

**Title:** Lau, Kar-leung

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**Author bio:** Tom Cunliffe is an associate lecturer in film studies at UCL. His essays have appeared in journals including *Film History*, *Framework* and *Screen*. He is currently working on a book about the filmmaker Lung Kong and is co-editing a special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* on the topic of the politics of Hong Kong left-wing cinema 1950s-1970s.

**b. 28 July, 1934. Guangzhou, Guangdong, Republic of China**

**d. 25 June, 2013. Tai Wai, Sha Tin, Hong Kong**

The kung fu genre and Shaw Brothers studio gave Lau Kar-leung all the tools and resources he needed to create an exhilarating body of work that celebrates the beauty and transformative qualities of martial arts, in all their varied forms. Lau pushes the boundaries of the four walls of the frame in creating images that explode with colour, movement and rhythm. His tenure as director at Shaw Brothers from the mid-'70s to mid-'80s is a case study of the relatively rare symbiosis that can occur between auteur, genre and studio, given the right set of circumstances.

### **Origins**

Lau's martial arts lineage can be traced back to the legendary Cantonese martial artist Wong Fei-hung. A second generation disciple of Wong, Lau practiced Hong Quan fist at his father's gymnasium from the age of 9 to 28. This style was founded by Hong Xiguan and developed by Wong, amongst others. Roger Garcia notes that Lau's approach to the kung fu genre was influenced by his experiences growing up surrounded by the legends and lore of martial arts.<sup>1</sup> In the '50s, Lau took bit parts in the long series of Cantonese films chronicling the life and legends of Wong. This folk hero would take centre stage in two of Lau's later films: *Liu A-Cai yu Huang Fei-Hong* (*Challenge of the Masters*, 1976) and *Wu guan* (*Martial Club*, 1981). These films subverted tradition by dramatising origin stories of Wong, who is in the rocky process of becoming the figure of moral authority he is usually depicted as.

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Garcia, "The Autarkic World of Liu Chia-Liang," in Lau Shing-Hon (eds) *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1980) p. 121

Legendary figures of Southern Chinese martial arts often appear in Lau's films, where he negotiates and reconfigures their legacies in conjunction with his own.

From the early '60s, Lau worked as martial arts choreographer on numerous Cantonese *wuxia* films before entering Shaw Brothers in 1966 in the same role, which proved to be a vital training ground to master capturing martial arts action on film. At Shaw Brothers, he mainly worked on Chang Cheh's films. In 1972, Chang shifted his focus almost entirely to Southern Chinese martial arts traditions: the master/disciple relationship that transmitted these traditions through the ages, mythologies related to Shaolin heroes and the Shaolin Temple as a site of political resistance against the Manchu government. Tony Rayns argues that Lau largely guided this change in Chang's focus, especially since these are all themes that Lau would focus on when he started directing his own films in 1975.<sup>2</sup>

### **In the Directors Chair**

A clear love and passion for martial arts punctuates every one of Lau's films made at Shaw Brothers. Using all the resources the Shaws could offer him, Lau realised beautiful sets of bustling towns and rural training locations full of pastel blue skies and at times a mythical, magical ambience. Rarely shooting on location (with the exception of *Zhang men ren (The Lady is the Boss, 1983)* - Lau's only Shaw Brothers film set in contemporary times) Lau thrived on tightly controlled sets where the colours and contours of the stage could be moulded to accommodate and exaggerate the action.

The Shaw Brothers' preference for opulent set design was conducive to Lau's historical world-creation. In contrast to his peers (like King Hu, who could not accept Run Run Shaw's attempts to reign in his stylistic self-assertion in the name of efficiency and profit margins) Lau found relative comfort within the confines of the Shaw Brothers to realise his vision. He was able to build up a staple of regular actors and collaborators, creating resonances across his films and aiding his creative process. The popularity of kung fu in the mid-'70s allowed Lau to work exclusively in this

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<sup>2</sup> Tony Rayns, "Resilience: The Cinema and Liu Jialiang," in Li Cheuk-to (eds) *A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 2002) p. 51

genre. He also created far fewer films than his contemporaries at Shaw Brothers' working in the martial arts/*wuxia* canon. In the decade from 1975-1985: Chor Yuen directed 39 films, Chang Cheh made 35 films before leaving the Shaws in 1983 while Lau directed 17. This suggests (at the very least) that Lau had more time to focus on each film, making it easier to find a better balance between creativity and survival.

