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FROM THE GILDED GHETTO TO HOLLYWOOD: BRUCE LEE, KUNG FU, AND THE EVOLUTION OF CHINESE AMERICA

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FROM THE GILDED GHETTO TO HOLLYWOOD: BRUCE LEE, KUNG FU, AND
THE EVOLUTION OF CHINESE AMERICA

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
History

by
Darcy Anne Robards Coover
December 2008

Accepted by:
Dr. Abel A. Bartley, Committee Chair
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Dr. Edwin E. Moise

ABSTRACT

As has been true for most groups of immigrants arriving in the United States, the Chinese have undergone a wide-ranging, and at times rapid, transformation in the eyes of mainstream America. No other ethnic or racial group in American history has been so singled out for immigration regulation as have the Chinese—the Exclusion Act, passed in 1882, still represents the only time that a particular ethnic group was selected for immigration restriction. While an analysis of the legal history of the era reveals the various restrictions faced by Chinese immigrants in terms of the state, a look at American popular culture paints an even more vivid picture of the Chinese American experience. The treatment of Chinese in pop culture—particularly in visual media such as political cartoons, film, and television series—illustrates their ever-changing role in American society and culture.

In the 1960s, Chinese kung fu virtually exploded onto the American pop culture scene; kung fu television series and movies enjoyed huge commercial and popular success from 1966 to roughly 1974, and Bruce Lee was arguably the most important figure in the genre. Lee, an American-born Hong Kong Chinese, provided one of the first images of a strong, capable Chinese man that Americans saw, both in terms of his onscreen roles and in his off-screen life. However, there has been no truly academic study of Bruce Lee, nothing substantive to place his life and his short career in a broader historical context. The purpose of this thesis, then, is to address Lee's role as the first true Chinese American pop culture hero, and to analyze the interaction between that role and the changing identity of Chinese Americans.

DEDICATION

For my parents, whose loving support has allowed me the fleeting joy of life as an unemployed writer.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1820, the first Chinese immigrants on official record made their way to the United States mainland. There are unsubstantiated accounts of Chinese in lower California—presumably brought across the Pacific by Spanish traders—as early as the late sixteenth century, as well as claims of a single Chinese living in New York City in 1807; however, the 1820 date is generally accepted as the first solidly documented. In any case, very few Chinese faces could be found in America before 1850. With the discovery of gold in California, the Chinese immigrant population exploded, increasing from roughly fifty in 1849 to four thousand in 1850, to six times that by the end of 1851. Given the political climate in China at the time, it is unsurprising that so many Chinese, particularly poor Chinese, would choose to leave their native land for the fabled Gold Mountain, a place where—according to those who had gone before—they could find prosperity and fortune.

As has been true for most groups of immigrants arriving in the United States, the Chinese have undergone a wide-ranging, and at times rapid, transformation in the eyes of mainstream America. The immigrants who initially arrived in California on the heels of the Gold Rush were welcomed as a source of inexpensive labor. The thousands of Chinese immigrants who worked on the Transcontinental Railroad were initially tolerated, if never truly embraced. However, with the completion of the railroad and the petering out of the Gold Rush, the Chinese who had made the journey to the United States (most of whom never found the promised fortune) found themselves the objects of

xenophobic mistrust, hostility, and at times outright violence. While this, too, is a story common to most immigrant groups, no other ethnic or racial group in American history has been so singled out for immigration regulation as have the Chinese. By the late nineteenth century, American public opinion of the Chinese as a group was driven so low that anti-Chinese legislation was the norm in many states, particularly in the west. The Exclusion Act, passed in 1882, still represents the only time that a particular ethnic group was singled out for immigration restriction, but state-level legislation also included restrictions on employment, residency, property ownership, and so on.

While an analysis of the legal history of the era reveals the various restrictions faced by Chinese immigrants in terms of the state, a look at American popular culture paints an even more vivid picture of the Chinese American experience. The treatment of Chinese in pop culture—particularly in visual media such as political cartoons, film, and television series—illustrates an ever-changing role in American society and culture. The earliest American representations of Chinese and Chinese Americans portrayed them as servile, effeminate, and exotic in an insidious way. The most common image until well into the twentieth century was arguably that of the Chinaman laborer—the coolie with his queue, Chinese "pajamas," broad-brimmed straw hat, and pole and buckets. This particular brand of Orientalism was pushed to the back burner during World War II, when the Chinese suddenly became an ally, but anti-Chinese sentiments did not die in America. In fact, Cold War anti-Communist sentiments fueled a new wave of hostility against Chinese in the United States, even those who were American citizens. What Christina Klein calls "Cold War Orientalism" took the place of the traditional image of

the Chinese coolie in the decades after the war, but this new picture was joined by one of the Chinese American as the Model Minority. While mainstream American views of Chinese Americans became less virulently hostile in the 1960s and '70s, they also became more complex.

What undoubtedly complicated the matter was the fact that Chinese Americans themselves struggled to find their own group identity within American society. Young Americans of Chinese descent—whether first-generation or descended from less recent immigrant ancestors—began to explore what they saw as a uniquely Chinese American experience in the late 1960s. Writer Frank Chin, one of the most prominent voices of the so-called Chinese American Movement, made the case for a new and distinct sociocultural identity, something neither American nor Chinese. Chin and others had to struggle with creating this identity as something unique in American society while still fighting against the intolerance suffered by Chinese Americans up to that point.

In this climate of change, concurrent with the youth-led protest movements of the Vietnam Era, one of the most striking images of Asian culture that Americans saw was that of the martial arts master. Chinese kung fu, in particular, virtually exploded onto the American pop culture scene; kung fu television series and movies enjoyed huge commercial and popular success from 1966 to roughly 1974, and Bruce Lee was arguably the most important figure in the genre. Lee, an American-born Hong Kong Chinese, provided one of the first images of a strong, capable Chinese man that Americans saw, both in terms of his onscreen roles and in his off-screen life. Despite the cult of personality that emerged around Lee, however, there has been little academic analysis of

his films and his life in the context of the Chinese American Movement of the era, though his films have been approached from a number of different angles, with several arguments leveled about their nature and import. Jachinson Chan, for example, argues that Bruce Lee's films emerged out of and in response to his marginalization by the American film industry, and that the interpretation of Lee as a sexual object in mainstream American culture has led to the further marginalization of Chinese American masculinity. Amy Abugo Ongiri's interest in Lee centers on the interception of the kung fu genre and the Blaxploitation genre of the 1970s and 1980s. Stephen Teo analyzes Bruce Lee and Hong Kong action cinema in general from the perspective of the post-World War II Chinese diaspora.

Despite these offerings, the body of academic work pertaining to Bruce Lee is still incomplete. Lee biographers have tended to be fans or, in the case of Robert Clouse and John Little, personal acquaintances of the star himself. There has been no truly academic study of Bruce Lee, nothing substantive to place his life and his short career in a broader historical context. The purpose of this thesis, then, is to address Lee's role as the first true Chinese American pop culture hero, and to analyze the interaction between that role and the changing identity of Chinese Americans. It will be an attempt to place Bruce Lee and the early popularity of the kung fu genre into the historical context of the Cold War and the era of the Yellow Peril, and to study Lee's appeal to both Chinese and non-Chinese Americans and the ways it reflected and sometimes changed mainstream American views of their Chinese-descended countrymen

The first chapter will essentially provide a narrative summary of the Chinese American experience through World War II, with particular attention to the twentieth century, and to mainstream America's reception of Chinese immigrants throughout this period. The major anti-Chinese legislation of the era will be outlined, as will some of the more virulent anti-Chinese movements, as it is useful to note the ways that the law influenced or was influenced by the prejudices and misconceptions of the people who came into contact with Chinese immigrants. Attention will also be paid to the popular images of Chinese and Chinese Americans that emerged throughout the decades, from the crude image of the coolie laborer often found in nineteenth century political cartoons to the graceful image of Anna May Wong, one of the first recognizable Chinese American movie stars.

The second chapter will address ways that the Chinese experience in America changed with the end of the Exclusion Era and the coming of the Cold War. Bruce Lee and his films will be analyzed in this context from a specifically Chinese American viewpoint; this was a diasporic community in the United States, not fully integrated, and Bruce Lee was more to them than a simple action star, and held different meaning than to non-Chinese Americans. Stephen Teo's analysis is that Lee represented a kind of apolitical nationalism for diasporic Chinese worldwide, that he provided a way for them to express pride in their cultural traditions without having to pledge loyalty to a communist (or any other) government. While this is an incredibly insightful treatment of the topic, Teo's argument is brief (a single chapter in a larger work about Hong Kong cinema in general), and also focuses mainly on Hong Kong Chinese. Here it will be paid

more attention, and will be reinterpreted from the perspective of the unique position of the Chinese American Movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Having analyzed the role of Lee in the development of Chinese American self-identity, the third chapter will then focus on Lee's role in the social consciousness of mainstream America. In particular, attention will be paid to white American attitudes about Asian Americans in the wake of the Cold War and the Civil Rights movement, and to how these attitudes may have been altered by the popularity of Lee's films—for better or for worse. Furthermore, although Lee's popularity with African Americans truly merits its own study, it is nonetheless an important phenomenon in the context of Lee's appeal to non-Chinese. The chapter will also address Lee's popularity with youth and urban audiences. Overall, this chapter will attempt to demonstrate that non-Chinese (particularly white) audiences tended to see Lee as merely an action star or a sex symbol—and occasionally a philosopher—but that they rarely understood the greater importance his career may have had in terms of the Chinese American community. Lee, therefore, was situated at the beginning of mainstream American acceptance of Chinese Americans, rather than at the pinnacle.

Lastly, the fourth chapter is an analysis of the mixed legacy of Bruce Lee, particularly in terms of the role of Chinese Americans (and, more generally, Asian Americans) in modern popular culture. The history of the kung fu/martial arts genre after Lee's untimely death will be briefly overviewed, as a means of exploring the effect Lee had on both the film genre and on successive stars' ability to succeed in it. The chapter will conclude with an analysis of the stereotypes about Chinese Americans that still exist

in mainstream American popular culture, and of the struggle for Chinese American actors to provide new images that counter these lasting stereotypes and to move past the legacy left by Bruce Lee.

CHAPTER ONE

UPON GOLD MOUNTAIN

The Chinese constitute one of America's most dynamic ethnic groups, with a complicated legal and social history in the United States. As has every new group of immigrants, they have faced prejudice and been stereotyped by mainstream Americans, often viewed as coolies and tong gangsters or as model minorities. Moreover, Asian Americans, and particularly the Chinese, have borne a great deal of legal discrimination, more so than most European immigrants. Though they came to America because of many of the same push-pull factors as other groups, the Chinese have a unique place in the country's history and therefore in its popular culture.

Chinese immigrants first traveled to the United States in large numbers during the Gold Rush years, making their way to California—the Gold Mountain (*Gum Shan* in Cantonese). At first hailed as industrious workers who could help fill labor shortages on the West coast, particularly with the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, they quickly became the mistrusted objects of racial intolerance, with mainstream popular attitudes toward them patronizing at best and hostile at worst. The Chinese did not experience any real change in status, legal or otherwise, until World War II. Overnight, with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, China became an ally and Chinese Americans supplanted the Japanese as the preferred Asian. *Time* magazine printed a short article in

1941 entitled "HOW TO TELL YOUR FRIENDS FROM THE JAPS."¹ The Chinese, seemingly, had moved up.

However, this ostensible new acceptance was little more than a thin veneer covering the same racial intolerance. As evidenced by *Time*, many Americans could not, nor did they care to try to, tell the difference between Chinese and other Asians. Many more simply transmuted their outright hostility into a more subtle Orientalism. The paternalistic view of a less civilized culture in need of conversion and democratization is readily apparent in Henry Luce's description of the American Century. With the coming of the Cold War, one can almost imagine the sense of relief some white Americans must have felt—no longer would they have to pretend the alien was a friend. The greatest steps forward for the Chinese American community would have to wait until the 1960s and '70s.

Historically labeled the Exclusion Era, the period of immigration restriction from 1882 to 1943 is also sometimes known to Chinese Americans as the Silent Decades. While it is true that anti-Chinese sentiments of these decades marginalized Chinese Americans and silenced many voices, it is also true that many more personal accounts survive from the Exclusion Era than from the earlier Gold Rush years. As it did among the general population after the turn of the century, literacy increased among Chinese who remained in the United States, and their stories have been preserved in the form of letters, diaries, and other written sources. Though they may have been politically and

¹ "HOW TO TELL YOUR FRIENDS FROM THE JAPS." *Time*, December 22, 1941, 33.

socially silenced, these stories are a testament to the strength and dynamism of the Chinese who made their permanent homes in American cities.

Further, while conditions did not improve for Chinese Americans until World War II, this era of discrimination did serve as a sort of crucible from which a stronger Chinese American community emerged. Chinese Americans did not silently endure discrimination and intolerance; as Peter Kwong, Dusanka Miscevic, Iris Chang, and other historians have pointed out again and again, those Chinese who remained in the United States fought against their circumstances by a number of means. Through the establishment of successful businesses, merchants and clerks fought the intolerance that had forced many Chinese out of their railroad jobs and off of the western ranches in the late nineteenth century. Though Chinese immigrants were denied political rights, their American-born children were not. Increasingly, Chinese Americans were able to take part in the political process. Since, under the Exclusion Act, only exempt-class Chinese, the elite immigrants, were allowed to bring their wives to the United States, the second generation of Chinese Americans was mostly middle class—at least, they had been in China.² They were literate, educated, usually fluent in English, but still faced virulent racial prejudice in the United States, and were often limited to the same low-paying jobs to which their predecessors had had access, despite their education levels. Though the higher education level of the second generation sometimes served to create a cultural divide between them and the previous generation, both groups found ways to blend their

² Judy Yung, Gordon H. Chang, Him Mark Lai, eds. *Chinese American Voices from the Gold Rush to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 106

Chinese and American heritages together, creating a strong bicultural tradition that persists to this day.

Chinatown itself was changing in the early decades of the twentieth century. The neighborhoods, described as "gilded ghettos" by Ronald Takaki, evolved from tiny colonies of segregated Chinese laundrymen to metropolitan communities that "developed a different character and purpose from the initial nineteenth-century Chinatowns. They... became residential communities for families, Chinese economic enclaves, and tourist centers."³ Takaki describes an urban quarter that was a curious mixture of old and new, one which provided a refuge for educated Chinese who could not always find high-level employment in the outside world, a setting that must have been both comforting and restricting.

Additionally, as Takaki points out, Chinatown, particularly San Francisco's, both confirmed negative mainstream views of the Chinese and also buoyed the Orientalist view of the Chinese as exotic and mysterious. Popular imagination had made Chinatown the home of opium dens, brothels full of unseemly oriental attractions, gambling houses, and any manner of other vices. After the great fire caused by the 1906 earthquake, however, San Francisco's Chinatown was completely rebuilt, and the community's Six Companies—the six that controlled most Chinese American business in San Francisco—deliberately promoted the community as a tourist destination. In 1917, the *San Francisco Chronicle* described the "Oriental Quarter" as newly-renovated and modern, safe for white visitors, and still possessing its charm and quaintness, while a campaign by the San

³ Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 245.

Francisco Chamber of Commerce called it "the chief jewel in San Francisco's starry diadem of tourist attractions."⁴ New York's Chinatown, too, became a tourist destination in the 1920s, and hired guides would take white Americans on walking tours through the neighborhood.

Beneath the gilded veneer, of course, Chinatowns were real living and working communities. By 1920, forty percent of the Chinese in the United States lived in either New York's or San Francisco's Chinatown, and there they could enjoy "a warmer, freer, and more human life" than they could outside of these enclaves. Though a number of churches were founded by white missionary groups, particularly in San Francisco's Chinatown, the community was also home to Chinese temples, as well as to Chinese theaters, herb shops, groceries, barbershops, and language schools for Chinese American children. Despite the restrictions of the Exclusion Act, the Chinese American population slowly grew, and as a new generation of children was born, Chinatown became home to families, as old bachelor pads were repurposed as family apartments.⁵

The role of the Chinese in American society began to change in other ways. China itself was undergoing a great deal of upheaval in the early twentieth century. The business elite of Shanghai, angered by the treatment of Chinese immigrants at San Francisco's Angel Island detention center, as well as along the rest of the Pacific coast, instituted a boycott of American goods beginning in 1905. President Theodore Roosevelt, in a direct response to the boycott, "publicly condemned the abuses in the way the exclusion laws were administered and issued an executive order to 'put a stop to the

⁴ Takaki, 248.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 254.

barbarous methods of the Immigration Bureau."⁶ The boycott also encouraged the growth of pro-China nationalism on the part of Chinese Americans, leading to the publication of dozens of Chinese-language newspapers and newsletters.

