

CONFERENCE REPORT

BRUCE LEE'S CULTURAL LEGACIES

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Cardiff University

11-12 July 2018

Bruce Lee has been dead for nearly half a century, but his status has not waned. He made Chinese martial arts famous all over the world. Indeed, the term 'kung fu' arguably became a household term largely because of Bruce Lee. He not only introduced the West to kung fu via film, but actually introduced changes and developments in the genres of kung fu movies, ultimately establishing it as a global film genre. In the process, he changed long-standing stereotypes about Asians in the Western world.

As the years have passed, the Bruce Lee phenomenon produced multiple legacies. This is why, on July 11-12, 2018, Paul Bowman and Kyle Barrowman held the conference 'Bruce Lee's Cultural Legacies' in the School of Journalism, Media, and Culture at Cardiff University, UK. In attendance were more than 40 scholars from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Hungary, Ireland, Hong Kong and other countries and regions, all keen to explore and discuss Bruce Lee and his cultural legacies from a wide variety of perspectives – including film and television, advertising, sociology, philosophy, ethnology, digital technology, and more.

As Paul Bowman himself proposed in his own presentation, Bruce Lee set the terms of the first martial arts 'landscape' to become mainstream in the United States. He built a cultural bridge between the East and the West, revolutionized martial arts, and shattered the Western world's stereotypes of the East. However, the oriental image he constructed also played to the imagination of Westerners. So, when we are talking about Bruce Lee, Bowman proposed, we are often talking not about a person, but a symbol, a multi-modal image. Everyone has his or her own Bruce Lee in their heart.

Journalist, best-selling author, and most recent biographer of Bruce Lee, Matthew Polly, was also present, giving a talk which provided behind-the-scenes insights and perspectives on the life and times of Bruce Lee. Polly was there to promote his own book, *Bruce Lee: A Life* (2018), the composition of which was based on extensive archival research and more than 100 in-depth interviews with Bruce Lee's relatives, friends, training partners, colleagues, and even secret lovers. In Polly's own presentation, he discussed how, contrary to his epic, heroic screen persona, the real life of Bruce Lee was comprised of intense passions, emotions and complex experiences, some unique and others utterly ordinary, and argued that Lee was a rather troubled human being.

However, among all the conference topics, a focus on Bruce Lee's film and media work and legacies was most common, with most talks discussing his films and television shows and their intertextual legacies in contexts such as adverts and video games.

CONTRIBUTORS

Xiujie Ma, Shanghai University of Sport/Handan University
Zizheng Yu, Cardiff University

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It is significant that, after starring in two films (*The Big Boss* (1971) and *Fist of Fury* (1972)), Lee formed his own production company and wrote, directed, and starred in his own project, *The Way of the Dragon* (1972). Eric Pellerin, an assistant professor at City University of New York, explored the transition period between Lee's work at Golden Harvest and his work under the banner of his own Concord Production. Pellerin discussed how the combination of Lee's starring vehicles for Golden Harvest breaking box-office records – and thereby earning Lee considerable clout – and Raymond Chow's belief in fostering artistic freedom allowed him to successfully establish himself beyond the confines of the traditional studio system, with its contract player model. Pellerin also juxtaposed the aesthetics and the choreography in Lee's films at Golden Harvest, in the films directed by Lo Wei, and Lee's own style in *The Way of the Dragon*, examining similarities and differences as well as their significance in understanding Lee as a filmmaker and Hong Kong as a site of film production.

Glen Mimura, an associate professor at the University of California Irvine's School of Film and Media, proposed that among all of Bruce Lee's cultural legacies, his kung fu movies have had the most profound impact. Mimura pointed out that *The Way of the Dragon* is one of Lee's most important films. Aside from being Lee's lone completed directorial effort, in *The Way of the Dragon* Lee projects a different symbol of Asian masculinity. Lee's protagonist, Tang Lung, defeats white, Western villains, from the Italian gangsters to Bob Wall and, of course, Chuck Norris, and in doing so he established a new sense of (embodied and embodyable) Asian strength. Mimura also postulated as one reason for its success in the West, despite its ostensibly unpalatable jingoism, the cultural context of 1960s West Coast America amidst the counterculture and Civil Rights movements.

From a very different film studies perspective, John Twycross, a senior lecturer in digital media production at Oxford Brookes University, used dynamics of computing to analyze Bruce Lee's martial arts movements. He talked about how it is impossible to reconstruct Bruce Lee's movements via motion capture but that digital capture could represent a leap forward, beyond such disappointing fighting video games as those put out by the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). Twycross also explained that, beyond trying to simulate Lee's movements, another difficulty is simulating his facial expressions. In pursuit of an accurate and plausible digital Bruce Lee, Twycross went through a computer application called 'Boss fighter', a program in which users can compete against a Bruce Lee 'clone' capable of reflecting Lee's unique fighting style.

