor who plays the hero of the film, Shi Juan, if he thought of the film as being a metaphor for the

²² See Burnham for the references to Norman Holland, Sigmund Freud, and Frederic Jameson. Clint Burnham, *Fredric Jameson and the Wolf of Wall Street*, 25, 26, 137.

²³ Stephen Teo, "King Hu," accessed February 3, 2018, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/great-directors/hu/>.

²⁴ Thus bringing to mind Wu Zhuoliu's 1946 novel *Orphan of Asia*.

Taiwan and China situation, he responded, “No, Director Hu did not have this idea in mind at all when he made the film.”²⁵ Still, an allegorical reading allows for interesting insights into concurrent Cold War politics. For example, spies are sent on secret missions, the identity and purpose of and mission of government officials is cloaked in subterfuge, and the specter of betrayal permeates the film’s atmosphere. Multiple confrontations in close quarters create tensions between characters who advocate polarizing positions; they speak to one another, waiting for the other to make the first move or the first mistake.



Figure 2: Villains exit a magnificent fortress.

²⁵ Interview with Shi Juan, August 26, 2008.

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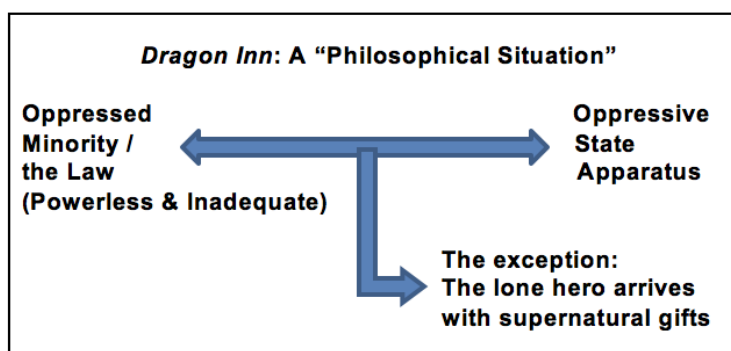
Figure 3: The isolated Dragon Inn.

Meanwhile, the fantasy of the film is all too evident as well: saviors arrive out of nowhere to support the cause of the orphaned children, and the protagonist—a wandering vagabond named Xiao Shaozi—can see through the enemy's schemes while demonstrating superhuman intellectual and martial arts abilities. Additionally, the film's use of humor provides welcome release of pent up anxiety. Hu's comedic wit is particularly prevalent in a scene in which a heroine prevents her comrade from drinking poisoned wine—without letting the adversaries know that she knows the wine is poisoned—rendering a suspenseful predicament to be one imbued with comic relief.

While the participants in the narrative of *Dragon Inn* differ from those in *Come Drink with Me*, the philosophical situation of *Dragon Inn* arguably presents a similar paradox: both choices presented to the protagonists are untenable. The exception to the paradoxical situation arrives in the form of a hero imbued with uncanny martial arts abilities. Moreover, Xiao Shaozi, like the lone hero in Hollywood western films produced during the Cold War, uses violence to defeat his adversaries. Since the hero's use of violence functions in contradiction to the implementation of justice and the law valued by the oppressed minority, the lone warrior must depart, riding off into the sunset at

the film's resolution like his western counterparts, after law has been restored.²⁶

Table 3: The "Paradoxical Relationship" in *Dragon Inn*



Dragon Inn: A "Philosophical Situation"

A Touch of Zen

A Touch of Zen, is much darker than his previous two films, arguably depicting apocalyptic anxiety in a more pronounced manner than any of King Hu's work. If Peter Brooks is correct when he claims that audience desire to invest in narrative trajectories may be due in part to conscious and unconscious associations between *eros* and fictional characters, this may explain the appeal of *Come Drink With Me* and *Dragon Inn*. However, Brooks' corollary claim that the death drive, or *thanatos*, the desire for resolution, also propels audience interest may be more appropriate for *A Touch of Zen*, for the ultimate goal of the characters in the film is the "serenity of closure." Brooks writes, "All narrative may be in essence obituary in that

²⁶ Again, I am entirely indebted to Badiou's reading of Hollywood westerns to make this conclusion.