With the death of the Qing Emperor in 1908, Chinese American support shifted to the Revolutionary Alliance of Dr. Sun Yat-sen. When the new republic was established in 1911, it was a moment of celebration for Chinese Americans. For a community of people who had for two decades attempted to feel their way toward a bicultural balance, the blend of Western and Eastern ideals in Sun's Three People's Principles must have provided almost a sense of relief. Even after Yuan Shikai's dissolution of the Kuomintang, the Nationalist Party, and attempted reinstatement of the monarchy in 1915, overseas Chinese, particularly Chinese Americans, remained supportive of Sun Yat-sen, and later of Chiang Kai-shek. In the face of increasingly aggressive Japanese imperialism, Chinese American pro-China nationalism increased, and so, gradually, did Western sympathies.⁷

Chinese national politics were not the only factor that began to alter mainstream American views of the Chinese. American missionaries returned to the United States and offered new interpretations of China to white Americans. Pearl S. Buck, in particular, shaped American opinions with her 1931 Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Good Earth*. The novel was immensely popular, as were the Broadway play and the Hollywood film based upon it. Buck "made Chinese people feel real for the first time to millions of Americans,"

⁶ Peter Kwong and Dusanka Miscevic. *Chinese America: The Untold Story of America's Oldest New Community* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 161.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

endowing them "with admirable attributes of hard work, strength, and perseverance in the face of the most severe adversities."⁸ Importantly, the book's publication coincided with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, and, as Kwong and Miscevic point out, the novel "accomplished a feat that could hardly be matched by any propaganda—it humanized the people who became Japan's principal victims and brought out full-scale American sympathy for the Chinese."⁹

Of course, the place of Chinese Americans in popular media was not revolutionized overnight. Anna May Wong, a popular Chinese American actress of the 1930s, made over sixty films, but was nearly always typecast as the stereotypical Chinese mistress or other negative roles. "The more deeply I studied," she wrote in 1934, "the more did my Chinese blood call to me."¹⁰ Nevertheless, Wong was turned down for the starring role of O-lan in *The Good Earth* and was offered instead the part of the concubine Lotus. When she returned to her parents' native China in the mid-1930s, she found herself criticized for the roles she had taken, though she had certainly helped to make Chinese more visible to an American audience. The individuals she portrayed largely enforced mainstream American stereotypes about exotic Orientals and servile coolies. Despite the interceding decades, in 1966, Bruce Lee would initially object to the role of Kato offered to him in *The Green Hornet*, complaining that he was nothing more than just another Chinese houseboy.

⁸ Kwong and Miscevic, 196.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Yung, Chang, and Lai, 181.

Despite the growing popularity of Chinese characters in novels and films in the 1930s, and despite the growing sympathy of Americans for the plight of the Chinese, what truly provided Chinese Americans the opportunity to prove that the United States was their country too was the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The Chinese, who had frequently been mistaken for "Japs" in the past, became allies overnight. *Time's* helpful tips on telling "placid, kindly, and open" Chinese friends from "dogmatic, arrogant" Japs appeared just two weeks after the December 7 attack.¹¹ As Ronald Takaki describes, World War II gave Chinese Americans "the opportunity to get out of Chinatown, don army uniforms, and be sent overseas where they felt they were a part of the great patriotic United States war machine."¹² After decades of discrimination and mistreatment, during the height of which Chinese immigrants were virtually imprisoned on Angel Island while they underwent inspection, the United States could no longer afford to maintain the status quo when it came to its Chinese residents. Chinese Americans enlisted in great numbers, and, just as young white American boys did, often lied about their ages in an attempt to join the military before they were legally old enough to serve. On the home front, thousands left the laundries and restaurants to go to work in the booming war industry. Three hundred Chinese left their jobs in Los Angeles to help build the USS *China Victory*, and a hundred more left to work for Douglas, a manufacturer of attack planes and dive bombers. Furthermore, notes Takaki, Chinese made up 15 percent of the workforce in the shipyards of the San Francisco Bay area.¹³

¹¹ "HOW TO TELL YOUR FRIENDS FROM THE JAPS."

¹² Ronald Takaki, *Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 2000), 116.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Chinese American women, too, found work in the new economy, as well as opportunities in the Women's Army Corps. Soong May-ling, Madame Chiang Kai-shek, toured the United States in 1943, and was immensely popular with Americans. As Congress began to consider a repeal of the exclusion laws that same year, she helped lobby for the cause. In October, President Roosevelt wrote to Congress, urging the members to "be big enough to...correct a historic mistake and silence the distorted Japanese propaganda"¹⁴ by repealing the exclusionary measures and instituting an immigration quota. Just two decades earlier, the anti-Chinese movement had still roiled through American cities, but in the midst of war, Americans achieved what Takaki has coined a "double victory." They could not well ignore freedom and democracy on the homefront while fighting for them abroad. Whereas the 1881 *Wasp* cartoon, "A Statue for Our Harbor," had depicted Chinese as disease-ridden, vice-laden aliens¹⁵, propaganda posters put out in the 1940s by United China Relief pictured hard-faced, determined Chinese men and women who were fighting a common enemy. "China—" reads one such poster, "First to fight!"¹⁶

In January 1943, the United States signed a new treaty with China, one in which its extraterritorial rights were relinquished. In December the same year, Congress passed the Act to Repeal the Chinese Exclusion Acts, to Establish Quotas, and for Other Purposes. Though these measures certainly did not end discrimination against the Chinese in the United States, they did open the door to a new, more relaxed period in

¹⁴ Takaki, *Double Victory*, 119.

¹⁵ Erika Lee. *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 28.

¹⁶ T. Christopher Jespersen, *American Images of China 1931-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 44.

Chinese American history. The Chinese American community had, in sixty years, undergone a gradual evolution with an abrupt moment of change in World War II. By the end of the war in 1945, the American image of the Chinese had shifted away from that of the servile coolie laborer or the slant-eyed Oriental temptress, but, as the next several decades proved, no concrete new vision had emerged yet to replace these images. The Western Orientalist view of the Chinese persisted well into the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, colored by China's part in the Cold War, but would be challenged by the emergence of positive Chinese American roles in popular culture. With the rise of the major Hong Kong film production companies in the 1960s, new images would be provided to Americans both of Chinese and non-Chinese descent. One man in particular, born in San Francisco's Chinatown at the close of the Silent Decades, would provide a new voice for Chinese Americans.

CHAPTER TWO

ENTER TWO DRAGONS:

THE CHINESE AMERICAN MOVEMENT AND BRUCE LEE

In the years following World War II, the future seemed bright for Chinese Americans. The 1943 repeal of the Exclusion Act was a watershed event, marking the end of the Silent Decades and initially ushering in a relaxed, more optimistic period of Chinese American history. Many foreign-born Chinese, some of whom had entered the country illegally, were granted United States citizenship in return for their wartime military service. Whereas many Chinese immigrants had previously been legally barred from bringing their wives to America, in the post war era, the government modified the policy and allowed Chinese American veterans to send for their wives and children. Additionally, Chinese Americans made inroads into mainstream American labor unions, which had previously barred "Oriental" membership.

However, the decades following the war saw neither an automatic nor a complete integration of the Chinese into mainstream American society. The Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War and the declaration of the People's Republic of China in 1949 immediately undid the wartime gains in US-China relations, souring the situation for Chinese in the United States. Political events helped drive popular opinion. In three decades, the prevailing mainstream American image of Chinese Americans had shifted from reviled alien to brave ally, and finally to mistrusted Red.

Moreover, the postwar decades saw the children and grandchildren of the immigrants who had been sequestered and interrogated at Angel Island forced to forge a uniquely *Chinese American* self-identity. During the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, they attempted to incorporate both their American and Chinese cultural heritages into that identity, and to reconcile their dedication to their parents' native China with their loyalty to the United States—all the while battling popular images often tinged with racial and cultural prejudice. It is not surprising, then, that Chinese Americans would later gravitate toward the strong, confident figure of Bruce Lee. Lee appeared at a crucial moment, when Chinese Americans needed a hero. Lee's life and career gained the status of legend largely because of his sudden death at the age of thirty-two, and the perceived loss of a great potential associated with his death, but he arrived in the midst of the growing Chinese American Movement of the era, and provided an incredibly powerful image.

Despite the gains made with Chinese participation in the war and the repeal of the Exclusion Act, the fall of China to communism spurred fresh anti-Chinese sentiments in the United States. The role played by Communist China in the Korean War only added fuel to the growing anti-Chinese fire. Americans, increasingly caught up in the fury of McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare, frequently projected negative images onto the ethnic Chinese living in the United States. While supporters of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government were held up as virtuous, many Chinese, particularly progressive Chinese American students, were presumed to be subversives until proven otherwise.

Chinese Americans, particularly those living in the nation's Chinatowns, faced the issue of trying to preserve their devotion to their native Chinese culture without

appearing anti-American. Because their legal and social situation in the United States had not improved until recent years, Chinese immigrants and even American-born Chinese had retained sharp interest in and connections to China, and some understandably supported Mao's new communist government. There was still a strong working class in the urban centers, and now a growing youth and student culture, and many of these Chinese Americans were more inclined to support Mao than Chiang. As one San Francisco Chinatown resident, Franklin Woo, said, "By 1947 I gradually realized more and more the corruption and ineptness of the Nationalist government. I felt that it was crumbling, certainly China needed a change. At the time, the Communists were the only ones who could provide that kind of change."¹⁷

However, while there was no single, monolithic Chinese American opinion on Chinese sociopolitical events, community leaders—particularly in San Francisco's Chinatown—attempted to present a kind of united anti-Communist front to Middle America. As previously discussed, almost all of the Chinese who immigrated to the United States during the Silent Decades belonged to an exclusion-exempt class of elites: professors and other scholars, merchants, and officials made up the bulk of the immigrant population at the time. Thus, as the Chinese American population as a whole became more urban, it also tended to become more literate and more culturally middle-class, and it is only logical that many members of the community supported Chiang Kai-shek's less radical Nationalist movement in China. In addition, Soong May-ling (Madame Chiang) had become immensely popular even before her wartime tour of the nation, particularly

¹⁷ Victor G. and Brett de Bary Nee, eds. *Longtime Californ': A Documentary Study of an American Chinatown* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 214.

for her support of the repeal of the Exclusion Act; she and her husband were heroes to many Chinese Americans.¹⁸

Moreover, given the political climate of the age, supporting Chiang's Nationalist government-in-exile was simply a more prudent decision for Chinese Americans. The internment of Japanese Americans during the war was still fresh in the minds of many Chinese; according to Franklin Woo, "You had to make sure you didn't sound anti-American...The whole atmosphere [in Chinatown] then was fear. If you weren't careful, you could be thrown into a concentration camp."¹⁹ In an effort to assuage mainstream American fears of the new Yellow Peril, the Six Companies of San Francisco's Chinatown and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of New York's worked to establish anti-Communist organizations in America's Chinatowns, notably the Anti-Communist Committee for Free China, which, in 1951, denounced Communism as "antithetical to Chinese culture," and declared its ongoing loyalty to the United States and to Chiang's Nationalist government.²⁰

Despite their attempts, postwar immigration quotas reflected the anti-Asian racism that persisted in American society. The 1952 McCarran-Walter Act allowed only 105 Chinese immigrants per year, compared with the thousands allowed most European nations like Poland.²¹ Moreover, the McCarran Act also had provisions that allowed for the screening of immigrants for "subversive" political views and for the detention or deportation of those found to have Communist affiliations. The FBI and INS monitored

¹⁸ De Bary Nee, 213.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 216.

²⁰ Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 415.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 418.

leftist organizations in Chinatowns all over the nation, undermined publications sympathetic to the PRC (such as the *China Daily News*), and invaded the privacy of Chinatown residents. Even those Chinese Americans who did not necessarily support the PRC sometimes found themselves the subject of scrutiny. According to one historian, those who were involved in progressive Chinese organizations found their mail opened and their phones tapped, and their family members and friends occasionally interrogated.²² In 1956, after the US consul in Hong Kong, Everett Drumright, released a paper to the State Department alleging that most of the Chinese in the United States had entered illegally, the INS instituted the so-called Confession Program, by which Chinese Americans could come forward if their citizenship was fraudulent. Because confessing could also implicate relatives, many Chinese American families were torn over what to do.²³ Iris Chang notes that, of the thousands of Chinese who confessed in San Francisco alone, almost none were actually deported, but that the threat had a huge psychological impact on the community at large, one that lasted after the program was ended—in addition, according to the Six Companies, Chinatown businesses were suffering because of the stigma attached to being Chinese. "Whether intentional or otherwise," read a statement from the Companies, "[the investigations] are having the effect of stigmatizing the social and family status of a respected community with criminal coloration."²⁴ As Kwong and Mischevic write, "The only Chinese who benefited from the cold war, which

²² Iris Chang. *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* (New York: Viking, 2003), 250.

²³ Kwong and Mischevic, 224.

²⁴ "U.S. Inquiry Hurts Chinatown Trade," *New York Times*, March 17, 1956.

had such a devastating effect on the working-class Chinese American community, were the 'good Chinese'—the political refugees and the stranded scholars."²⁵

However, despite the discrimination, mistrust, and outright hostility they faced, Chinese Americans slowly improved their status in American society, and the mainstream view of them gradually began to change. Though Chinese immigration to the United States was still highly restricted, those Chinese who did arrive from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan tended overwhelmingly to be educated, professional elites, particularly as China's communist government grew increasingly hostile to intellectuals. The 1960s saw an influx of middle-class Chinese immigrants that was large enough to shift statistics describing the Chinese American population at large. In addition to this, the Chinese Americans who had served during the war were able to take advantage of the GI Bill in order to obtain college educations. The percentage of Chinese in America who held university degrees skyrocketed, while the number of Chinese working in restaurants and laundries and as domestics fell rapidly, so much so that Chinese Americans surpassed white Americans in median income and education levels by 1970.²⁶

The nation's Chinatowns faced a decline in the 1950s and early 60s as residents filtered out. Chinese American society had always been focused very strongly on the family unit, and during the postwar baby boom Chinese Americans became just as increasingly family-oriented as did the rest of American society; not content to raise their children in Chinatown tenement housing that had not been refurbished in decades, this

²⁵ Kwong and Miscevic, 226.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 233.

new generation of young Chinese Americans left the urban core. Thanks to the lifting of racist housing restrictions that had previously prohibited non-white Americans from living in certain neighborhoods, Chinese Americans now had both the means and the ability to move to the suburbs, though most still lived on the West coast.²⁷

Year	Total U.S. population	Number of Chinese in the U.S. (exclusive of outlying possessions)	% Living on the West Coast ²⁸
1900	76,303,387	89,863	(not available)
1910	91,972,266	71,531	64.7%
1920	105,710,620	61,639	55.5%
1930	122,775,046	74,954	55.5%
1940	131,669,275	77,504	56.7%
1950	150,216,110	117,140	57.6%
1960	179,323,175	237,292	60%
1970	203,210,158	431,583	55%

Table 2.1 Chinese Population of the U.S., 1900-1970 Censuses.

As the composition of Chinese America shifted, so too did popular American views of them. While strong anti-Chinese sentiments persisted, a new stereotype developed—one that is often still attached to Chinese Americans to this day; rather than inferior coolies or nefarious Reds, many American began to view the Chinese in the United States as the Model Minority. Kwong and Miscevic have already explored in greater detail the various generalized explanations to which white Americans attributed Chinese Americans' rather sudden increase in status; the most popular was one that is still prevalent in American thinking today, the idea that Chinese Americans indeed, all

²⁷ Chang, 257.