Lau's cinema takes the aestheticisation of kung fu as its formal principle and the characters who populate his worlds are shaped by their relationship to kung fu. Audiences are often introduced to the specific martial arts styles featured in the film in the opening sequence, as a fight scene plays out behind the credits against a red backdrop. Physically demanding training and combat scenes, captured in medium-long shots with limited use of editing cuts, imbue the films with a documentary quality as the intricacies of this high velocity movement can't be acted out without actually doing it. Far from still, the camera is frequently in concert with the rhythm of the martial arts. In *Wu guan (Martial Club, 1981)*, the camera oscillates from floor to aerial shots as Wong Fei-hung (Gordon Liu) and Master Shan (Wang Lung-wei) exchange blows in an increasingly narrow alleyway, about 90 cm wide at its crux. The camera leads, follows and hovers over their bodies as they bounce off the walls.

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FILE NAME: 1

CAPTION: *Martial Club*

This penchant for claustrophobic fight scenes that unfold over and under obstacles in cramped corners of the set signals Lau's innovation in the genre. Martial artists spar in-between eaves in an attic in *Shi ba ban wu yi (Legendary Weapons of China, 1982)* and through panels of a wooden fence in *Zhong hua zhang fu (Heroes of the East, 1978)*. The camera is in dialogue with the actors movements, zooming in then ricocheting away from them. Lau's compositions place fighters in centre stage as weapons flash in and out of the corners of the frame. Off-screen action bursts into our peripheral vision, underscoring the dynamism of Lau's cinematography.

While Lau's shooting style is more earth-bound and legible than the *wuxia* flights of fancy from directors like King Hu, bodies being propelled through space in slow

motion is a staple of his filmography. Against a soundscape of billowing wind, without the jar of the cut. Moments of such physical magic abound in Lau's cinema. It can be pushed into fantasy realms, as in a beautiful sequence in *Legendary Weapons of China* where four men jump off a balcony, open their umbrellas and descend in slow motion as if they were equipped with miniature parachutes.

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CAPTION: *Legendary Weapons of China*

### **Transformation**

The transformative quality of Lau's kung fu is reflected in the mythical playgrounds of many of his films. Concocting fairy-tale worlds on studio sets, *Feng hou (Mad Monkey Kung Fu, 1979)* and *Yu mao san xi jin mao shu (Cat Vs. Rat, 1982)* demonstrates Lau's capacity for fantasy. Sets are soaked in a warm magenta glow as sunsets bathe the horizon.

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CAPTION: *Mad Monkey Kung Fu*

When delegated generic revenge plots to work with, Lau used them as springboards to move onto more complex terrain in the martial arts canon. Such as questioning gender norms, negotiating authority in the master/disciple relationship and the nature/culture of competition. This articulates a flexible, borderline improvised sketch of his evolving thoughts on martial arts and their place in society. Sexual politics dominate *Hong Xi Guan (Executioners from Shaolin, 1977)*. Here, the historical figure and founder of Hong Quan Fist, Hong Xiguan (Chen Kuan-Tai), refuses to accept his wife Fang Yung-chun's (Lily Li) advice to learn her feminine crane style to defeat the white-browed Pai Mei (Lo Lieh). Pai Mei has mastered a soft, internal form of kung fu that allows him to retract his genitals and trap opponents' legs with his thighs. Hong uses a hard, external style of kung fu and argues that his masculine Tiger Claw will suffice until he is defeated by Pai Mei's technique. Reflecting Lau's own ideas around the flexibility of thought that one should apply to the development of kung fu,

the couple's son Hong Wen-ting (Wong Yu) proceeds to utilise both masculine and feminine styles to ultimately defeat Pai Mei.

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CAPTION: *Executioners from Shaolin*

The comedy of marriage diegesis in *Heroes of the East* segues from arguments between Chinese husband Ho Tao (Gordon Liu) and Japanese wife Yuka Mizuno (Mizuno Yuko) over which nation's martial arts is superior, to a series of fights between Ho and different Japanese martial arts experts. Although a perfunctory answer is given, the film is really a celebration and acceptance of different martial arts styles in all their multiplicity. The film does not feature a single death.

### **Training**

Lau devotes a huge amount of screen time to training sequences, which further echoes the transformative potential of kung fu as an amateur becomes the master. The tendency to skirt over, or subsume revenge plots to focus on training, is most evident in *Shao Lin san shi liu fang* (*The 36<sup>th</sup> Chamber of Shaolin*, 1978) which opens and closes with a perfectly serviceable plot about undercover rebels fighting the Manchus. The student San Te (Gordon Liu) becomes involved in the rebellion which leads to the Manchus killing his father, friends and teacher. Seeking revenge, San enters the Shaolin Monastery to train. An hour of the 115 minute film is devoted to San's training. This entirely plot-less middle hour is the most thrilling part of the film, as San trains his body and mind for several years in the monastery. The trials of training dwarf the revenge plot. The first chamber requires our hero to bounce off a floating log to traverse a pond.