[...] the retrospective knowledge that it seeks, the knowledge that comes after, stands on the far side of the end, in human terms on the far side of death.” Furthermore, “The desire of the text is hence the desire for the end, but desire for the end reached only through the at least minimally complicated detour, the intentional deviance, in tension, which is the plot of narrative.”²⁷

A Touch of Zen eschews the tea house and inn for the wide-open spaces of nature in a post-apocalyptic world in which the protagonist tries to make sense of his reality. I argue that the presentation of violence in *A Touch of Zen* is at once a projection of an imagined nuclear conflict in the future, while at the same time it recollects historical memories, as violence was “fresh in the conscious experience” for those who experienced the Second Sino-Japanese war.²⁸ Michael Baskett’s work on Japanese cinema in the context of the Cold War reveals that depictions of nuclear terror exploited fear of a nuclear catastrophe by using the aesthetics of destruction and the imagination of disaster. Interestingly, such references also are entirely relevant to our understanding of disaster films made throughout Asia today.

King Hu aestheticized his depictions of destruction, both in terms of memory of the past and projections for the future, perhaps most clearly in the film’s “haunted estate” scenes. The iconography of the scenes connotes both historical traumas and visions of a Cold War nuclear holocaust.

²⁷ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, 95, 104.

²⁸ Michael Baskett SCMS Conference presentation: “Terminally Entertaining: Japanese Cold War Nuclear Holocaust” (Conference Presentation, Society for Cinema and Media Studies, Seattle, 2014).



Figure 4: Wreckage evoking the catastrophe of war.

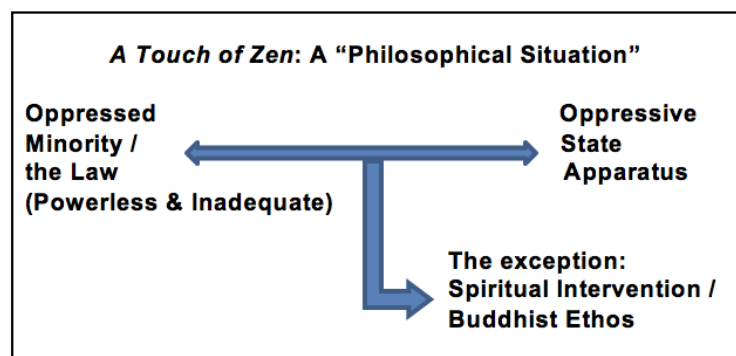
Thus, the legendary bamboo forest scene within *A Touch of Zen*, famously re-articulated by Ang Lee in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, is not only a crucial fight scene in terms of narrative structure and kung fu action, but perhaps more importantly, it reveals that the tragedies of violence displayed in urban centers permeates even the furthest reach of rural spaces as well. At the same time, nature retains the potential in the film to be a site of harmony in contrast to the terrors enacted by civilization, so long as human endeavors and spiritual realities coexist in a peaceful balance.

Spiritual unity in the film is projected within a Buddhist framework. According to the logic of the film, the vast scale and scope of human endeavors are, from another point of view, a miniscule aspect within an expansive universe. Consider that the protagonist, portrayed Shi Juan, is watched from on high by those who exist in accordance with Buddhism, thus ensuring his safety even though he is not aware of their presence.²⁹ In addition, the Buddha's teaching offers an alternative to suffering caused by

²⁹ Stephen Teo, "King Hu." Buddhism in King Hu's film is at the intersection of the spiritual and the material; "both fantasy and reality". See Teo's excellent article.

desire; thus, the tension of the film can be seen an additional context: the desire for narrative pleasure (*eros*) and closure (*thanatos*) is ultimately overturned by a Buddhist worldview which propounds the Four Noble Truths and the negation of suffering. At the resolution of *A Touch of Zen*, King Hu presents some of his most ambitious and experimental techniques which work in conjunction with his films as philosophical situation, highlighting the importance of individual, spiritual enlightenment as protagonists engage with a collective crisis.