²⁸ The US Census defines the "West," or sometimes "Pacific" region as including the states of Washington, Oregon, and California; that description has been used here, although it might be argued that inland Washingtonians, for example, are not truly coastal residents.

Chinese, if not all East Asians, possess an inherent, deep respect for hard work and education. With the percentage of Chinese Americans in college more than double that of Americans as a whole, it appeared on a superficial level to be a valid explanation at the time.²⁹

It must have been a curious experience for Chinese Americans in the mid- to late-1960s to suddenly find themselves at the center of such a seemingly positive stereotype. Frank Chin, an outspoken Chinese American writer of the time, protested the idea of a benign stereotype, however, arguing that underneath it lay the same ignorance that had fueled the anti-Chinese sentiments of the 1950s. Interviewed in 1970, he said, "The Chinese American, native born, has attributed to him all of...the high aesthetic Chinese culture. This is the China of the literary, the China of the watercolor painting, the China of the civil service administration."³⁰ Moreover, he argued, the Model Minority stereotype was one that stripped male Chinese Americans in particular of any attributes that could be considered overtly threatening to white Americans—the Model Minority is nice, quiet, and submissive—the stereotype serves to restrict Chinese American achievement to the relatively non-aggressive world of academia. In Chin's estimation, this "positive" stereotype was just as damaging, and even more insidious, than other racist views of the Chinese.

The Model Minority was not the only stereotype that played a role in American popular opinion of Chinese during the Cold War. Two equally lasting images that had been popular even before the Second World War persisted in American culture

²⁹ Kwong and Miscevic, 234.

³⁰ Yung, Chang, and Lai, 306.

throughout the 1960s and '70s: the characters of Dr. Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan. Though the nature of these two fictional characters will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, they are important to understand when considering the cultural climate from which Bruce Lee emerged as a star. Each character gave rise to a specific archetype that Americans would recognize even to this day: Fu Manchu originally emerged as a character in the novels of Englishman Sax Rohmer, though both the books and the other media inspired by them became immensely popular in the United States in the early twentieth century. He was brilliant but nefarious, inherently evil, and had dreams of world domination; in short, he was the personification of the Yellow Peril. Charlie Chan, a Hawaii detective featured in the novels of Earl Derr Biggers, was, on the other hand, kindly and wise, frequently quoting "ancient Chinese philosophers," an image that fit nicely into the idea of the Model Minority.

When the Model Minority stereotype is added to these two archetypes—the Good Asian and the Bad Asian—as well as to previous Chinese stereotypes such as the coolie laborer, the hypersexual courtesan or dragon lady, and the wicked communist, it results in a dismaying morass of images through which Chinese Americans themselves had to sort as they struggled to define what it meant to be Chinese American. These were the pop culture images with which they were most often confronted until the sudden explosion of the kung fu³¹ genre upon the American scene. Furthermore, even when films did feature more sympathetic, realistic Chinese or Asian characters, these characters were almost

³¹ Although *Gung fu* is a more accurate transliteration of the Chinese phrase, for the sake of consistency and clarity I have chosen to use the form that is more frequently associated with the American pop culture phenomenon, except when part of a direct quotation that uses the former spelling.

exclusively portrayed by white actors wearing yellowface—a cinema device that survived long after blackface fell out of use, and which film historians such as Eugene Franklin Wong argue was a conspicuous attempt to further marginalize Asian American actors.³² Indeed, as previously discussed, even Anna May Wong, not only the first but arguably the greatest Chinese American film star of the era, was turned down for the lead in *The Good Earth*, and appeared opposite German Luise Rainer, who wore yellowface in the role.

In his 1974 biography of Bruce Lee, Alex Ben Block wrote of the star, "There's no substitute for being in the right place at the right time." Indeed, while much of Lee's success and lasting popularity must obviously be credited to the man himself, it is imperative to place his life and career in a greater historical context. Bruce Lee was more than simply a celebrated action star, and his importance goes beyond his role in helping to establish a new genre of cinema. A huge part of Lee's star power was, and is, tied into the fact that he emerged at a crucial point for the still-growing mainstream acceptance of Chinese Americans and for developing ideas of a distinct Chinese American cultural identity. The full impact of his legacy is still debated today by students and scholars of Chinese American history. Undoubtedly, his legacy would have been very different had he not died so unexpectedly and at such a young age, but no one can deny he had a lasting impact on Chinese American history.

Lee was born in San Francisco's Chinese Hospital in 1940, to Cantonese parents Grace Li and Li Hoi Chuen. Even the story of his name has, over the years, taken on

³² Peter X Fang, ed. *Screening Asian Americans* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 58.

something of a mythic status. Because they had lost their first child, a boy, as an infant, Lee's parents were wary of again angering the gods presumed to have taken the baby; even after adopting a baby girl and then having another biological son, they were still cautious when Grace was pregnant with Bruce, initially calling him by a girl's name to confuse angry spirits into passing him over.³³ He, of course, would not actually be called by a girl's name except in the time immediately following his birth, and Grace Li, wishing to give her son a more Western-sounding name, used the Westernized spelling of the family name, calling him Lee Jun Fan. One of the hospital nurses, however, decided that he needed a truly American name, and called the baby boy Bruce. The name that was eventually put on his birth certificate was Bruce Lee, although biographer and *Enter the Dragon* director Robert Clouse notes that Lee went by the name of Jun Fan for much of his youth; the name on his University of Washington transcript is Bruce Jun Fan Lee.³⁴ However, the name by which Lee is still known to many of his fans, particularly in Hong Kong, is Li Sui Loong—the Little Dragon.³⁵

It is easy to trace important threads of Lee's career back to his early life. When he was only two months old, his parents returned the family to the Kowloon district of their native Hong Kong, where Lee spent the rest of his childhood. Roughly a year after the Li family's move, and less than a day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese attacked Hong Kong from their strategic position from nearby Guangzhou (Canton). The British

³³ Even in the mid-twentieth century, the loss of a boy child was considered a much greater tragedy for a traditional Chinese family than the loss of a girl, and families often employed such tricks in order to fool spirits into passing over any other male children.

³⁴ Robert Clouse. *Bruce Lee: The Biography* (Burbank: Unique Publications, 1988), 4.

³⁵ On the Chinese lunar calendar, 1940 was the year of the dragon; when Lee began his film career in Hong Kong, "Li Sui Loong" was developed as a stage name.

and Canadian forces holding the island were eventually surrounded, and Hong Kong was surrendered to the Japanese on Christmas Day, 1941. Bruce Lee spent his earliest childhood years living in a city under martial law. In fact, the Japanese military and administrative command post was in Kowloon, directly across a public park from Lee's home. As Clouse describes it, "[Lee] grew up shaking his fist and shouting at Japanese planes overhead and watching enemy troops dominate the streets and life of Hong Kong."³⁶ Despite his young age at the time, one should not dismiss the impact that these events, and growing up in a British dominated Hong Kong, had on Lee. It is not a coincidence that the first film over which Lee had any real creative control was one that explored the effect that centuries of imperialism had on southern Chinese.

That Lee entered the entertainment business in the first place was not a coincidence. His father was a Cantonese opera star who, though never particularly famous, was at the very least well known to aficionados of that particular brand of Chinese theater.³⁷ Lee began performing at the age of two months, appearing in the arm of an actor in a Chinatown film, and at the age of six he made what he credited as his first real film appearance, eventually appearing in another nineteen Hong Kong films before the age of eighteen. Friends and relatives later described Lee as having been a precocious child, self confident, good-looking, a natural leader, and given to showing off. He was the middle child of five—with an adopted elder sister, Phoebe, elder brother Peter, and two younger siblings, Agnes and Robert. The Lee home, though large enough, was often busy and cramped. Lee purportedly took to the streets often as a child to escape the bustle, and

³⁶ Clouse, 7.

³⁷ Alex Ben Block, *The Legend of Bruce Lee* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1974), 18.

enjoyed leading the local teenage gangs; Lee himself later admitted, "I was a punk and went looking for fights."³⁸ It was after losing a fight at the age of thirteen that he began studying martial arts as a means of self-defense, not realizing at the time what a profound impact it would eventually have on his life.

As Lee approached his eighteenth birthday, he was, according to later interviews with his brothers, becoming more and more belligerent, getting himself into trouble with members of local rival gangs, and was doing poorly in school. He was expelled from La Salle College and was in danger of being expelled from Saint Francis Xavier High School. Concerned, his mother Grace convinced him that returning to the United States would be the best option for him—since he had been born in San Francisco, he still retained his United States citizenship, and had no trouble re-entering the country.³⁹ After living with family members in San Francisco for a time, he relocated to Seattle, where he worked as a busboy in the restaurant of the family friend with whom he was living. Lee, who was a brilliant dancer, also earned extra money giving ballroom dancing lessons. After completing his high school diploma, he entered the University of Washington as a philosophy major in the spring of 1961.

There is no indication that Lee considered acting as a career at this point in his life. He became something of a phenomenon in local amateur boxing competitions, and began teaching a kung fu class that was open to other university students. Lee founded the Bruce Lee School of Gung Fu, which met in a grove of trees on campus (it was here he met his future wife, Linda Emery, who became vital to him as a partner and

³⁸ Block, 21.

³⁹ Clouse, 23.

confidante). In fact, in an interview for the Garfield High School newspaper, given after a kung fu demonstration for the senior class, he said that he planned to eventually open kung fu schools throughout the United States.⁴⁰ In a letter to a family friend, composed at roughly the same time, Lee wrote:

Gung fu is the best of all martial arts; yet the Chinese derivatives of judo and karate, which are only basics of gung fu, are flourishing all over the U.S. This so happens because no one has heard of this supreme art; also there are no competent instructors. I believe my long years of practice back up my title to become the first instructor of this movement...My aim, therefore, is to establish a first Gung Fu Institute that will later spread out all over the U.S. I have set a time limit of 10 to 15 years to complete the whole project.⁴¹

As Bruce Lee was making plans for his martial arts schools, giving demonstrations at local schools, entering competitions, and teaching his particular brand of kung fu to university students and Boy Scouts alike, American-born Chinese baby boomers were coming of age. In the wake of the civil rights movements of the early 1960s, they were exposed to more and more of the ideas that were changing long-held American assumptions about minority ethnic and racial groups. Along with other Asians, Chinese Americans had always been lumped together under the catchall designation of "Oriental" by white Americans. As Kwong and Miscevic put it, "this common experience

⁴⁰ "Gung Fu Demonstration" in *Words of the Dragon: Interviews, 1958-1973*, The Bruce Lee Library, ed. John Little (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle Co., Inc., 1997), 27.

⁴¹ Bruce Lee to Pearl Tso, September 1962, in *Letters of the Dragon: Correspondence, 1958-1973*, The Bruce Lee Library, ed. John Little (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle Co., Inc., 1998), 30.

became the basis from which their consciousness as a single racial group began to evolve."⁴² Young American-born Asians were not only fighting against centuries-old discrimination, they were also embracing the cultural traditions of their parents' and grandparents' native countries, and they were doing it during an era in which young Americans of every ethnicity were embracing a powerful protest culture. While the goal of the Asian American Movement was to develop a cohesive pan-Asian community in the United States, the more specific goals of the Chinese American Movement⁴³ did not just represent an attempt to be American *and* Chinese, but an attempt to actually experience both American and Chinese identities together in a new way, to fuse them into a wholly new cultural identity. Bruce Lee, self-described as an Americanized Chinese, and with his own personal philosophy about fusing the physical and the emotional, was a perfect early image of this identity.

In addition to issues of self-identity, another goal of the Asian American Movement at large was to push for greater mainstream acceptance of Asians in American society. The movement eventually led to, among other things, the development of Asian-American Studies programs at colleges such as the University of California at Berkeley; as reporter Frank Ching wrote in 1973, "The first Asian-American studies programs resulted directly from the Third World Liberation Front strikes in the late nineteen-sixties at the University of California at Berkeley."⁴⁴ The strikes in question were in fact the combined effort of the Third World Liberation Front and other minority student

⁴² Kwong and Miscevic, 267.

⁴³ For the sake of discussion, I borrow Frank Chin's description of the Chinese American Movement as being distinct from the Asian American Movement that historians usually discuss.

⁴⁴ Frank Ching, "Expansion of Asian-American Studies Programs on U.S. Campuses Reflects Growth of Ethnic Consciousness," *New York Times*, July 26, 1973.

organizations such as the Afro-American Student Union, and were called off in the spring of 1969 after University of California administrators agreed to set up a Third World college that would have its own dean and would offer ethnic studies programs, including programs for black, Asian, and Mexican-American students.⁴⁵ Students at college and universities all over the nation pushed for the institution of similar programs, though education reform was not the only goal. There were other, more Asian- and Chinese-specific organizations that lobbied for change in other areas. San Francisco's Asian-American Political Caucus, for example, was formed in order for joined Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, and other Asian voices to seek representation on the city council and school board.⁴⁶

The group Chinese for Affirmative Action, in particular, was active both in San Francisco and on the national stage in the late 1960s and 1970s. The CAA "[spoke] up aggressively for the civil rights of Chinese Americans, particularly in employment, civic representation, educational opportunity and sharing of public funds for social programs."⁴⁷ The CAA, moreover, fought the so-called "refugee syndrome" that earlier Chinese American advocacy groups had exhibited: "In some ways," said one member, "[earlier groups] still feel that they're in another person's country. But CAA, in fighting for the welfare of Chinese-Americans, believes that Chinese-Americans belong in this

⁴⁵ Lawrence E. Davies, "Berkeley Strike Halted by Students and Teachers," *New York Times*, March 15, 1969.

⁴⁶ Norman Pearlstine, "The 'Quiet Minority,': Tokyo-U.S. Differences Stir Fear and Militancy In Japanese-Americans," *Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 1972.

⁴⁷ William Wong, "Speaking Up: A Chinatown Organization in San Francisco Presses for Civil Rights of Asian-Americans," *Wall Street Journal*, September 18, 1974.

country."⁴⁸ Frank Chin was particularly vocal in fighting the notion that Chinese Americans were outsiders, and argued, furthermore, that "yellow Americans" had something new to offer American society. "If [white Americans] would shut up a while," he wrote in 1972, "leave us to show ourselves and strut our stuff, they might hear a new American voice singing from all over the place."⁴⁹

It only made sense that aspects of Asian culture, especially Chinese and Japanese culture, would enter the cultural consciousness of non-Asian Americans. This consciousness often translated into faddish interest in things like karate and other Asian martial arts. The karate and judo schools that Lee described in his 1962 letter were opening up all over the nation, particularly in urban centers and along the west coast, and were an offshoot of a growing mainstream American interest in Asian culture.⁵⁰ This was undoubtedly spurred by martial arts television and movies, but also supported in part by the Asian American Movement (though many, if not most Americans at the time did not recognize any real difference between different strains of Asian martial arts).⁵¹ As Asian Americans themselves promoted an understanding of traditional Asian cultures, mainstream American society grew more interested as well. This interest is what eventually led to Bruce Lee's discovery by the producers of ABC's *The Green Hornet*.

⁴⁸ Wong, "Speaking Up."

⁴⁹ Frank Chin, "Don't Pen Us Up in Chinatown," *New York Times*, October 8, 1972.

⁵⁰ Poshek Fu and David Dresser, eds. *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 28.

⁵¹ Unlike karate, which was also introduced into American pop culture at the time, kung fu is a much more comprehensive system. Lee himself described Japanese karate as a simplistic derivative of Chinese kung fu, which incorporates not only the physical form and action of a system of defense, but also mental discipline and training, and a spiritual exploration of the self; it is, as Lee often wrote, a complete way of life. The nuances were unfortunately lost on many American TV audiences and movie-goers in the 1960s and '70s.