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CAPTION: *The 36<sup>th</sup> Chamber of Shaolin*

This sequence lasts for around 11 minutes, 10 minutes more than most directors would have spent, but not a second wasted. After numerous failures, San begins practising his balance alone at night by jumping from one rolling wooden bucket to

another. Finally, he (and we, as an audience) are rewarded. His ascension through the first chamber is captured in one slow motion shot as San moves through the air, interrupted by a sequence of rapidly edited shots as he nimbly touches down on the logs, before propelling himself back into the air to reach the other side of the pond. This cinematic language mimics the monk's point that, "Power helps speed while balance keeps your body stable," as slow motion precedes and succeeds the fast paced edits in the middle. As he lands on the other side of the pond (dry, for the first time) the camera zooms in on the previously strict and stern senior monk nodding his head, appreciating San's progress.

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CAPTION: *The 36<sup>th</sup> Chamber of Shaolin*

San is the audiences' on-screen surrogate as we feel the physical strain experienced in the chambers. While the challenges initially yield sweat and bruises, San's movement becomes effortless as he masters each technique. Audience anxiety, induced by witnessing his pain, is offset by the elation of making it through another chamber. Each training sequence is a direct illustration of there being no short-cuts in the learning process, as San's emotional and intellectual development mirrors his physical prowess.

While the revenge plot is a springboard for the plot-less training sequences, Lau does hint at what an institution like the Shaolin Monastery could provide in the real world. At the film's conclusion, San becomes the master of a 36<sup>th</sup> chamber that trains lay people in martial arts so they can defend themselves against Manchu oppression. A political project encouraging mass participation.

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CAPTION: *Mad Monkey Kung Fu*

*Mad Monkey Kung Fu* is another ostensible revenge film, that's ultimately about the virtues of training. Uncle Chan (Lau Kar-leung) is framed by gangster and brothel-

owner Tuan (Lo Lieh). To spare his life, Uncle Chan's sister Miss Chan (Kara Hui) becomes Tuan's concubine. Tuan has Uncle Chan's hands smashed, so he cannot take revenge. Reluctantly, Uncle Chan accepts Little Monkey (Hsiao Ho) as his protégé. The film focuses on some of the most beautiful, inventive and exhilarating training sequences in cinematic history. For dexterity, Little Monkey uproots potatoes with rocks attached to his fingers. For speed, Little Monkey is only allowed to eat if he can manoeuvre his hands quickly enough to grab a roasting potato from a fire. Other sequences include mid-air push ups, achieved by wrapping his hands and feet around tree vines, and "sleeping monkey training" which requires him to sleep on a narrow stretch of rope. After landing a hit on his master, the two smile at one another. Little Monkey is nearly ready to be his master's hands. For Lau, resistance begins when one starts training to be better than their oppressor. Progress on this mission is an end unto itself. Such a feeling of merriment ripples through many of Lau's films as he showcases kung fu's capability of bringing out the best in people.

The master/disciple dynamic in *Mad Monkey Kung Fu* is unusual insofar as we see the master's failure to live up to the high level of ethics and etiquette that would be expected of him. Uncle Chan's alcoholism led to him losing his sister and his ability to fight. Made in 1979, the film signals a change in the canon and the world it emerged from. The kind of kung fu Lau practised, on and off the silver screen, was slowly going out of fashion in popular culture.

### **Master/Disciple: Past/Present**

Man Fung Yip argues that such a reverent attitude to tradition, the patriarch and the figure of the master/*shifu* was becoming anachronistic in the Hong Kong of the late '70s.

Rapid modernization and the opening up of the society to Western influences; unprecedented economic growth and the rise of a utilitarian and opportunistic mentality; the rise of the postwar baby boomers, with their new, more liberal perspectives – all this contributed to such a change and caused a drastic rethinking of traditional values and relations.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Man-Fung Yip, *Martial Arts Cinema and Hong Kong Modernity: Aesthetic, Representation, Circulation*, 108.