While film and television shows have in a sense kept Lee alive even beyond his death, an underexplored realm in which the 'Bruce Lee Phenomenon' persists is the world of advertising. Sally Chan, senior lecturer in advertising media at the University of Leeds, explained the impact of Bruce Lee on TV commercials. She listed the top ten advertisements related to Bruce Lee: Levi's jeans (Bartle Bogle Hegarty advertising company, 1997), Lipton Brisk Iced Tea (JWT New York advertising company, 2000); Doritos (BMP DDB advertising company, 2008), Nokia N96 (JWT Beijing advertising company, 2008), Johnnie Walker (Bartle Bogle Hegarty advertising company, 2013), the Mazda 3 (Berlin Cameron United advertising company, 2014), the Skoda superb (Publicis India advertising company, 2016), the BMW M4 GTS (BBDO Intertone China advertising company, 2017), Body Armor Sport Water (Brooklyn Brothers advertising agency, 2018), and Boost (snap LDN advertising company, 2018). These advertisements all attempt to cash-in on some aspect of Bruce Lee, whether his film and television work or his martial arts philosophy.

For instance, in 2013, alcohol company Johnnie Walker joined forces with American director Joseph Kahn and produced a TV commercial called 'Game Changer'. In it, an aged Bruce Lee, speaking Mandarin, returns to the 'be water' theme he made famous. Accordingly, Chan argued advertisers can be seen as redeploying images and ideas that people take most seriously about Lee, in order to sell more product. In this way, a successful advertisement is one that not only promotes products, but might also promote the cultural legacies of Bruce Lee.

From a very different perspective, Colin McGuire, a researcher in the music department at University College Cork, observed that in his *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* (1975) Lee emphasized the concepts of timing and rhythm in martial arts. In working through the *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, McGuire sought to reinterpret Lee's conception of 'fighting rhythm'. In addition to analyses of Lee's fight scenes, notably his fighting rhythm against Chuck Norris in *The Way of the Dragon*, McGuire also discussed his empirical study of a Chinese kung fu club in Canada, connecting Lee's innovations with the club's use of musical rhythm in timing in relation to martial arts demonstrations. As McGuire argued, it is highly beneficial to martial artists of any style to cultivate a sense of rhythm and a sense of timing, to be able to 'listen to' and 'hear' combat, in order to grow as a martial artist.

In a similar vein, Caterina McEvoy, Senior Lecturer at Leeds College of Music, focused on Lee's martial arts philosophy and its relation to sound art. Focusing in particular on installations and percussion, McEvoy connected the philosophical components of jeet kune do, namely Lee's Daoist and Buddhist influences, with key concepts in music performance such as phasing, timing, and improvisation.

In an interesting twist, David Brown of Cardiff Metropolitan University analyzed Lee from the perspective of physical charm and charisma. Combining the insights of Max Weber and Chris Shilling, Brown explored the nature and significance of Lee's physicality and his body as a force on society and a source of global change.

Also coming from Cardiff Metropolitan University, George Jennings went in a slightly different direction. Jennings also used Chris Shilling as a theoretical jumping off point, but he was concerned with analyzing Lee as the founder of a martial art. Using a comparative approach that juxtaposed Lee and his founding of jeet kune do with Edward William Barton-Wright's founding of Bartitsu and Marisela Ugalde Velázquez de León's founding of Xilam, Jennings outlined five preconditions for the creation of a new martial art, arguing that:

1. The creator must be proficient in one or more martial art.
2. He/she must have certain practical ability, combat capabilities, self-confidence, and charisma.
3. He/she not be the top student, master, or descendent in/of another martial art.
4. He/she experience a physical crisis or be dissatisfied with his/her own body and/or experiences a sociopolitical crisis.
5. He/she responds to said crisis by seeking to improve as a martial artist, necessitating the creation of a new martial art.

For another look at Lee's combative philosophy, Lyn Jehu, a lecturer at the University of South Wales, explored the legacy of Lee's critique of 'traditional' martial arts teaching and practice in his epochal essay 'Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate'. Though famous for his animus against the 'classical mess' of traditional martial arts practice and for his insistence on freedom and innovation, Jehu provided a historically-nuanced examination of the terms of Lee's critique. To Jehu's mind, Lee's target was not at all 'traditional'; rather, Lee's animus should have been directed at the modernized (if not bastardized) forms of traditional martial arts like karate, for the historical traditions of many martial arts, including karate, consist of similarly iconoclastic martial artists committed to freedom of exploration and innovation in teaching and practice. With references to other historical figures, most notably Kenwa Mabuni, Jehu provocatively invited martial arts studies scholars and historians to take another look at the history of martial arts practice and, rather than fetishize Lee's breaks from various methods and practices, to seek out similarities and continuities with other traditions and figures through history.