Lee was in Los Angeles at a 1964 Long Beach martial arts competition when an associate of producer William Dozier spotted him there. Though Dozier was actually looking for a young Chinese for another series that the network never picked up, he was impressed with Lee's screen tests, and when he later needed an Asian actor to fill the role of Kato on *The Green Hornet*, it was Lee he called. Lee was initially wary of the role; as he would later tell reporters, "It sounded at first like typical houseboy stuff. I tell Dozier, look, if you sign me up with all that pigtail and hopping around jazz, forget it. In the past, the typical casting has been that kind of stereotype."⁵² Although the Kato character in the original *Green Hornet* radio series had, in fact, been "a subservient Oriental chauffeur,"⁵³ Dozier convinced Lee that this would not be the case with the new television series. Ironically, the canceled series for which Lee had originally screen tested was the Charlie Chan-based "Number One Son."

Despite his childhood film roles, *The Green Hornet* was the first role that gave Bruce Lee acclaim. When the show first went on the air in 1966, the only other Asian actor appearing in a regular role on American television was Japanese American George Takei, who portrayed "Star Trek" helmsman Hikaru Sulu.⁵⁴ What made Lee stand out even more, though, was what he *did* onscreen. He brought his personal form of kung fu, which he later called Jeet Kune Do, to the role of Kato. Japanese karate had started to work its way into American pop culture by this time, featured notably in the James Bond film *Goldfinger*, but Americans had never seen kung fu performed on television before.

⁵² Leroy F. Aarons, "Batman's Boy Has Black Belt Rival," *The Washington Post*, August 30, 1966.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Television series involving superheroes, science fiction, and other such unrealistic or fantastical elements seem to have offered Asian Americans and other minorities more opportunities over the years than have more mainstream programs, a phenomenon which will be discussed in greater depth in chapter four.

Lee described Kato as "the weapon,"⁵⁵ the one who did all the fighting, and he infused the character's every move with poise and carefully controlled strength that could be unleashed at a moment's notice, making him instantly popular with audiences. Numerous articles published at the time focused not on the star—Britt Reid, the Green Hornet—but on Kato, and therefore on Bruce Lee himself. Lee jokingly told reporters that the real reason he had been offered the role was because he was the only Chinese the producers could find who could pronounce the name "Britt Reid" properly,⁵⁶ but Lee and his kung fu were the real stars of the show. Even now, with four decades of American-produced martial arts series and films between, Lee's performance as Kato—particularly in the action scenes—is magnetic. No one in the United States had ever seen this kind of martial art before, and Lee infused his personal Jeet Kune Do into every action sequence he performed. Producer Charles Fitzsimons has since said that Lee had to learn to perform his kung fu more slowly, because he actually moved too fast for the cameras. It is no surprise that American audiences were enthralled.⁵⁷

However, Lee himself felt that Kato, as one of the only Asian characters on TV at the time, needed more depth. During filming, before the show had actually aired, he wrote a letter to Dozier, expressing concern over the way the character was presented. "True," he wrote, "that Kato is the houseboy of Britt, but as the crime fighter, Kato is an active partner of the Green Hornet and not a mute follower."⁵⁸ Despite Kato's later popularity with audiences, the character had very few spoken lines in early episodes, and

⁵⁵ "Batman's Boy Has Black Belt Rival."

⁵⁶ Willard Clopton, Jr., "Kato Likes Puns, Preys on Words," *The Washington Post*, May 6, 1967.

⁵⁷ Charles Fitzsimons, "The Green Hornet," *A&E BIOGRAPHY Bruce Lee: The Immortal Dragon*, DVD, directed by Jude Gerard Prest (Burbank, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1997).

⁵⁸ Bruce Lee to William Dozier, June 21, 1966, in *Letters of the Dragon*, 77.

Lee argued for more dialogue to establish a more equal relationship between the Kato and Britt Reid. In his years in the United States—not to mention in British-held Hong Kong Lee had been inundated with the same mainstream stereotypes of Chinese as had every other American. *The Green Hornet* represented a chance, however small, for him to attempt to bring a more proactive, positive Asian character to American viewers. In the end, it turned out not to matter. Due to low ratings, the series was cancelled after the first season. Even though producers had anticipated a large number of cross-over viewers from the more popular *Batman* series, the ratings never improved. Lee blamed the series failure on several things, such as the show taking itself too seriously. It did not make use of the campy humor that made *Batman* popular, it ran in a thirty-minute rather than hour-long timeslot, and as Lee told a reporter, "The scripts were lousy."⁵⁹

Despite its short run, the show did make Bruce Lee a nationally recognized figure. It would eventually serve as a springboard to more work, but not in the United States. Lee spent the next few years splitting his time between Oakland—where his first formal martial arts studio was founded—and his and Linda's home in Los Angeles, where he worked as a sometime technical advisor and acted in several television guest spots. He also taught martial arts privately in Hollywood, not only to help earn a living, he argued, but as a way to continue to develop his Jeet Kune Do.⁶⁰ Many of his kung fu students were either producers or celebrities or would later become martial arts stars in their own

⁵⁹ "Kato Likes Puns, Preys on Words"

⁶⁰ J. D. Bethea, "Laughter a Good Sign As Karate Kings Meet," *The Washington Post*, June 22, 1968.

right. Among those taught by Lee were Steve McQueen, James Coburn, James Garner, Sterling Silliphant, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and Chuck Norris.⁶¹

Lee's Hollywood years were not easy ones. Despite his personal popularity as Kato, the major television producers at the time still did not believe that the American public would accept an "Oriental" as a regular on a network show. Frustrated, Lee tried to get new productions off the ground, including a film he intended to produce with friends and students Silliphant and Coburn. The film, *Silent Flute*, was produced several years after Lee's death, under a new title.⁶² It is clear from his personal writings and letters that he believed himself destined to be a star, but knew that the small roles and cameos he was getting in the late 1960s would never get him there. Moreover, he knew that the current mentality of most Hollywood producers was still decidedly anti-Asian; though they were eager to tap into the rising popularity of the martial arts movement, they remained leery of putting an Asian onscreen in any meaningful role.⁶³ Even Sterling Silliphant was skeptical. Interviewed later, he recounted a conversation he had with Lee. "He said then he'd be the biggest star in the world, bigger than Coburn or McQueen," he recalled. "I said, 'No way. You're a Chinese in a white man's world.'"⁶⁴

One of Lee's most bitter disappointments occurred when he was turned down to play the lead in Warner Brothers' new series, *Kung Fu*. Lee had actually helped develop the concept for the series; in 1970, he worked with Warner Brothers producers on what was then tentatively called *The Warrior*. It was intended to be a kind of Chinese Western,

⁶¹ Bruce Lee to Fred Sato, April 9, 1966, in *Letters of the Dragon*, 70.

⁶² Bruce Lee to Jhoon Goo Rhee, March 4, 1969, in *Letters of the Dragon*, 113.

⁶³ The major US studios' reaction to the popularity of martial arts will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

⁶⁴ Block, 53.

featuring a half-Chinese, half-American hero. "It's about time we had an Oriental hero," Lee said in a 1970 interview. "Never mind some guy bouncing around the country in a pigtail or something. I have to be a real human being. No cook. No laundryman."⁶⁵ He worked closely with Warner Brothers and producer Fred Weintraub, giving input on stories and technical details, ostensibly as an "inside track" as the star of the series.⁶⁶ It should have been perfect. However, Lee himself knew on some level that great success would be difficult to obtain in the United States, even for him, and with a young family to support (son Brandon had been born in 1965 and was now a small child), he could not afford to stay idle. In 1971, as he waited to hear back about the series, he went to Hong Kong to begin work on the first of his martial arts films, and in a November interview with the *Hong Kong Star*, he was asked what opportunities he saw for Asian movie stars in Hollywood. "None for the next ten years," he answered.⁶⁷

A month later, Lee received word that Warner Brothers had decided to cast David Carradine in the starring role in *Kung Fu*. The producers, the network, and many of the sponsors all felt that "a Chinese could not carry the lead role on American television."⁶⁸ In a letter to Ted Ashley, Warner Brothers Chairman and a sometime kung fu student of Lee's, Lee wrote, "Well, you cannot win them all, but, damn it, I am going to win one of these days."⁶⁹ Despite the seemingly optimistic tone of the letter, those close to Lee said

⁶⁵ J. D. Bethea, "Don't Call it Karate—It's Martial Art," *Washington Star*, August 16, 1970.

⁶⁶ There is some disagreement as to the extent of Lee's involvement in the series. In her biography of her late husband, Linda Lee claimed that the entire concept had been Bruce's idea and that the studio had essentially stolen it from him; it seems more likely that Lee developed the concept together with Weintraub.

⁶⁷ John Hardie, "The Man with a Stomach Like a Brick Wall," *Hong Kong Star*, November 1971.

⁶⁸ Clouse, 70.

⁶⁹ Bruce Lee to Ted Ashley, December 16, 1971, in *Letters of the Dragon*, 162.

that he was devastated by the studio's rejection. In the end, it turned out to be a boon, but at the time, it was clearly another blow, one that drove home to Lee the fact that, at that time, a Chinese American could not make it in Hollywood.

In Asia, on the other hand, Bruce Lee was already becoming immensely popular, even something of a household name in Hong Kong, where *The Green Hornet* was aired as "The Kato Show."⁷⁰ While interest in the Eastern martial arts was just beginning to catch hold in the United States, the major Hong Kong production companies had been putting out action flicks for years. After enjoying an initial golden era in the 1930s, Chinese film producers were forced to shut down or leave the country during the Japanese occupation. From 1940 to 1945, Hong Kong company Grandview made a number of films in San Francisco, screening them there before releasing them to other urban Chinatowns. These were the only films of the era in which viewers saw Chinese Americans presented as realistic, non-stereotypical characters, though as Law Kar and Frank Bren describe them, the characters in the films were "generally concerned with what was happening in Hong Kong or in 'homeland' China."⁷¹ Though the Grandview Theater itself remained open and showed Chinese-produced films until the 1980s, actual production shifted back to Hong Kong after the end of World War II.

It is unfortunate that the Grandview films were never screened outside of major urban centers. A number of them were never screened outside of San Francisco, nor screened to broader, non-Chinese audiences. Had the films continued to be produced into

⁷⁰ Dresser, 33.

⁷¹ Law Kar and Frank Bren. *Hong Kong Cinema: A Cross-Cultural View* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004), 83.

the Cold War era, it is interesting to speculate what effect they might have had on white attitudes toward Chinese Americans during the worst of the anti-Communist Yellow Peril hysteria. Even more interesting to imagine is the potential effect said production might have had on the development of the youth-driven Chinese American Movement in the 1960s and '70s. Perhaps it might even have diminished the profound impact Bruce Lee had later if these films had still been in production and providing young American-born Chinese with positive images of their community.

In the aftermath of World War II and then the Communist Revolution, the Hong Kong film industry essentially had to build itself up from scratch again. Facilities that had been destroyed during the war had to be rebuilt or refurbished, and film production and culture itself had to modernize. In the late 1950s, what would become the two major Hong Kong production companies emerged, the Motion Pictures and General Investment Film Company (MP&GI) and Shaw Bros.⁷² In particular, Shaw Bros. became the leader in the production of Cantonese blockbusters, and was instrumental in starting the mid-1960s craze for "new-style martial arts" films on the Asian market. The choreography of these early martial arts films grew in part out of the acrobatic style of Cantonese opera and became extremely popular in East and Southeast Asia.⁷³

When Bruce Lee returned to Hong Kong, Shaw Bros. was one of the first companies to approach him. "Since my arrival," he wrote Linda, "everyone, including Shaw Bros., are calling and using all means to get me. One thing is for sure, I'm the super

⁷² Kar and Bren, 162.

⁷³ Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li, and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu, eds. *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 22.

star in H.K."⁷⁴ However much a super star he was, though, Shaw Bros. apparently didn't see it; when Lee told representatives that he'd make movies with Shaw Bros. for the then-unheard of salary of 10,000 Hong Kong Dollars per month, they balked. Raymond Chow, founder of the fledgling Golden Harvest, approached Lee next, and did so with a better understanding of the actor's potential. With the exception of *Enter the Dragon*, all of Lee's major films were produced by Golden Harvest.

His popularity as Kato notwithstanding, it was Bruce Lee's short but incredibly successful film career that truly launched him into international fame. His first two films broke all Hong Kong box office records and made him the undisputed king of the martial arts genre, a designation that many of his fans feel he retains to this day. Film critics and cinema historians have since produced a great deal of material dealing with the effect of Lee's career on the development of cinema itself—on techniques, tropes, and genres—and have also considered his popularity with Hong Kong Chinese or overseas Chinese as a group. Few scholars, however, have considered either his films or his career from the specific perspective of the growing Chinese American Movement of the 1960s and 70s, though many of their most salient arguments, when modified, do much to explain the role Lee played in that movement. The anti-racist themes of his major films obviously would have appealed to Chinese Americans. In fact, these themes also appealed to a broader spectrum of Americans, including those white Americans disturbed by the racism still prevalent in American society at that time. The anti-imperialist themes would also have appealed to those Chinese who immigrated to the United States after the passage of the

⁷⁴ Bruce Lee to Linda Lee, July 24, 1971, in *Letters of the Dragon*, 148.

1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, many of whom had experienced life under foreign rule during the war. One of the most interesting analyses of Lee's films, however, is that of Stephen Teo, who argues that Bruce Lee served as a kind of apolitical nationalist figure to overseas Chinese. His study is insightful, but is overly focused on Hong Kong Chinese. The theory in fact is possibly more relevant to the particular situation of American-born Chinese during the 1970s.

Bruce Lee's first major film appearance was in *The Big Boss*⁷⁵, as a somewhat one-dimensional character with simple motivations that are common to early martial arts films. Cheng, a young Hong Kong Chinese, leaves his mother to join his cousins in Thailand. Predictably, Cheng must first give his mother his word that he will not fight once he is there. There they work at a Bangkok ice factory, which two of the cousins eventually discover is merely a front for a drug-smuggling operation. They are murdered by the henchmen of Hsiao Mi, the Big Boss himself, when they refuse to take part in the operation. When Lee's character, Cheng, discovers the truth later in the film, he returns to the factory only to find himself surrounded by Hsiao Mi's gang. Finally unleashing his barely-bridled power, Cheng defeats the gang, killing most of them, including Hsiao Mi's son. Upon returning home, however, he finds that the rest of his family has also been murdered by remaining gang members, and he takes his revenge in another fight with Hsiao Mi before giving himself up to the police.

⁷⁵ To avoid confusion, I will refer to Lee's major films using the titles under which they were originally released in Asia. Interestingly, *The Big Boss* was intended to be released in North America as *The Chinese Connection*—an homage to the similarly-themed *The French Connection*. However, the distribution company, National General Pictures, somehow confused the release information for *The Big Boss* and Lee's second film, *Fist of Fury*. The latter ended up being released in North America as *The Chinese Connection*, while the former was released as *Fists of Fury*, causing a great deal of confusion for many later movie-buffs. The films have recently been re-titled in North America to reflect their original Hong Kong titles.

The Big Boss is a rather flat film from a modern perspective, but the simplicity of the plot and the characters' motivations were common to Hong Kong action cinema at the time, and the film was the perfect vehicle to carry Bruce Lee's incredible martial arts style. Audiences who weren't familiar with Lee from *The Green Hornet* were by all accounts mesmerized by his fight sequences and his magnetic presence onscreen—the film broke all previous Hong Kong box office records, grossing 3.2 Hong Kong Dollars during its initial nineteen-day run.⁷⁶ It carried none of the weightier themes of Lee's films, particularly *Fist of Fury*, but the fame it provided gave him the opportunity to do more. "With any luck," he told an interviewer after the film's release, "I hope to make multi-level films here—the kind of movies where you can just watch the surface story if you want, or you can look deeper."⁷⁷

Lee had no real creative control over *The Big Boss*; as Robert Clouse put it later, he was still something of an unknown to Golden Harvest at the time. However, his status increased by miles with the film's success. Additionally, *Longstreet*, a television series for which Lee had already shot several guest appearances, went on the air while he was working on *The Big Boss*. Television critics were "nearly unanimous in praising Bruce as an actor as well as a martial artist,"⁷⁸ and Paramount Studios' sudden interest in him only increased his prestige in Hong Kong. Shortly after the *Big Boss* release, Lee began filming *Fist of Fury*—what is arguably his most important film in terms of thematic development.