Yip argues that *Lan tou He* (*Dirty Ho*, 1979) is the clearest example of Lau responding to the trend of increasingly cynical kung fu comedies that negotiated the deterioration of the master-disciple relationship in the face of Hong Kong's rapidly developing dog-eat-dog capitalist subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> *Dirty Ho* pulls at the loosely bound threads of the master/disciple relationship by focusing on the relationship between the art and wine loving prince Wang Tsun Hsin (Gordon Liu) roaming around incognito (which provokes some spectacular and inventively choreographed martial arts fights) and a good-natured thief 'Dirty' Ho Jen (Wong Yu). One of the prince's brothers is trying to have him killed for succession purposes and Wang comes to rely on Ho for protection after he is injured. Concurrently, the thief relies on the prince to get him out of trouble with the law and later as a kung fu teacher. While their bond strengthens, audiences are constantly reminded that Wang's exploitation of Ho is the foundation of their relationship. The film concludes with a freeze frame of Ho being thrown out of the palace, immediately after Ho saved Wang's life.

This clear demonstration of class inequality reconfigures earlier formations of the master/disciple relationship, based on the traditional values of benevolence and honour. Ultimately, the master figure continues to dominate the symbolic world of the film. This reflects a desire to uphold the older patriarchal order in a modern way by making the master "even more devious and conniving, more exemplary of the 'survival-of-the-fittest' mentality and the utilitarian spirit characteristic of the modern capitalist world than his young disciple."<sup>5</sup> These negotiations show how Lau was attempting to adapt martial arts ideas about hierarchy and the transfer of knowledge relative to developing generic, commercial and socio-political conditions in Hong Kong and its film industry.

Roger Garcia argues that the master/disciple relationship dramatised here has shifted into a political realm due to Ho's position in relation to Wang. In *The Autarkic World of Liu Chia-Liang*, Garcia states that Ho is "consistently relegated to the subservient role indicating the underlying theme of the film as a study in personal and social

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 111-114.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 114.



exploitation.”<sup>6</sup> The “master” in *Dirty Ho* is a prince of great privilege and power. The depiction of the exploitative dynamic he has with Ho can be read as critical of the class structures in capitalist society. Labour disputes were a common social phenomenon in ’70s Hong Kong due to the lack of protection for worker’s rights and exploitative employment practices. Lau’s *Shao Lin da peng da shi (Return to the 36th Chamber, 1979)*, set in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), features workers at a Manchu-owned dye factory striking over pay cuts and exploitative working conditions.

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CAPTION: *Legendary Weapons of China*

*Legendary Weapons of China* shows how socio-political disruption can affect a master’s relationship to their martial art. Lau plays Lei Kung, who has a complicated relationship with kung fu, but concludes his journey with a beautiful affirmation of his art. Set during the Boxer Rebellion (an anti-foreign, anti-colonial, and anti-Christian uprising) Chinese masters of kung fu clans join forces to fight imperialism and train their bodies to become bulletproof. Lei is in self-imposed exile, because he cannot bear to see his students slaughtered while experimenting with techniques to resist Western weapons. Viewed as a traitor by his peers, they send assassins to kill him. Lei’s shaking hands reveal how his skills have regressed. In order to defend himself against multiple assassins, he trains with multiple weapons. Initially unable to stop his hands shaking, through practice he gains confidence and blossoms once again. It is a magical sight to behold. The sequence becomes radiant, because we see how he is coming to terms with his relationship with kung fu. There’s a moment of stasis at the end of each demonstration as he looks at the weapon, satisfied that he is recovering his long dormant skill. This sequence truly shines with an abiding love of kung fu, in cognisance of the existential threat modernity poses to the canon.

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<sup>6</sup> Roger Garcia, “The Autarkic World of Liu Chia-Liang,” in Lau Shing-Hon (eds) *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1980) p. 130.

CAPTION: *Legendary Weapons of China*

Lau's work in the '80s accentuates the realities of irreconcilable forces in cultural and socio-political landscapes that complicate the ideals of martial arts. This is foregrounded in *Wu Lang ba gua gun (The 8 Diagram Pole Fighter, 1983)*, one of the last films Lau made at Shaw Brothers. While revenge is secondary to training in his other films, here, revenge leads to madness and despair. An incandescent rage fills this film, which the relentlessly brutal and ferocious fight scenes contribute to. Opening on a stark, dark, apocalyptic sound stage, five of the seven sons of the honourable Yang family are killed on the battlefield. Of the two surviving sons, one loses his mind in anger and despair. The other, Yang Wu-lang (Gordon Liu), eventually retreats to a monastery where he learns the eight diagram pole fighting style. This technique is used to brutal and gory effect in the final fight scene against the powerful warlords that betrayed his family. In films like *The 36<sup>th</sup> Chamber of Shaolin* or *Zhang bei (My Young Auntie, 1981)*, if one fighter's arm is injured, their opponent will proceed with one arm to continue the fight on even terms. Such principles of fairness and etiquette are nowhere to be seen in *Eight Diagram Pole Fighter's* furious finale, which is awash with bloody vengeance and gore unlike anything else in Lau's oeuvre. The ferocity of violence questions the use of martial arts (we are a far cry from the deathless celebration of martial arts in *Heroes of the East*) and offers no chance of conciliation. The film ends with Yang walking off into the distance, alone. Chaotic times, which kung fu no longer seemed to hold the answers to. Significantly, this was Lau's last major masterpiece as the Shaw Brothers studio collapsed and the kung fu genre's heyday was receding into the distance.