Table 4: The "Paradoxical Relationship" in *A Touch of Zen*



A Touch of Zen: A "Philosophical Situation"

The Valiant Ones

The philosophical situation in King Hu's martial arts films have been presented in this paper on two levels. The first level involves an immanent critique of King Hu's films, which is to recognize the internal features and paradoxical situations within each narrative. Arguably, each of the films portray variations on an important theme in works of King Hu during the Cold War, namely the distance between an oppressive state apparatus and an

oppressed minority adhering to the rule of law which is powerless and inadequate. The second level is a symptomatic reading of the films, which is to arrive at a social critique embedded in the film by noting the contradictions between the film's philosophical situation and the historical context. The symptomatic reading locates contradictions between film and periodization, moments when political situations limit what a film can convey, or where the film breaks down by stumbling over its own inconsistencies.³⁰ For example, the "voice of god" narration at the introduction of *Dragon Inn* reveals a slippage as it almost comically over-simplifies the historical complexity of the moment the film purports to represent, rendering it accessible and intelligible for mainstream audiences.

A symptomatic reading also demonstrates the ways Hu's films "manage" the audience's psychic investments by covering up or repressing historical reality.³¹ Perhaps no other film by King Hu attempts to overtly manage its audience's psychic investments than *The Valiant Ones* (King Hu, 1975), which may explain its relative lack of success when compared to positive audience responses to the previous three films outlined above. Produced by King Hu's film company and distributed by Golden Harvest, the film reverses the parameters of the philosophical situation of his previous films by portraying Ming Dynasty seaports attacked by marauding pirates and Japanese invaders. While Hu retains the fantasy of an enclave of heroic swordfighters surrounded by intruders, the reversal is located in the way that the standing government in power defends the law in an upright manner. In such a way, the

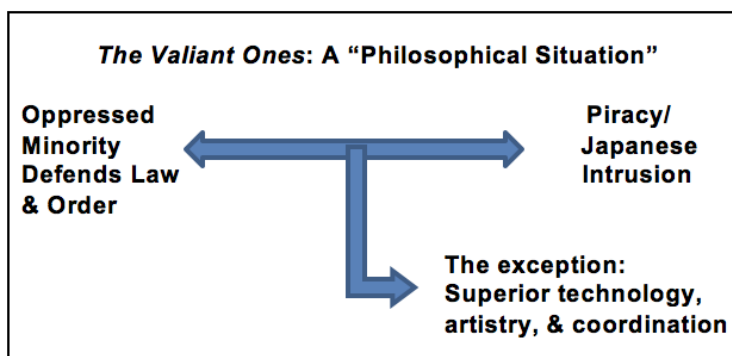
³⁰ Clint Burnham, *Fredric Jameson and the Wolf of Wall Street*, 47. These concepts and ideas are used directly from Burnham's excellent text.

³¹ Clint Burnham, *Fredric Jameson and the Wolf of Wall Street*, 145.

film conforms to the pattern of multiple anti-Japanese war films produced in Taiwan during the 1970s in which a strong KMT Nationalist government withstands Japanese aggression on the silver screen while the Nationalist government's prestige was waning on the global stage.

Shot in Taiwan, *The Valiant Ones* conflict centers around protecting resources and money under the threat of piracy. Sustaining national wealth within the narrative is coupled with the fear of internal corruption and the threat of spies, echoing both corollary Cold War economic objectives and the theme of multiple spy thrillers of the era. The government's use of technology, artistry, and the assistance of *wuxia* masters in the film ensures that the invaders are met with defeat despite the fact that residents in the government's remote outposts are outnumbered by their adversaries. Just as the major global participants meted out injunctions from various metropolises during the Cold War, *The Valiant Ones* portrays politicians in the capital as they make determinations which affect locals in distant regions. The simplistic storyline pits the film's noble combatants who (once again) must fend off a formidable enemy that possesses both a seemingly unstoppable weapon and its corollary weakness that might be exploited. To do so, the Ming Dynasty heroes couple art and military strategy in order to communicate their tactics. For example, a flute player in the trees signals to his compatriots on the ground who, in turn, move black and white pieces on a Go game board to choreograph their moves which co-aligns both the visual imagery and the philosophical situation.

Table 5: The “Paradoxical Relationship” in *The Valiant Ones*



The Valiant Ones: A “Philosophical Situation”

Reality and Fantasy during the Cold War

Describing King Hu’s notable films as philosophical situations within a Cold War context, among a number of other advantages, might enable us to see why these films were so popular at the time. Just as the *Dragon Inn* withstood pressure yet remained standing, Hu’s historical narratives actualized China’s “past in symbolic form, so that it could be replayed to a more successful outcome” during the Cold War era.³² For example, in *The Valiant Ones*, the protagonists follow a series of jewels on a forgotten path until they locate a storehouse of treasure—if only it were so easy. Additionally, like blockbuster apocalyptic films today, Hu’s films contain few participants, so that wide-scale conflict is understandable, and narrative resolutions seem to occur ideally for our protagonists who achieve victory despite the odds. But the end was not the only appeal, but also the means. Hu’s entertaining,

³² Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, 235.

spectacular films evoked pity, laughter, awe, wonder, fear, tension, unity, possibility—a full range of structures of feeling along the way.