⁷⁶ "The Big Boss Takes a Record Profit," *China Mail* (Hong Kong), November 19, 1971, in *Words of the Dragon*, 115.

⁷⁷ Jack Moore, "Bruce Lee—The \$3 Million Box-office Draw," *Sunday Post-Herald* (Hong Kong), November 21, 1971, in *Words of the Dragon*, 111.

⁷⁸ Clouse, 105.

Fist of Fury takes place in the early twentieth century Shanghai International Settlement, which was then under the control of foreign powers (largely British, though the film plays up Japanese involvement, for the benefit of Chinese audiences). Lee's character, Chen Zhen, is a pupil at a Chinese martial arts school; when their master is killed by a rival Japanese judo school, he swears to find those responsible and take his revenge. The plot itself is fairly straightforward, but the themes of imperialism, racism, and the resistance to both are almost more important than the main revenge storyline itself. Those themes are presented in a number of powerful scenes; one of the most famous scenes of the film is one in which Bruce Lee, as Chen Zhen, is denied entry to The Bund's Huangpu Park. The guards point to the infamous (though apocryphal) sign that reads, "No Dogs or Chinese Allowed." After a foreign woman passes the guards on the way into the park with her dog on a leash, some nearby Japanese begin to taunt Chen, telling him that if he pretends to be their dog, they will take him into the park. Infuriated, Chen attacks the Japanese, defeating them all, and then delivers a flying kick to the offending sign, destroying it. In another scene, Chen yells at the Japanese judo students he has just defeated, "We are not sick men!" a reference to the phrase "Sick Man of Asia."

Scenes such as these provided a very powerful, overt anti-imperialist and anti-racist image that was incredibly appealing to Chinese audiences in the early 1970s, but, despite the fact that *Fist of Fury* broke all of the box office records set by *The Big Boss*, Lee wanted to do still more. He did not have a good working relationship with Lo Wei, the director of both films, and found both productions to be disorganized and poorly

done. In both cases, the cast and crew were not even working with full scripts when production began.⁷⁹ When Golden Harvest approached him about a third film, Lee pointed out that his two-film contract was up, and told Raymond Chow that he wanted to be a partner rather than a "hired hand." Whether because he concurred or because he did not want Lee leaving Golden Harvest to make films with Shaw Bros., Chow agreed to form a new company with Lee. Concord was founded as a separate entity from Golden Harvest, with Chow and Lee as equal partners. Rather than leave his next film in the hands of someone he had no faith in, Lee wrote most of his next screenplay, then acted in and directed the film himself.

Way of the Dragon was, as Alex Ben Block argues, Bruce Lee's weakest film. In 1974, Block wrote, "From a directorial point of view, it is a foolish, indulgent, rather routine film."⁸⁰ Indeed, Lee wrote *Way of the Dragon* as more of a comedy than as an action-drama as his previous two films had been. His character, Tang Lung, travels to Rome to help some family acquaintances who are being targeted by a local gangster, and there are a number of humorous scenes in which he deals with the culture shock of his first time in the West. The film is remembered now mostly for its final fight scene, for which Lee recruited former kung fu student Chuck Norris, and in which the two characters battle to the death in the Coliseum.

Despite its narrative and thematic shortcomings, *Way of the Dragon* yet again broke box office records; more importantly, it was Bruce Lee's first experience as a filmmaker rather than just an actor and martial arts star. While the obvious anti-racist

⁷⁹ Bruce Lee to Linda Lee, July 1971, in *Letters of the Dragon*, 150.

⁸⁰ Block, 92.

themes of his films made him an attractive figure to his broader Chinese audience, his desire for more ambitious storytelling is what helped to make him a particularly Chinese American figure. He did not intend to remain a Hong Kong star, but wanted to break into the international market, and he wanted to do it by fusing Eastern and Western film and storytelling techniques. In an interview conducted during *Way of the Dragon's* filming, Lee told a reporter, "You see, there is a cultural gap between the West and the East... We have to try and produce films with universal appeal if we are to gain international recognition."⁸¹ In the same interview, he expressed a desire to continue directing and scriptwriting, saying that he would actually prefer it, but that his fans by now expected to see kung fu fight scenes in any production with which Lee was associated.

Reading interviews such as this one, as well as Lee's personal correspondence with friends and wife Linda, it is clear that he was taking part in the era's Chinese American Movement regardless of whether he would have phrased it in such explicit terms. His film career is an obvious reflection of his personal life, an attempt to blend both his Chinese and American heritage, and to present that blend in such a way as to be accepted by mainstream America. *Way of the Dragon* was a first attempt to create a story that was both Western and Eastern, and while it was a project of mixed success—
incredibly commercially successful, but less successful in its storytelling—it is also the beginning of what might have been an even more groundbreaking career. Lee had already been instrumental in sparking a worldwide interest in martial arts films and in helping to

⁸¹ Pang Cheng Lian, "Inside Bruce Lee," *New Nation* (Singapore), August 17, 1972, in *Words of the Dragon*, 139.

truly invent the kung fu genre, but, in the year before his death, he seemed to be in the perfect position to offer something more.

Bruce Lee finally got his chance in 1972. After the release of *Way of the Dragon*, he intended to begin work on his next film, *Game of Death*. However, the incredible success of his previous three films, as well as his lingering popularity in the United States from his roles on *The Green Hornet* and *Longstreet*, had American production companies more interested than they ever had been. Additionally, mainstream American interest in China and all things Chinese exploded after President Richard Nixon's 1972 trip to China.⁸² As Lee was filming an initial fight scene for *Game of Death*,⁸³ and as his first two films were being prepared for their North American release, he received a call from Warner Brothers.

Enter the Dragon was the opportunity for which Lee had been fighting for years, his chance to finally headline in an American movie. It was to be produced by Warner Brothers in collaboration with Golden Harvest, filmed in English, directed by an American actor, and released first in the United States. Lee himself had a great deal of input on the script, collaborating with director Robert Clouse.⁸⁴ In short, the film and its success would have offered Lee the opportunity, had he lived longer, to take on the kinds of projects he described in interviews and correspondence. When *The Big Boss* was finally released in the United States in 1973, it was an incredible hit, with mainstream

⁸² Kwong and Miscevic, 320.

⁸³ The now legendary bout between Lee and basketball star Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, a sometime student of Lee, was the only footage ever shot for the film. *Game of Death* was completed and released several years after Lee's death, using the fight scene and additional footage shot with actor Billy Lo as Bruce Lee.

⁸⁴ Piera Kwan, "The Violence Cult," *Hong Kong Standard*, February 10, 1973, in *Words of the Dragon*, 157.

audiences as well as with Chinese Americans; *Enter the Dragon* promised to be the same, and Lee's other films were being dubbed and were scheduled to be released in North America later in the year.

Indeed, *Enter the Dragon* met with huge success in the United States, sparking the furious but brief dominance of kung fu films on the American market.⁸⁵ Many have speculated that Bruce Lee's untimely death only a month before the release of *Enter the Dragon* may have helped spark further interest in the film. However, it seems clear that the genre was on the rise that summer, and that *Enter the Dragon* would have held its own in any case. *The Big Boss* and *Fist of Fury*, before being released on the mainstream market, had been screened in their original forms—subtitled in Mandarin Chinese and English for Hong Kong audiences, rather than dubbed in English—in Chinatown theaters,⁸⁶ and met with huge success there. Again, while Bruce Lee's films were sometimes thematically important, when one considers the precise timing of his career, it seems obvious that the more profound importance of them was to lift Lee himself up as a star, particularly to Chinese Americans.

It is for this reason that Stephen Teo's "apolitical nationalist" argument is such an intriguing one. Film critic Tony Rayns argues that Bruce Lee was more of a narcissist than a nationalist, but this view is one that depends entirely upon Lee's roles onscreen and does not take into account the greater scope of his career and life; moreover, Rayns implies that, as Lee is a narcissist, so too are his fans interested in him predominantly

⁸⁵ Dresser, 35.

⁸⁶ A. B. Weiler, "The Screen: A Chinese 'Fist of Fury,'" *New York Times*, November 8, 1972.

because of his physical prowess and appearance.⁸⁷ While it may be true, however, that the physical feats demonstrated in Lee's kung fu films draw audiences in, Rayns's interpretation does not take into account Lee's decades-long presence in the international imagination (it must be said, though, that while Rayns's interpretation is an incomplete one, he wrote his article in the 1980s and cannot be expected to have foreseen Lee's place in pop culture enduring into the twenty-first century). While Teo dismisses the idea that Lee's films are purely narcissistic, he too seems to stop short of placing the star's career into anything but a vague historical context; he discusses common issues of self-identity that Overseas Chinese frequently deal with, but does not delve into the specifics of the Chinese American community in the 1970s. Indeed, Teo's discussion of Lee's nationalism is part of a larger work about Hong Kong cinema, so when he speaks in greater detail about the appeal of Lee's nationalism, it is the appeal to Hong Kong Chinese that he describes. It is a natural direction to take, but fails, then, to put Lee's career into an American context.

Through his films, according to Teo, Lee displays for Chinese audiences "an abstract kind of nationalism, manifesting itself as an emotional wish among Chinese people outside China to identify with China and things Chinese, even though they may not have been born there."⁸⁸ That is to say, these films allow Overseas Chinese to embrace their Chinese cultural heritage by showing pride in Lee as a Chinese man achieving great feats onscreen, but it does not require them to show any loyalty to the

⁸⁷ Tony Rayns, "Bruce Lee: Narcissism and Nationalism," *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film: The 4th Hong Kong International Film Festival catalog*, April 3, 1980.

⁸⁸ Stephen Teo. *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* (London: The British Film Institute, 1997), 111.

actual government or rulers of China. To Chinese living in the United States in particular, this would have been very appealing in an age when the West was still very hostile to Mao's communist regime.

While Teo's argument is not incorrect, however, it is even more powerful if one considers the struggle for self-identity faced by Chinese Americans in the 1970s. Interviewed in 1974, Frank Chin, himself a fifth-generation Chinese American, insisted that his "most important mission" was to "legitimize the American Chinese sensibility as a distinct sub-culture which is recognized on its own terms, not as a 'blending of East and West.'"⁸⁹ Chin went on to describe the "Chinese American schizophrenia," writing, "Now I'm Chinese, now I'm American. But up against real Chinese...I saw that I had nothing in common with them. That they didn't understand me, and I didn't understand them."⁹⁰

It is ironic that Chin criticized kung fu in later writings, arguing that it had simply introduced another stereotype about Chinese men, when the genre's original star served as a powerful figure for the kind of Chinese American identity Chin wanted to develop. Bruce Lee himself frequently described his status as both Chinese and as American in this way he might be considered almost a precursor to this unique Chinese American sub-culture that Chin anticipated. Moreover, his status as not just Chinese but as an American put him in the perfect position to play the hometown hero to Chinatowns all over the country even after his death, and perhaps even more powerfully because of it. In this context, Teo's point about apolitical nationalism seems even more salient, certainly American-born Chinese were even more separated from their parents' and grandparents'

⁸⁹ De Bary Nee, 377.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 383.

homeland and were part of a culture much further removed from China's than that of Hong Kong. Moreover, while Bruce Lee provided proactive onscreen images of Chinese that may have been novel at that point, the greater importance was his life and career itself, his struggle to make it in the United States and the challenges he had to overcome as a Chinese American man. In the earliest decade of the Chinese American Movement, he was able to be something of a symbolic figure, offering an example of how to embrace Chinese culture and American culture at the same time, thereby providing a model for Chinese American self-identity. His early death the month before the release of *Enter the Dragon* may, in fact, have made him an even more powerful figure. The added air of tragedy gives a power to his life story that it might not otherwise have had.

Bruce Lee demonstrated a model for both embracing Chinese culture and integrating it into mainstream American culture, and in so doing, he offered himself as an image of the new Chinese American. He provided some of the first strong, positive Chinese characters that young Chinese Americans saw during the Cold War, but his life and the struggles he faced in his career were just as important as the characters he brought to life onscreen. Lee lived a life that could serve as an example of how to forge the new Chinese American sub-culture envisioned by Frank Chin. In all of these ways, he filled a vital role in Chinese American history. However, after his death, as martial arts films became more and more popular with non-Chinese audiences, Lee proved to be important in another manner, for the way that he pushed kung fu and therefore a Chinese presence, into the American mainstream consciousness.

CHAPTER THREE

ALL THINGS TO ALL MEN?

BRUCE LEE AND MAINSTREAM AMERICA

The scope of Bruce Lee's celebrity went far beyond Asian and Chinese American audiences. Kung fu itself slowly gained popularity as a genre after *The Green Hornet* ran in the United States, increasing with the airing of the better-rated *Kung Fu*, and exploding suddenly in early 1973 with the North American release of a number of Hong Kong films, including Lee's. By the time *Enter the Dragon* was released in August 1973, US audiences were engaged in all-out kung fu mania, and Bruce Lee, the man, the myth, the legend, was at the center of it. However, Lee's popularity with non-Chinese audiences must be attributed to different causes, and carried different implications, than his popularity with Asians. His greatest impact may have been as a kind of transitional figure to ease mainstream Americans into accepting more positive images of Chinese Americans—he was described by one journalist as looking "very young, very clean-cut, and very American (in an Oriental sort of way)." ⁹¹ Lee certainly provided an image of a strong and capable Asian man onscreen, and off-screen often surprised reporters and film writers with his particular combination of humor and erudition. He was also incredibly popular with urban youth and African American audiences, owing, according to many film historians, to the messages of justice, self-empowerment, and occasionally overt anti-racism present in his films.

⁹¹ Vincent Canby, "'Green Hornet,' From Bruce Lee Series," *New York Times*, November 28, 1974.

While Lee's fame certainly helped to put positive images of Chinese Americans forward in mainstream American consciousness, however, some, like writer Frank Chin, have argued that in doing so, new stereotypes were inadvertently created. Despite the pride he brought the Chinese American community, it must also be noted that Bruce Lee is often romanticized, particularly by white audiences. Much of that romanticism surrounds the idealization of the kung fu master, the trope of the Shaolin monk who is an incredibly powerful martial artist but is nonetheless zen-like in his restraint and wisdom. This is another of the Model Minority-style "positive" stereotypes. When considering Lee in terms of the impact he had on mainstream acceptance of Chinese Americans, then, his legacy can be best described as mixed.

If there is one group that seems to have fully misunderstood Bruce Lee and his appeal, it is American film and television producers of the era. As Mike Wash has argued, film producers in the early 1970s viewed the kung fu films of Hong Kong as nothing more than "a fad which could be domesticated"⁹² for mainstream American consumption. Kung fu had already been introduced to American television audiences by Bruce Lee in *The Green Hornet*, and they got another dose with *Kung Fu*, the series for which Lee was ultimately turned down. Despite low initial reviews, *Kung Fu* gained in popularity and was on the air until 1975, after winning several 1973 Emmy Awards.⁹³ In the spring of 1973, Shaw Bros. and Golden Harvest both released films to North American screens that had been produced and released in Hong Kong months or years

⁹² Mike Walsh, "Hong Kong Goes International: The Case of Golden Harvest," in *Hong Kong Film, Hollywood and the New Global Cinema: No Film is an Island*, ed. Gina Marchetti and Tan See Kam (London: Routledge, 2007), 167-176.