### **After the Kung Fu Zeitgeist**

Lau's body of work presents one of the greatest examples in film history of a director harnessing the industrial complex and commercial genres to realise a distinctly personal and exhilarating vision. This was fundamental to the development of the kung fu genre and its fate and fortunes overseas: exemplified by the massive influence *The 36<sup>th</sup> Chamber of Shaolin* had on RZA and the Wu Tang Clan. After Lau left Shaw Brothers, his output became more sporadic and uneven, as if he could not find his voice outside the confines and comfort of the studio system and the kung fu genre. The film industry's move towards modern action thrillers did not gel well with Lau's

aesthetic preferences, as demonstrated by the fact that he only directed one contemporary film during his tenure at Shaw Brothers. Lau favoured a mythical past in which martial arts culture could flourish and right the wrongs perpetuated in society. The evolving commercial, political and socio-cultural conditions in Hong Kong affected Lau's vision and impacted the trajectory of his career.

His subsequent work included directing the fun Chow Yun-fat modern day action flick *Lo foo chut gang* (*Tiger on the Beat*, 1986), a cameo appearance that completely steals the show in Sammo Hung's majestic *Qun long xi feng* (*Pedicab Driver*, Sammo Kam-Bo Hung, 1989), starring in the terrific kung fu action comedy *Kit ji jin si* (*The Scorpion King*, David Lai, 1992), co-directing *Jui kuen II* (*Drunken Master II*, 1994) with Jackie Chan and working on one of Tsui Hark's best post-millennial films *Qi jian* (*Seven Swords*, 2005) as both martial arts choreographer and actor. However, it is the roughly decade-long period between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s that has etched Lau's name into the pages of film history. The Shaw Brothers studio was Lau's gymnasium, where he could reanimate and bring back to flickering life the legends, lore and love of martial arts that was a part of his very being.

### **Filmography**

*Zhui ma lao* (*Drunken Monkey*, 2003)  
*Jui kuen II* (*Drunken Master III*, 1994)  
*Jui kuen II* (*Drunken Master II*, 1990)  
*Lao hu chu geng II* (*Tiger on the Beat 2*, 1989)  
*San jui gaai paak dong* (*Aces Go Places V: The Terracotta Hit*, 1988)  
*Lo foo chut gang* (*Tiger on the Beat*, 1986)  
*Nan bei Shao Lin* (*Shaolin Temple 3: Martial Arts of Shaolin*, 1985)  
*Pi li shi jie* (*Disciples of the 36th Chamber*, 1984)  
*Wu Lang ba gua gun* (*The 8 Diagram Pole Fighter*, 1983)  
*Zhang men ren* (*The Lady Is the Boss*, 1983)  
*Yu mao san xi jin mao shu* (*Cat vs Rat*, 1982)  
*Shi ba ban wu yi* (*Legendary Weapons of China*, 1981)  
*Zhang bei* (*My Young Auntie*, 1981)  
*Wu guan* (*Martial Club*, 1980)  
*Shao Lin da peng da shi* (*Return to the 36th Chamber*, 1979)  
*Feng hou* (*Mad Monkey Kung Fu*, 1979)  
*Lan tou He* (*Dirty Ho*, 1979)  
*Mao shan jiang shi quan* (*Spiritual Boxer II*, 1978)  
*Zhong hua zhang fu* (*Heroes of the East*, 1978)  
*Tang Lang* (*Shaolin Mantis*, 1978)  
*Zui jia bo sha* (*Breakout from Oppression*, 1978)  
*Shao Lin san shi liu fang* (*The 36th Chamber of Shaolin*, 1977)  
*Hong Xi Guan* (*Executioners from Shaolin*, 1976)

*Liu A-Cai yu Huang Fei-Hong (Challenge of the Masters, 1975)*  
*Shen da (The Spiritual Boxer, 1975)*

### **Bibliography**

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Tony Rayns, "Resilience: The Cinema and Liu Jialiang," in Li Cheuk-to (eds) *A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 2002) p. 51-57

Man-Fung Yip, *Martial Arts Cinema and Hong Kong Modernity: Aesthetic, Representation, Circulation* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017)

### **Endnotes**