Four initial conclusions and speculations come to mind. First, I would categorize the resolution to both *Come Drink with Me* and *Dragon Inn* as portraying “natural solutions;” namely, locating strategic alliances to achieve a semblance of order within a chaotic world. In terms of Hu's career, *Come Drink with Me* was his success in Hong Kong before transplanting to Taiwan, where he directed *Dragon Inn*. So, it appears that he used a successful strategy twice during this transitional point in his career. It is no wonder that he would rely on this pattern in both locales because it was already familiar to him. Moreover, although Hong Kong and Taiwan experienced vastly different colonial backgrounds, they shared a similar position concurrently in the Cold War in terms of their alliance to the “free world” so the strategy could work in both places. Second, the fact that Hu's follow-up film, *A Touch of Zen*, abandons the so-called “natural” solution in favor of divine intervention requires further consideration. Was the situation in Taiwan so hopeless that a material solution was simply beyond human comprehension, among other possibilities?

Third, the intersection of violence studies and the conflicts presented on screen deserve further inquiry. Hu cathartically breaks the psychological tension in the region during the Cold War by repeatedly displaying hot wars on the screen, from minor showdowns to more broad scale military maneuvers. Considering the secrecy of diplomacy during the era, at times it was only on the screen that violent encounters between a few participants were actually portrayed, as such events were withheld from mainstream publications and news outlets. Fourth, in addition to external conflicts, internal pacification was a violent enterprise in the post-colonial environment of

Taiwan during the 1960s. Thus, the threat of an oppressive state apparatus directly implicates the KMT Nationalist government in addition to metaphorically representing external national threats such as that of Mainland China. What happens if we read the isolated inn in *Dragon Gate Inn* as an enclave within Taiwan itself, a site where local Taiwanese individuals protect their ideals from yet another invading presence? Of course, reading these films psychoanalytically, the fears and fantasies presented in this essay as simple binaries deliberately offer only one among many possible readings of these films. From the basic philosophical situations outlined here, we can and should move into issues surrounding the complexities of race, gender, and class relationships.

Certainly, each of Hu's films described in this essay all end quite abruptly after the most tenuous of resolutions to the paradoxical situations have been achieved. It is as if, within this parallel universe that all four of his films seem to exist within, it is simply impossible to imagine long-term outcomes after temporary stopgap measures have been employed. This is where I believe that we step in. Perhaps the achievement of long standing peace is left open, in Hu's films, for a different set of ideas imagined by those who have the advantage of historical hindsight; namely, our imaginations as we contemplate the philosophical situations revealed in Taiwan cinema today.

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冷戰時期的銀幕熱戰： 胡金銓武俠片中的哲學情境

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摘 要

胡金銓（1932-1997）的武俠片《龍門客棧》（胡金銓，1967）在臺北破紀錄上映了 65 天，超越當時國內和國外的進口片，賺進了四百五十萬元臺幣，且在香港和東南亞都打破賣座紀錄。導演張徹的著名功夫片《獨臂刀》（張徹，1967）也同時在戲院上映，更加強化了這個類型的影響和吸引力。本文將胡金銓著名的電影放在冷戰的社會政治和歷史脈絡下，而不全放在武俠傳統中討論，希望拋磚引玉，藉由胡金銓電影中的哲學情境檢視其作品的精彩之處以及受歡迎的原因。一如當今的賣座鉅片，胡金銓的電影展現坦率、平易近人的敘事，但亦充滿緊湊宏偉的動作片段。透過這些以及其他的設計，胡金銓電影中所刻畫的災難巧妙映射出銀幕外的冷戰衝突。因此，胡金銓並非只是重新想像與活化武俠傳統，而是捕捉冷戰時期的想像，讓恐懼和幻想都變得顯著而具體。

關鍵詞：胡金銓、臺灣電影、冷戰、電影與哲學

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