⁹³ Lawrence Laurent, "'Kung Fu,' an Eastern-Western, Finds a Place in the TV Schedule." *Washington Post*, December 31, 1972.

earlier, including Lee's *The Big Boss* (*Fist of Fury* was scheduled for release in the fall). In fact, the week that *The Big Boss* was released in the United States, the week of March 21, 1973, it was the highest grossing film in the country, followed by *Deep Thrust—The Hand of Death* and *Five Fingers of Death*, both Shaw Brothers productions.⁹⁴ The success led to the release of other Hong Kong films by National General, Warner Brothers, and other distribution companies—38 films by the end of 1973—and while they did not always review well, they were nonetheless very popular with American audiences.⁹⁵

Warner Brothers was particularly interested in producing or co-producing kung fu films, and Golden Harvest's Raymond Chow wanted to produce a big budget, Hollywood-style film. Together with Bruce Lee's Concord, they turned out what is still one of, if not the most popular kung fu films of all time. Despite being his highest-grossing, though, *Enter the Dragon* is not typically regarded as Lee's best film by those who consider themselves experts on the star. Indeed, for all the improvement in production over Lee's earlier films and the addition of Western star power in the form of John Saxon, Jim Kelly was a relative unknown at the time, *Enter the Dragon* seems somewhat lacking when compared to *The Big Boss* or *Fist of Fury*. The plot, while original, brings to mind the exploits of James Bond: Lee's character, also called Lee, travels undercover to the mysterious private island of Han at the behest of an international intelligence organization, ostensibly to enter Han's martial arts competition, but in reality to find out what has happened to an intelligence agent who disappeared

⁹⁴ "Swish! Thwack! Kung Fu Films Make It," *New York Times*, June 16, 1973.

⁹⁵ Walsh, 169.

while investigating Han's island drug racket. Lee has an additional motivation: Han's bodyguard, Oharra, was the cause of the death of Lee's sister, who committed suicide rather than be raped by Oharra and his thugs in Hong Kong.

Though the film's early scenes take place in Hong Kong, and Han's mysterious island is just off the Chinese coast, the rest of the film could in truth have been located anywhere; only the entertainment scene—with the typical gongs and *qipao*-clad girls that signify the Orient to Western viewers—and the martial arts competition itself make the film "Chinese." More importantly, though, *Enter the Dragon* carries none of the nationalist or anti-racist themes of Lee's earlier work. While the thematic development of *Fist of Fury* may not have been sophisticated by dramatic standards, Lee's opposition to the oppression carried out by Shanghai's foreign occupiers added a certain depth to what would otherwise have been a simple action film. By comparison, *Enter the Dragon* seems almost whitewashed for white American approval, as though Warner Brothers did not believe those themes would screen well with mainstream, non-Chinese audiences. Indeed, as PTJ Rance so succinctly writes, "[National and cultural identity] themes are almost crowbarred into *Enter the Dragon*. So we have Saxon as the all-American hero, Jim Kelly in the African-American corner, and Lee satisfying the Asian audience."⁹⁶ Furthermore, "with the exception of Lee, the Chinese are represented either as kung fu automata, Buddhist monks, or Han's Fu Manchu-style villain." Additionally, as Rance points out, the plot itself was Americanized. For a Hong Kong audience, the simple motivation of avenging his sister's death would have sufficed as an honorable reason for

⁹⁶ PTJ Rance. *Martial Arts* (London: Virgin Books, 2005), 76.

Lee to enter Han's competition; family loyalty and vengeance, after all, is the greatest motivation for Lee's character in *The Big Boss*. The intrigue of the missing agent seems to have been added for the benefit of Western audiences.

In spite of its shortcomings, *Enter the Dragon* did extremely well with American audiences, only sparking further attempts to westernize the kung fu phenomenon. However, in doing so, producers may have undermined the change that Bruce Lee himself was working for, by helping to shore up the Orientalist views of China that many Americans still held in the 1970s. Although Said's *Orientalism* is predominantly a literary-based criticism, his theory, that non-Western cultures are placed into the role of the Other by dominant imperialist powers, is interesting when applied to the kung fu genre. Many of those who were involved in the production of early kung fu films—Bruce Lee chief among them—were interested in presenting films that would help American and other Western audiences understand certain aspects of Chinese culture. Lee was, after all, involved in much of the script writing for *Enter the Dragon*, and while the film may not carry any of the thematic depth of *Fist of Fury*, he was able to imbue it with some of his own personal philosophy. "I have a hell of a responsibility," he said, regarding his work on the script, "because Americans really do not have firsthand information on the Chinese."⁹⁷ Lee believed that *Dragon* at least introduced some of the fighting themes important to his Jeet Kune Do, which he had for years differentiated from the unrealistic, zen-centric vision most Americans had of Asian martial arts.⁹⁸ However, the film still

⁹⁷ Piera Kwan, "The Violence Cult," *Hong Kong Star*, February 10, 1973.

⁹⁸ P. M. Clepper, "Deadly Simple Fighter," *St. Paul Dispatch*, July 18, 1968.

presents kung fu—and therefore Lee himself—as something of a novelty, playing into the Western impulse to "Otherize" Chinese.

American producers were clearly interested in adapting kung fu for the American market as quickly as possible, with as much widespread appeal (and garnering as much profit) as possible. In the course of churning out new kung fu films with such rapidity, the Chinese characters onscreen were often exoticized and presented as Others, rather than presented as realistic characters with recognizable, familiar motives. The aforementioned entertainment scene in *Enter the Dragon* is a classic example: the women are beautiful in their traditional Chinese garments, but also deadly, demonstrating their skill with hand-thrown darts while gongs are occasionally beaten in the background. The women serve no purpose but to present an image reminiscent of the Dragon Lady—gorgeous and erotic, compelling in her exoticism, but ultimately deadly. Oharra, too, is almost a caricature, and it is surprising that Bruce Lee—who considered turning down the role of Kato, whom he initially considered too much like a typical Chinese houseboy—does not complain about the character in any of his published letters from that year.

The popularity of the kung fu genre introduced other stereotypes as well, including the idea that Chinese (or Asians in general) are experts in the martial arts. Frank Chin—though he was writing specifically about *Kung Fu*, the television series, and not the kung fu genre in its entirety—argued, "The progress that Asians of all yellows have made in the movies and on television is pitiful compared to the great strides in self-determination made by apes, dinosaurs, zombies, the Creature from the Black Lagoon

and other rubber creations of Hollywood's imagination."⁹⁹ He went on to point out that *Kung Fu* left non-Asian Americans with the impression that to be Chinese (or Chinese American) meant "doing strange things in the workaday world of white people." Chinese practice martial arts, adhere to the sage teachings of Confucius and Shaolin monks, and practice "weird candlelight ceremonies." Chin's argument, essentially, is that *Kung Fu* and programs like it present anyone who looks "yellow" as passive, mystical, and anachronistic.

To extend Chin's argument, one might contend that Bruce Lee's appeal to mainstream America was driven, at least in part, by an interest in the exotic. Certainly other Chinese American media over the decades had appealed to the same sentiments—Christina Klein, in her *Cold War Orientalism*, argues that novels such as *Flower Drum Song* owed much of their commercial and critical success to the fact that they "ethnicized Chinese Americans by representing their difference in cultural rather than racial terms."¹⁰⁰ Reading such narratives, then, essentially made non-Asian Americans into tourists peeking inside Chinatown, Hong Kong, or mainland China itself. Surely part of the appeal of films such as *Enter the Dragon*, *Fist of Fury*, and *Way of the Dragon* are their seemingly exotic or glamorous locations: Hong Kong, or nearby private islands, Shanghai, the Roman Coliseum. Bruce Lee himself was often presented in this framework. Interviewed in late 1972, he said, "Sometimes I feel a little schizophrenic [about splitting his time between Hong Kong and the United States]. I have to remember

⁹⁹ Frank Chin, "Kung Fu is Unfair to Chinese," *New York Times*, March 24, 1974.

¹⁰⁰ Christina Klein. *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 228.

which side of the ocean I'm on, and whether I'm the superstar or the exotic Oriental support player."¹⁰¹ Though Lee considered many of his roles to be steps forward in his career—particularly *Enter the Dragon*—he always remained clearly aware of the fact that Chinese actors had a long way to go in Hollywood.

The argument that Lee's films are predominantly narcissistic and that his appeal is mostly physical is another that would seem to mitigate his impact as a force of change in American perception of Chinese. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Tony Rayns makes the argument that Bruce Lee's "desire to externalize the feelings of personal and racial inferiority that afflicted him" led not to any real importance as a nationalist figure, but solely a narcissistic one. Rayns focuses on aspects of Lee's career such as the scene in *Way of the Dragon* wherein his character completes his morning stretches and exercises in front of a mirror—a scene Rayns describes as "narcissistic to the point of being onanistic."¹⁰² Following this argument, however, leads to the conclusion that Lee was popular with Chinese and Chinese Americans simply because he presented the image of a strong Chinese man in whom they could take pride. While his counter to the asexual docility of the Charlie Chan character was certainly important, it cannot account for all of his appeal. Moreover, it would then stand to reason, according to Rayns's argument, that Lee's appeal to Western audiences was merely the technical skill and physical presence he brought to his characters onscreen. While it is true that many of Lee's fans demonstrate a lack of understanding of his importance beyond that of a mere martial arts

¹⁰¹ Jack Moore, "Superstar Bruce Lee," *Off Duty/Pacific*, November 1972, in *Words of the Dragon*, 149.

¹⁰² Rayns, 111.

star, the appeal of his films even to mainstream audiences goes deeper than Rayns would care to admit.

It is not to say that Bruce Lee wasn't celebrated for his prowess and the pure physicality of his bearing. Youth audiences certainly seem to have been interested mostly in Lee's fight scenes—one reporter wrote in 1973, "The best time to see a Bruce Lee movie is at a Saturday matinee with kids running up and down the aisle, throwing popcorn, grunting kung fu yells...and chatting noisily during dialog bridging the action scenes."¹⁰³ This certainly describes most of the era's Saturday kung fu matinees, which, as the same writer pointed out, were reminiscent of the nickel theatres popular with kids in the 1940s. Another reporter wrote, "Lee gets a response from kids I haven't heard since Steve McQueen's motorcycle ride in 'The Great Escape.'"¹⁰⁴

However, older youths may have been drawn to Lee's image for another reason. The protest culture of the 1960s and early '70s was largely youth-driven; opposition to the Vietnam War and the development of the African American Civil Rights and Black Power Movements were incredibly powerful social forces. Particularly in his Hong Kong-produced films, Bruce Lee tended to portray downtrodden characters who lashed out at the establishment or took revenge for wronged family members by using his skills as a martial artist. In this way, his physical appeal would have carried a deeper meaning for the youth audiences he was so popular with. Lee was not simply performing cool

¹⁰³ Stephen J. Sansweet, "The Rock 'Em, Sock 'Em World of Kung Fu," *Wall Street Journal*, October 4, 1973.

¹⁰⁴ Gary Arnold, "Shades of Cagney, Echoes of McQueen," *Washington Post*, August 25, 1973.

stunts, he was engaging in physical struggles that mirrored the struggles in which American youths saw themselves embroiled.

Audiences also were drawn to Lee's physical presence itself, rather than the struggle his fights embodied, but far from representing a simply narcissistic appeal, Jachinson Chan argues that this carried a great deal of importance in terms of the way that Chinese American men were perceived in mainstream American culture. Though Asian men, and Chinese men in particular, were historically perceived as effeminate, docile, and asexual, Bruce Lee presented an unmistakable image of male strength and virility contained in the distinctly Chinese package of kung fu. No longer were Americans faced solely with the image of a desexualized Charlie Chan or effeminate opium-smoker, but with a Chinese man who clearly embodied all the things that Westerners value as masculine and strong.¹⁰⁵ Jachinson Chan compares Lee's popularity to that of James Bond, and argues that, "within the context of Orientalism, Lee's performance and the display of his physique and charm counter the dominant discourses of the 'other.'"¹⁰⁶ Lee's challenge to perceived notions of what it meant to be an Asian or Chinese American is one of his most important legacies. Certainly he did not change perceptions overnight, nor did he challenge preexisting stereotypes without inadvertently introducing some of his own. However, Bruce Lee did serve as one of the first widely popular stars to counter these preconceived images of Chinese Americans, a kind of precursor to later efforts.

¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, though Lee had obvious sexual appeal, it came through without much sexual interaction onscreen. In fact, Lee once complained that he never had much of a chance to explore his sexuality onscreen, a concept which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

¹⁰⁶ Jachinson Chan. *Chinese American Masculinities: From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 84.

Scholars have recently begun to analyze Bruce Lee's appeal to another non-Asian group in the United States as well. He was immensely popular with African American audiences. It led to what seems on the surface a bizarre crossroads between kung fu and the Blaxploitation film, with the mid-1970s release of films such as *Black Belt Jones*, *Black Samurai*, and *Dynamite Brothers*. These films, all put out by major production companies, were generally box-office flops that failed because studios like Warner Brothers failed to understand the real appeal of Bruce Lee and kung fu to urban black audiences.

Film historians have, of course, already refuted racist notions that seemed popular at the time, specifically the idea that low-budget action and horror films held some inherent attraction for "ethnic" audiences solely on the basis of the violence they contained. Gina Marchetti has explained the appeal of kung fu films to black urban audiences as initially being a simple result of access: when the first Hong Kong films were exported to the United States, they were usually screened in Chinatown theaters, or else shown in inner-city "ghetto" theaters, as a way of providing less expensive entertainment.¹⁰⁷ Going further, however, both Marchetti and David Dresser argue that Bruce Lee was particularly appealing to young black audiences because he was one of the only non-white heroes they saw on the big screen, and because of the anti-imperialist, anti-racist themes of some of his work. Additionally, the fact that Lee worked with African American actors and athletes such as Jim Kelly and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar would have been appealing as well.

¹⁰⁷ Gina Marchetti, "Jackie Chan and the Black Connection," in *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies*, ed. Matthew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo (London: Routledge, 2001), 139.

Amy Abugo Ongiri offers a more complex explanation of the so-called Ghetto Connection, one revolving around the way that kung fu as a genre helped reinvent what it meant to be a marginalized group in mainstream American society. Unlike Marchetti and Dresser, Ongiri argues that it is too simple to say that a film like *Fist of Fury*, for example, appealed to black audiences because they "identified with Lee's character's fight against oppression."¹⁰⁸ While this argument is not wrong, she explains, it fails to take into account the appeal of the aesthetic message carried in artistically choreographed martial arts sequences. The fights are designed in such a way as to be visual representations of the overall narrative of the martial arts film—resistance against a foreign oppressor or the struggle for filial vengeance, for example—and these narratives, Ongiri argues, "readily spoke to an African American audience's history of violence and violation in which acts of spectacularized violence would become the central visual metaphor for African American cross-identification."¹⁰⁹ While Ongiri's analysis is fascinating, her interpretation of martial arts fight sequences is a fairly abstract one—she is arguably reading too much into these scenes. While Lee himself probably felt that his fight choreography evinced a cultural narrative in and of itself, the idea that that narrative could have been read by an audience in any concrete way, without the surrounding framework of the films' plots and characters, is dubious.

Ongiri's broader argument, however, as well as those of Marchetti and Dresser, still stands. The idea that black audiences, particularly young black audiences, could

¹⁰⁸ Amy Abugo Ongiri, "Bruce Lee in the Ghetto Connection: Kung Fu Theater and African Americans," in *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*, ed. Shilpa Dave, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha G. Oren (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 253.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 254.

identify with Bruce Lee's social struggle and the social struggles of his characters is sound—and it flies in the face of what major film studios like Warner Brothers assumed about black audiences. In the wake of Bruce Lee's brilliant but quickly extinguished flame, Warner Brothers became the leader in the production of Blaxploitation kung fu films. *Black Belt Jones*, argues David West, was the worst of these, "a movie made by middle-aged white men, aimed a young black audience."¹¹⁰ In churning out films like these, the studios clearly misunderstood the depth at which black audiences were able to read kung fu films, movies that were frequently described by most critics as lowbrow action flicks without much substance, like "an éclair without much whipped cream inside."¹¹¹ Other offerings, like the animated television series *Hong Kong Phooey*, voiced by Scatman Crothers, not only failed to take this depth into account, but often relied on the worst racial stereotypes as humor. While some African American-produced kung fu films fared better, it is because, as Ongiri points out, they did not "attempt to simply redo the kung fu genre in blackface or place black characters in Asian locales."¹¹² Such films could be successful, in other words, only when they took into account the appeal of kung fu and Bruce Lee on a deeper level than what was appreciated by major studios.¹¹³

Another failed attempt at capturing some of the huge success of Bruce Lee's popularity came in the form of the so-called Bruceploitation phenomenon, which arose after Lee's death in July 1973 and the huge commercial success of *Enter the Dragon* in

¹¹⁰ David West. *Chasing Dragons: An Introduction to the Martial Arts Film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 214.

¹¹¹ "The Rock 'Em, Sock 'Em World of Kung Fu."

¹¹² Ongiri, 258.

¹¹³ Jackie Chan's offerings—films such as *Rumble in the Bronx* and *Rush Hour*—have been more successful than the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s for specifically that reason, and also because Chan has fused a particular brand of kung fu that involves an almost slapstick-like humor.

August. A spate of Lee look-alikes and impersonators cropped up on the kung fu film circuit almost immediately. Figures such as Bruce Li, Bruce Lai, Bruce Le, and so on made an attempt to exploit the star's appeal to both Asian and American audiences. Robert Clouse and Fred Weintraub, both of whom worked with Lee while he was alive, have been accused by West of producing some of the worst offerings of the American-made kung fu genre. Clouse himself is largely responsible for the final form of *Game of Death*, the last project Lee was working on before his death. Because Lee had only filmed about twenty minutes of actual footage for the film at that point, the aforementioned fight scene between himself and sometime student Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, the rest of the movie eventually had to be cobbled together, with new scenes shot with Billy Lo as Bruce Lee and old footage of Lee scavenged from other sources. With the exception of the fight scene between Lee and Abdul-Jabbar, the film is generally reviled as an affront to Lee's memory and legacy by those who consider themselves "true" Bruce Lee fans, and Clouse's role in its production has earned him no small amount of scorn.¹¹⁴

It is the very failure of most of the Bruceploitation films that speaks to Bruce Lee's immense popularity with mainstream American audiences. There were critics at the time who saw the kung fu genre as nothing more than bloody spectacle: Robert S. Elegant wrote about the mass appeal of bloody fight scenes and themes of revenge (themes he portrayed as being distinctly Oriental¹¹⁵), while Vincent Canby described the

¹¹⁴ One of the best places to engage modern Bruce Lee fans is on the internet—if one cares to brave the often indecipherable message boards on the Internet Movie Database's website, one is occasionally rewarded with surprising insight about Lee's continuing popularity.

¹¹⁵ Robert S. Elegant, "Oriental Films: Lots of Blood and Revenge," *Los Angeles Times*, January 14, 1973.

films as "pure bloody spectacles in which the issues fought over have hardly any relevance to the intensity of the fights themselves."¹¹⁶ This simplistic interpretation, however, does not take into account the fact that kung fu declined in popularity as a genre shortly after Bruce Lee's death. Both writers have failed to take into account both Lee's star power and the thematic appeal his films had—appeal beyond simple violence. While Weintraub and Clouse must have hoped that kung fu could be carried past its peak in popularity in 1973-1975, it is telling that successful martial arts films and television series were seemingly carried on the popularity of later stars like Chuck Norris, Jackie Chan, and others, rather than on the appeal of kung fu itself—both Norris and Chan are immensely popular to this day, and it is because neither tried to simply fill the void left by Bruce Lee. Jackie Chan is not another Lee impersonator, nor is Chuck Norris simply a white Bruce Lee; though both were strongly influenced by Lee, each had to develop his own personal style and find his own niche in the American or international market, leading to success where others have failed so totally. An attempt to "replace" Lee would never have been tolerated by his fans. Furthermore, just as strongly as did Chinese and Chinese American audiences, white, mainstream American fans took part in the cult of personality that quickly grew up around Bruce Lee after his death. David Carradine's appearance in *Kung Fu* had helped to solidify American interest in Asia and Asian martial arts, and though the series shored up Orientalist ideas of the mystical East, it also served as an intermediary, keeping on hold American interest in the martial arts genre in the years between *The Green Hornet* and the sudden explosion of Hong Kong action

¹¹⁶ Vincent Canby, "Have You Seen Shu Lately?' 'Shu Who?'" *New York Times*, May 13, 1973.

films onto the US market a few years later—making way for Lee's success in the early 1970s.

As Stephen Teo writes, "Bruce Lee is all things to all men."¹¹⁷ However, whereas Chinese and Chinese American audiences viewed Bruce Lee as an image of cultural nationalism, identity, and pride, white viewers found other appeal. "American admirers of Lee's cult," writes Teo, "dwell in his art as a reaction against racism."¹¹⁸ Furthermore, his physical appeal, discussed above, as well as his incredibly charismatic personality, drew (indeed, continues to draw) mainstream viewers, and, in a way, made China and Chinese America seem more accessible to them.

Bruce Lee's impact on the way that non-Asians in the United States viewed Chinese Americans is undeniable, though the overall legacy of his career is more complex, and will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter. What is clear is that he emerged at a moment when Chinese America, as a concept and as a community, was just beginning to coalesce, and that he undeniably affected the way that Chinese Americans were presented in American popular culture. Frank Chin, one of the most notable proponents of the Asian American and Chinese American Movement, argued for "a native-born Asian American literary consciousness that was not Chinese, Japanese or white Western European, but a native development of American culture." Bruce Lee is clearly not exactly what Chin was arguing for. Lee described himself alternately as an American Chinaman, a Chinese American, or an Americanized Chinese.¹¹⁹ However, Lee

¹¹⁷ Teo, 110.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹¹⁹ Flora Rand, "Chinese Bruce Lee Says of His American Child: 'I Want My Son to be a Mixed-Up Kid!'" *TV/Radio Mirror*, November 1966.

was arguably the precursor to Chin's hoped-for unique Chinese American. He certainly helped to pave the way for a broader mainstream acceptance of Asians, even when that acceptance sometimes hinged on compliance with new stereotypes.

By the early 1980s, the status of Chinese in America had greatly improved. The death of Mao Zedong in 1976 played an important role in the normalization of relations between the United States and China. His successor, Deng Xiaoping, was a moderate, and supported a less ideological, more open form of government. China's economy and society began the slow process of recovery from Mao's disastrous policies, and Deng opened the nation to the world for the first time in decades. In 1979, the United States and the People's Republic of China reestablished diplomatic ties, and the immigration quota for Chinese entering the United States was soon doubled. There was no longer a limit on non-quota Chinese who traveled on student, diplomatic, or tourist visas.¹²⁰

The impact on the Chinese American Movement was mixed. After 1965, American Chinatowns, which had been declining in stature and relevance, found themselves revitalized. The Chinese American population grew exponentially because of the new immigration regulations, and the influx of new immigrants gravitated toward Chinatown, particularly San Francisco's. However, this new influx of native Chinese had a sometimes negative effect on the development of a unique Chinese American identity. The differences between various sub-groups of the diasporic Chinese community were too polarized. American-born Chinese, Kwong and Miscevic write, "presented a

¹²⁰ Chang, 314.

relatively cohesive group,"¹²¹ but the wave of Chinese immigrants who arrived in the United States in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s represented widely varying groups: formerly persecuted intellectuals, wealthy party officials and their families, thousands of legal and illegal working-class immigrants, and the middle-class family members of those already in America.

The old Chinatowns abandoned by Chinese Americans who moved to the suburbs during the postwar era became familiar enclaves for newer immigrants. They were more and more crowded as greater numbers of Chinese moved into them, but this also revitalized them for a time. More residential, retail, and office space had to be constructed in limited downtown spaces, leading to urban renewal projects and the interest of Chinese American-owned banks and investors. Unfortunately, the growing population also led to a number of problems for Chinatown residents. Because of the high cost of living in downtown centers, the very poor were often priced right out of Chinatown. A huge number of businesses failed for the same reason. Many Chinatowns, particularly in cities like Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, and Seattle, became little more than tourist destinations for non-Chinese Americans, but, "without their Chinese residents and customers, their authenticity was gone."¹²² Ironically, as Chinese Americans have themselves become more accepted by mainstream American society, Chinatown has yet again become the exoticized destination for white tourists it once was, perpetuating the Orientalist ideas of the alien Other that were so common in popular images of Chinese throughout most of American history.

¹²¹ Kwong and Miscevic, 317.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 327.

This is not to say that the Chinese American struggle for identity has been in vain but it is, in the words of Iris Chang, an *ongoing* struggle. The role of kung fu in that struggle has been an interesting one. As kung fu itself has fallen out of vogue, Chinese-produced and *wuxia* swordplay films have become popular among mainstream American audiences and have influenced American film production. Bruce Lee's role in the presentation of Chinese and Chinese Americans in pop culture, too, has been mixed, his legacy sometimes confusing, but one thing is certain: he was one of the first Asian Americans who mainstream audiences ever saw on television in the 1960s, and he was the first Chinese American superstar. For better or for worse, he changed the way Chinese Americans were received by the mainstream

CHAPTER FOUR
LEGACY OF THE DRAGON
CHINESE AMERICANS IN TODAY'S POP CULTURE

The kung fu craze of the 1970s peaked in about 1974 and never truly recovered after that point. The attempts of Robert Clouse and Fred Weintraub, among others, to capitalize on Bruce Lee's popularity probably did more to hasten the decline of the genre than to shore it up. Certainly the meager offerings of Lee impersonator films smack almost of desperation, and give the impression that major studio producers never truly understood Lee's appeal within the context of contemporary culture. Kung fu had been more than a fad, it was part of the protest culture of the 1960s and 1970s. By the late '70s, that culture was dwindling, and so was kung fu's relevance. Bruce Lee himself remained a cult figure, undoubtedly his explosively short career and untimely death had much to do with thrusting him into the realm of myth. Indeed, to this day, Lee is considered one of the greatest martial artists of all time. His legacy, however, has been a curious mix of good and bad. Frank Chin has argued that Bruce Lee and the kung fu craze of the 1970s introduced new stereotypes to which Asian Americans are still trying to live up, an argument that is supported by a cursory examination of American pop culture during the 1990s and 2000s. While Chinese Americans still have not made the strides in popular culture that other groups have, though, one must remember that Bruce Lee was the first, the precursor to Chin's new Chinese American and a necessary catalyst for change.

While Hong Kong cinema did enjoy an upsurge in net profit and popularity on the international market following the 1970s explosion of kung fu, the kung fu genre itself was never the same after the peak in late 1973 and early '74. "With [Bruce Lee's] death," writes Suhel Ahmed, "Asian cinema and its growing internationalism fell into a deep coma."¹²³ Particularly on the American market, the genre never seemed to regain the momentum it had experienced just before Lee's death and the release of *Enter the Dragon*. Moreover, the major US studios' failed attempts to domesticate kung fu to package and present to mainstream American audiences had an ultimately negative impact on the way the genre was received. Critics at the time rarely gave higher praise than Stephen Sansweet's, that kung fu offers little depth, but "when you're looking for just a snack, it can be quite satisfying."¹²⁴ It is also pertinent that the peak of the kung fu genre occurred at roughly the same time as the United States was pulling the last of its troops from Vietnam. Surely it can be argued that the American public, for years bombarded with images of the Orient in popular culture and with images of the war on the evening news, simply wearied of seeing Asian faces on their television sets. While this may not have been the major factor behind the decline of the genre, the tendency of the public to quickly discard a phenomenon that it had only months before embraced wholeheartedly is one that should be considered when analyzing pop culture trends.

In the wake of Lee's death, American stars began to take over the action scene once again. Chuck Norris, of course, had trained with Bruce Lee and appeared in *Way of the Dragon*, but others, such as Sylvester Stallone and Jean-Claud Van Damme, tended

¹²³ Suhel Ahmed, "What's Taken So Long?" *Metro Magazine* 129/130 (2001): 188-195.

¹²⁴ "The Rock 'Em, Sock 'Em World of Kung Fu."

toward a different style of strongman action onscreen. However, in the late 1970s, a new star emerged on the Hong Kong action scene. Jackie Chan, ten years younger than Bruce Lee, had attended a Peking Opera School in Hong Kong, where he excelled in his acrobatics and martial arts training. Though he was making his living as a stage performer (not unlike Bruce Lee's father), Chan's skillful acrobatics also led to work as a stunt man on several Hong Kong-produced films—and eventually on *Fist of Fury* and *Enter the Dragon*. However, he initially had difficulty finding success as an actor in Hong Kong films. Yuan Shu explains that Chan's early failures were due to the fact that he initially attempted simply to fill the gap left by Bruce Lee. Imitating Lee, however, had not brought any actor success, and Chan was no exception. It was when Chan broke out of the mold Lee created and actually changed the kung fu genre that he met with success. Shu writes of Chan: "If his original intent was simply to reinvent himself and market himself in a landscape that had been dominated by Lee and his unfading image, Chan actually started a new wave of kung fu cinema that would change the philosophy of the genre as well as challenge Lee's image of toughness, which had been grounded in both Asian and American cultural contexts."¹²⁵ Rather than attempt to appropriate Lee's kung fu tragedy, Chan pioneered the kung fu comedy. The effect was to humanize kung fu and to soften the tough image that Bruce Lee presented. Chan's characters prefer not to fight, and much of the humor in his films comes when they attempt to escape danger. However, Chan counters the stereotype of the weak Chinese man when he does fight—his personal strength often comes through more clearly during escape sequences than

¹²⁵ Yuan Shu, "Reading the Kung Fu Film in an American Context: From Bruce Lee to Jackie Chan," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 31.2 (Summer 2003): 50-60.

fight sequences. Additionally, Chan performs most of his own stunts, sometimes to the point of personal injury, so that he himself cannot be accused of presenting an image of the traditional effeminate Asian male. Moreover, argues Shu, Chan's characters are "usually middle class in language and behavior, [and] do not have any reason to show [their] fists of fury constantly like Lee's alienated and bitter characters."¹²⁶

In presenting characters like these, Chan essentially changed the purpose of the kung fu genre. As the turbulent times of the '60s and '70s came to a close, American audiences no longer needed or wanted the violent struggle for justice presented by Bruce Lee. Instead, Chan offered a kung fu that was stripped of Lee's racial politics and nationalism in favor of the new global nature of Hong Kong cinema. Chan's films are appealing to a wider range of audiences specifically because of their multinational flavor and ability to meet the "tastes and needs of the middle class on a global scale."¹²⁷ Chan's American-produced films fared especially well. Movies like *Rumble in the Bronx* and the *Rush Hour* series appealed to American ideals of multiculturalism in the 1990s, and launched Chan to stardom in Hollywood.

Additionally, Hong Kong cinema in the 1980s and '90s began to move toward "more cerebral, edgy, and experimental films"¹²⁸ that were popular on the international market, as young filmmakers educated in the West began to return to their native Hong Kong and make more cosmopolitan films. Aside from Jackie Chan's comedy kung fu, the action genre moved away from hand-fought martial arts and in the direction of the

¹²⁶ Yuan, 51.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*.

¹²⁸ Ahmed, 192.

*wuxia*¹²⁹ swordplay epics that had been popular decades before. As Hong Kong directors "wove Western standards into Hong Kong productions,"¹³⁰ Western filmmakers began to take notice of the artistic quality of *wuxia*'s fight choreography and the romance of its settings and stories. When Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was released in 2000, it exploded onto the international scene, eventually winning several Academy Awards and BAFTAs. *Crouching Tiger*'s graceful—at times almost magical—martial arts style and wirework, combined with the appeal of stars Michelle Yeoh and Chow Yun-Fat, both ethnic Chinese actors familiar to Western audiences at that time, as well as the contribution of popular cellist Yo-Yo Ma to the soundtrack all acted to make the film incredibly popular in the United States. *Hero*, released in China in 2002 and in the United States in 2004, was given a similar reception by American audiences. Stylistic features from these new style martial arts films were also incorporated into a number of American films produced later, including the acclaimed *Matrix* trilogy.

The combination of Jackie Chan's career and the new style *wuxia* films released in the last ten years has certainly placed China and the Chinese back in the forefront of American cultural consciousness. However, these films also raise some of the same issues brought on by the initial kung fu craze. Though Frank Chin wrote his criticism of *Kung Fu* in the 1970s, one of his major points still stands: the popularity of martial arts films strengthens the stereotypical connection between Asians, specifically Japanese and Chinese, with karate and kung fu skills. Consider the Asian and Asian American actors

¹²⁹ *Wuxia* refers to a sub-genre of martial arts film, theater, and literature that draws from the chivalric tradition of the Chinese knight-errant, with the addition of sometimes fantastical elements.

¹³⁰ Ahmed, 192.

who are popular on American screens today: Bruce Lee remains arguably the best known Chinese American of the century. Other faces familiar to Americans are those of Jackie Chan, Jet Li, Zhang Ziyi, Michelle Yeoh, and Chow Yun-Fat. They are all action stars or initially became known to Americans through action roles, and none are Chinese American. Bruce Lee's redefinition of what it meant to be a Chinese in American popular culture has arguably had the inadvertent effect of carving out a niche from which Asian actors, particularly male Asian actors, in American media cannot escape now.

"Ironically," Jachinson Chan writes of Lee, "after [he] proved himself to be a bankable star, the popularity of Bruce Lee's martial arts was co-opted not to include Asian American men in the film industry, but to further marginalize and exclude them if they did not fit into the stereotype of the kung fu master."¹³¹

In addition to marginalizing Asian men who do not fit into this stereotypical role, the success of Chinese films may have had another inadvertent result. Americans are drawn to films like *Crouching Tiger* largely because of the mystery and the exoticized glamour of ancient China. A number of American-produced "Asian" period films have also been popular in the United States in recent years, including *The Last Samurai* and *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Asian faces may be more prevalent on American television and movie screens now than they were in the 1960s and '70s, but one cannot help but notice that many of these faces are kept carefully constrained to their "native" settings. Though they are far less likely to say so now than when Bruce Lee was turned down for various

¹³¹ Chan, 73.

roles in 1960s Hollywood, one wonders if producers are still reluctant to cast Asian actors in the role of the mainstream American.

Aside from these roles, filled largely by non-American Asians, what others are available to Chinese Americans? As mentioned briefly in previous chapters, science fiction television programs have been particularly good places for Chinese Americans and other minority actors to find work. In 1966, when *The Green Hornet* aired, the only Asian American on television other than Bruce Lee was George Takei, portraying the helmsman of the *USS Enterprise*. The *Star Trek* franchise, in particular, has been a kind of haven for non-mainstream stars, characters, and themes over the decades. In addition to Takei, Nichelle Nichols co-starred in the original *Star Trek* series, one of the first African American women to be featured on American television in a role that did not involve any kind of domestic work. Additionally, her onscreen kiss with William Shatner was one of the first interracial kisses on American primetime television.¹³² Later *Star Trek* series broke other taboos and challenged other mainstream notions. *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* featured a black station commander, portrayed by Avery Brooks, a native of New Orleans who first gained attention as a singer; the series also featured one of the first kisses between two women to be shown on American television.¹³³

Other science fiction and fantasy television series have also offered Asian and Asian American actors some of their only long-term recurring roles. Chinese American

¹³² The first scripted interracial kiss actually took place between Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz on "I Love Lucy," but the kiss between Uhura (Nichols) and Captain Kirk (Shatner) has entered *Trek* fan lore as the first and is often hailed by fans as evidence of the forward-thinkingness of the franchise's producers.

¹³³ The onscreen kiss between actresses Terry Farrell and Susanna Thompson took place before the now-famous "coming out" episode of *The Ellen Show*, which helped bring attention to GLBT issues in the United States.

Garrett Wang found a place on *Star Trek: Voyager*, Korean American Grace Park on the reimagined *Battlestar Galactica*, Korean Americans Daniel Dae Kim and Yunjin Kim on *Lost*, and Korean American James Kyson Lee and Japan native Masi Oka on *Heroes*.¹³⁴

There may be a number of explanations for this phenomenon, but two seem most likely. Science fiction and fantasy, even when presented first as drama and only secondarily as carriers for special effects, are firmly entrenched in the minds of most viewers as having little to do with the everyday world around them. In the same way that Asians often find roles in period dramas taking place in ancient China or feudal Japan, they often can only find leading parts in television series that do not attempt to present their very presence as "normal" or mainstream. *The Green Hornet* could present Bruce Lee in a co-starring role partly because he was the sidekick, but also in part because of the show's roots in an unrealistic, comic book-inspired setting. *Star Trek* could present a Japanese American helmsman and an African American communications officer for similar reasons.

Additionally, science fiction programs are routinely relegated to Friday night timeslots and described in terms of the "cult hit," thereby marginalizing these series in a sense, and removing them from consideration as "mainstream" television. Moreover, while many more mainstream science fiction programs like *Heroes* may not follow this rule, producers and writers working on series such as *Star Trek* and *Battlestar Galactica* have a reputation for pushing the envelope anyway, and therefore might be more likely to hire Asian American and other minority actors.

¹³⁴ George Takei has also appeared as a *Heroes* guest star several times, playing a native Japanese businessman.

Of course, this is not to say that Asian American actors never appear on dramas and other more mainstream programs. However, many of the roles filled by Asian Americans are not starring, or even co-starring, and do not recur every week. For example, Chinese American Archie Kao portrays lab technician Archie Johnson on CBS's *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, but the character is tertiary and rarely has more than a few lines. Of course, there are other problems with Archie, which will be discussed below. B. D. Wong is one of the only Chinese American male actors to appear in a regular role in a primetime television series, as Dr. George Huang on *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*. Indeed, of the recurring roles for Asian Americans on major network series, many are actually for women. Ming-Na Wen had a supporting role on *ER* for six seasons, and Lucy Liu became well known largely because of her regular role on *Ally McBeal*.¹³⁵ Korean Canadian actress Sandra Oh may be the most recognizable woman of Asian descent on American television at the moment, known for her role on *Grey's Anatomy*.

Unlike male Asian American actors, Asian American actresses do not necessarily have to conform to or overcome the Lee-inspired stereotype of the kung fu master in order to find leading roles. However, they have had their own stereotypes to overcome. Chinese American actress Anna Hu argues that Asian women are frequently typecast as the quirky sidekick or the best friend of the main female (inevitably white) character. Additionally, she says, Westerners have an accepted idea of what Asian women "should"

¹³⁵ Additionally, Wen and Liu may be the only Chinese American actresses who American audiences recognize from regular film appearances, although, like other Asian stars, both have acted primarily in action films.

look and act like, and often think that those who do not conform to those ideas are "too Americanized." Hu said of one failed audition that it was "basically an instance where who I am kind of got the better of me. They basically thought my mannerisms were too American."¹³⁶ Brittany Vuong makes essentially the same argument, saying:

The stereotype of how Asian women were viewed [during Bruce Lee's time] appears to be embedded in the minds of males even to this day. We are automatically typecast as being too typical or too 'Americanized,' in this era when we're struggling to detach ourselves from demeaning stereotypes. Whether we choose to remain traditional or to liberate ourselves, there is criticism for either choice.¹³⁷

As both Hu and Vuong point out, Asian American women are typically expected to fall into one of three categories: the warm, maternal figure; the soft-spoken, obedient object of romance or lust; or the beautiful but dangerous Dragon Lady. There seem to be few opportunities for actresses who cannot conform to at least one of these types.

The perpetuation of such racial stereotypes is the biggest obstacle standing in the way of Chinese American actors and actresses today and therefore in the way of more realistic presentations of Chinese Americans in popular media. Even those who do find themselves with regular work often find that the characters they are portraying fit into one of the stereotypes presented in earlier chapters. For example, Archie Kao's character on *CSI*, Archie Johnson, is a very capable lab technician and is well liked by his co-

¹³⁶ Bryan Robinson, "In Bruce Lee's Shadow: Asians Struggle to Create New Hollywood Images," *ABC News Online*, May 20, 2005, <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=771790&page=1> (accessed June 3, 2008).

¹³⁷ Brittany Vuong, "Fists of Fury," *VietNow Magazine*, October 31, 1996: 60.

workers—and also fits into the Model Minority trope. Archie is a fan of internet-based role-playing games and science fiction, particularly the Star Trek franchise. Consider the following exchange between Archie and CSI Nick Stokes on the third season episode "Random Acts of Violence":

NICK: Hey, Archie, what's that "Star Trek" episode with that guy and the forehead thingy and the time portal...?

ARCHIE: Original, TNG, Deep Space Nine, Voyager, or Enterprise? Or were you thinking of Farscape?¹³⁸

Nick, a Texas native with classic good looks, nice manners, and always a smile for the ladies, initiates the conversation in order to demonstrate Archie's apparent nerdiness to another character. Although Archie is redeemed in later seasons with greater depth of character, in rattling off a string of science fiction series to the All-American Nick, he certainly fits the mold of the well-educated but slightly socially-inept geek that young Asian American men are frequently placed in.

Another classic example of the Model Minority on American television was Garrett Wang's character, Harry Kim, on the since-canceled *Star Trek: Voyager*. In interviews, Wang has described his excitement at the time to be one of the very few Chinese American actors to have a weekly co-starring role on a major American television series. However, young Harry Kim, the ship's operations officer, fits every stereotype surrounding the Asian Model Minority in current American pop culture. He is an excellent student, graduated Starfleet Academy with top honors, the only child of two

¹³⁸ "Random Acts of Violence," *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation—the Complete Third Season*, DVD. Directed by Danny Cannon. Los Angeles, CA: Columbia Broadcasting System, 2004.

dotting parents, shy with women, eager to please but respectful of the captain's authority—he even plays a musical instrument. However, while Wang has since noted the character's early stereotyped role on the show, it must be said that Harry Kim, even more so than Archie Johnson, developed as a character during the show's run, eventually shedding his model behavior and status.

Garrett Wang makes another observation about Harry Kim—in later seasons, Harry, in Wang's words, "Definitely had a lot of romance." In a 2003 interview, Wang pointed out that Asian men are rarely portrayed in romantic roles, particularly opposite non-Asian women, saying, "I'm very proud to say that I'm one of the few Asian American male actors who has been able to kiss a woman onscreen." Indeed, Chinese American men before Bruce Lee were almost always presented as desexualized at best, and effeminate at worse. The early stereotypes of Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan did not fall into the latter category, but the classic depiction of the Chinese coolie lounging on pillows in a Chinatown opium den nearly always did, conjuring the image of the exotic, emasculated, and high-voiced Oriental. While Jachinson Chan has noted that Bruce Lee did much to challenge these stereotypes by presenting the image of a strong, virile (and often bare-chested) Chinese man, he rarely engaged in any direct romantic or sexual liaisons onscreen. Moreover, the same is true even for stars of later decades. Jackie Chan, Jet Li, Chow Yun-Fat none ever seems to end up with the girl, particularly if the girl is white. Garrett Wang's excitement at his character's onscreen dalliances, then, is

understandable. Additionally, Wang said in the same interview, "I'm positive I had the first kiss onscreen between an Asian man and an African American woman."¹³⁹

Fighting these stereotypes has been, and continues to be, an uphill battle for Chinese American actors. What is important to remember is that these are not simply individual actors struggling for a way to make a living, but also Chinese Americans who are not only fighting to find work, but to find characters who fall outside mainstream American expectations of what Asians should and should not look like, say, and do. Bruce Lee's importance lies not in breaking these molds, for he did not break many of them, but in being the first Chinese American to challenge them. Those who came before Lee—Anna May Wong and Nancy Kwan, to name just two—were more often than not forced into the same stereotypical roles. It was Lee who, for the first time, was able to do something different.

At the same time, however, Bruce Lee also created new stereotypes against which many Chinese Americans are now struggling. In particular, the new ideals of Asian male masculinity that were built up around Lee have been troubling to many Chinese Americans. *Exit the Dragon* playwright Eric Michael Zee said in 1997, "Bruce Lee himself was so limited by his own 'Bruce Lee' image."¹⁴⁰ Indeed, Lee himself often lamented the fact that his fans so expected him to perform kung fu in all of his films that he was not able to work on other projects as he would have liked. Interviewed at thirty-two, months before his death, Lee said, "I think the fighter over 45 should sit back and

¹³⁹ Garrett Wang, "Timecapsule: Harry Kim," *Star Trek: Voyager—the Complete Fourth Season*, DVD. Los Angeles, CA: Paramount, 2004.

¹⁴⁰ Joe Adcock, "'Exit the Dragon' Playwright Aims to Slay Asian American Stereotypes," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, September 26, 1997.

watch the emergence of the new ones."¹⁴¹ While he looked forward to concentrating more on scriptwriting and directing, one has to wonder what Lee would have faced once his fighting days were over. In a culture where he had essentially helped to build the image of the Chinese man as a martial arts master, what would his role have been as a prominent Chinese American man who was no longer master of the kung fu world?

Perhaps Frank Chin, after all, was correct in his criticism of the kung fu genre in the 1970s, and perhaps Eric Michael Zee was correct in his insistence, in 1997, that Chinese Americans must move past the legacy left behind by Bruce Lee. Although a few actors have managed to find roles that allow them to abandon the traditional stereotypes surrounding Asians, mainstream American views of Chinese Americans—views shaped largely images on the small and silver screens—are held back by the portrayal of Chinese Americans in popular culture. It may be time to acknowledge Bruce Lee's contribution to the struggle for Chinese American identity and then leave it behind for the next new stage.

¹⁴¹ Pang Cheng Lian, "Inside Bruce Lee," *New Nation* (Singapore), August 16, 1972, in *Words of the Dragon*, 143.

CONCLUSIONS

The evolution of Chinese America has seen one of the most hated (and regulated) immigrant groups in American history gradually transform into an integrated ethnic minority that plays a strong role in American society while still maintaining its unique identity. Few ethnic groups in the nation's history have endured the level of restrictive legislation that the Chinese faced during the Exclusion Era—not only the Exclusion Act itself, but also related labor, housing, and citizenship laws, as well as such xenophobic minutiae as restrictions on the wearing of queue hairstyles. Even after World War II and the end of Exclusion, Chinese Americans—many from families that had been in the United States for generations at that point—found themselves the continued objects of suspicion and mistrust. The popular culture of the era reflects mainstream American attitudes of the era; China's involvement in the Cold War only added a new dimension to derogatory stereotypes presented in popular media, including print and film. Some early Chinese American stars, such as Anna May Wong, attempted to mitigate the negative portrayal of Chinese and other Asians in the US media, but, as was the case for Wong, they often found themselves relegated to playing supporting roles or characters that only shored up existing stereotypes. Not until the 1960s and 70s were mainstream Americans exposed to media that truly countered these negative images on a widespread basis—television shows and films that not only altered the way that Chinese Americans were viewed by non-Asians, but also how they defined their own identity at a time when modern ideas of ethnic identity were just emerging.

If one views Chinese American identity as a puzzle, Bruce Lee might seem only a small piece. And yet, Lee left an indelible mark on the way that Chinese Americans are viewed—by themselves and by their non-Chinese countrymen. The Orientalist images of the Dragon Lady, the coolie, and the servile houseboy persisted for more than a century before Bruce Lee delivered one of the first blows to them that actually resonated with mainstream Americans. In a relatively short period—from 1966 to 1973—Lee was a recognizable national figure, not just to the Chinese American youths who were engaged in a struggle for self-identity, but to non-Chinese Americans as well, to some of the same people who, only decades earlier, had not only bought into Orientalist stereotypes, but had actively supported anti-Chinese legislation. While it is true that Lee also contributed a new kind of stereotype, his unique projection of himself—as a man both Chinese and American, and as a Chinese who refused to conform to stereotypical images—made him one of the first individuals capable of single-handedly changing American perceptions of Chinese. That his presence persisted in American popular imagination long after his death is evidence of his importance to a growing acceptance of Chinese Americans. To put it succinctly, "Bruce Lee made it cool to be Chinese."

Despite Lee's impact, however, it is also true that the image he nearly single-handedly created—that of the carefully controlled martial arts master—is one that is just as dated today as the image of the coolie was in the 1960s. What is important, then, is not Lee's image, viewed in a vacuum, but what that image did to alter the way that Chinese are treated in American popular culture. What is important is that Bruce Lee helped open eyes to the fact that stereotypes can be challenged, altered, or struck down. The struggle

of Chinese Americans now, then, must be to follow in that tradition of challenging stereotypes—even if it is a Lee-created stereotype they challenge—just as the struggle of non-Chinese Americans must be to challenge their own perceptions of the "accepted" roles played by Chinese

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