From yet another perspective, Vera Kérchy, senior lecturer at Szeged University in Hungary, began her presentation from the observation that French avant-garde playwright and theatre director Bernard-Marie Koltès (1948-1989) was a big fan of Bruce Lee's kung fu movies. Accordingly, she argued that there is a close relationship between, on the one hand, Koltès' rebellious drama 'Solitude of the Cotton Fields' and 'Roberto Zucco', and on the other, Bruce Lee's *The Way of the Dragon* and *Enter the Dragon*. As Kérchy argued, Lee exerted considerable influence on Koltès' work, providing him with ideas of 'survival confrontation' and 'continuous violence' for his dramas. Furthermore, Lee's simple and direct style of fighting inspired Koltès to promote a concise, realistic, and unpretentious mode of dramatic expression. In Koltès' work, Kérchy believed, language is expressed with the same impact as Lee's fists in his films.

Still in relation to films, Lindsay Steenberg, senior lecturer at Oxford Brookes University, placed Bruce Lee and his films in the context of the global action movies of the 1960s and 1970s. More specifically, she situated Lee in a long tradition of gladiator media and iconography. According to Steenberg, more than just a martial artist, Lee can also be understood in the cinematic history of the heroic gladiator. Beyond the famous gladiatorial showdown in the Roman Colosseum between Lee and Chuck Norris in *The Way of the Dragon*, Lee's entire screen persona constitutes a transnational, transhistorical fusion of gladiator archetypes and a potent masculine identity.

Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park from Hong Kong University went in a very different direction – into the topic of national identity. Park explored the potentially racist aspects at work in the dubbing of *Enter the Dragon*. Despite his rising stardom, Park maintained that there was a battle of egos behind the *Enter the Dragon* scenes, one that spilled over into the screenplay, evidence of which is discernible in Lee's dubbed voice work. In the hostile environment produced by the ill-will between Lee and screenwriter Michael Allin, Park argued that the script ended up packed with words intended to be particularly difficult for the non-native English-language speaker Lee to pronounce.

Luke White, senior lecturer in visual culture at the University of Middlesex, explored Western conceptions of 'masculinity' and various warrior images in relation to Bruce Lee, focusing ultimately on the recent Netflix series *Daredevil* (2015-2018). White's presentation provided an examination of *Daredevil's* many complex and contradictory elements, from technological innovation in martial arts to classical training and from progressive multiculturalism to racist orientalism, and he enthusiastically and expertly took everyone through the nuances and the implications of *Daredevil's* storytelling.

Wayne Wong, from King's College London, argued that research into Bruce Lee's films has hitherto focused primarily on the sociopolitical elements of the plots and their cultural reception over time. Yet, rather than this, Wong encouraged scholars to start to explore its aesthetic composition, and, in particular, its uniquely Chinese composition. According to Wong, Lee's films not only provide realistic martial arts action, they also provide insights into a Chinese philosophical concept that Wong explored under the heading of 'martial ideation'. In Lee's films, Wong proposed, the ebb and flow of calm and tranquility is rooted in Daoist 'nothingness', and from this Daoist foundation Lee elevated kung fu cinema to a place that captured the probative value of exploring ideation in film.

Li Siu Leung, professor of cultural studies at Lingnan University in Hong Kong, emphasized Lee's admirable commitment to philosophical inquiry. Connecting Lee to Mencius, Li distinguished Lee from his fellow martial arts movie peers Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Donnie Yen on the basis of Lee's desire to be a martial artist of both 'pen' and 'sword'. Lee, according to Li, was not only an impressive martial artist but an impressive thinker, and Li sought to encourage fans of Lee to follow in his footsteps not just to the path of martial arts but to the path of philosophy and to commit themselves to 'read carefully, ponder deeply, and experience truly'.

Finally, Kyle Barrowman, co-organizer of the conference, presented a provocative paper in which, similar to Li's desire to explore Lee's philosophical roots, he strove to illuminate a 'perfectionist' ethos at the core of Lee's philosophical enterprise. Moving away from typical scholarship on Lee in which national identity is the focus and Eastern philosophy takes precedence, Barrowman connected Lee's ideas to the Western philosophical tradition of perfectionism traced by the late American philosopher Stanley Cavell and most emblematically captured, to Barrowman's mind, in the philosophical writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Ayn Rand. Ultimately, Barrowman encouraged a balancing of the philosophical scales vis-à-vis Bruce Lee between East and West and implored scholars to move beyond Buddhism and Daoism in order to explore in a more comprehensive fashion the many influences on and currents in Lee's philosophical thinking.

In conclusion, then, scholars from all over the world came to the conference to engage in a productive and provocative dialogue, casting remarkable light on the many legacies of Bruce Lee. More than 'geeking out' in fandom or paying tribute to an influential legend, those who participated in the 'Bruce Lee's Cultural Legacies' conference conducted well-researched, engaging, and insightful investigations into the man and his works, as well as the myths, legends and diverse legacies that developed in his wake. Many of the ideas were novel and inspired, and

many conclusions challenging and thought-provoking. By virtue of this conference, which brought together so many different scholars from so many different perspectives, places, and institutions, we in the audience, like all present, came away with an enhanced understanding of the cultural legacies and the cultural value of Bruce Lee, as well as a strong sense of the stimulating and bright future of martial arts studies.

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MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

EDITORS

Paul Bowman
Benjamin N. Judkins

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS

Kyle Barrowman
Qays Stetkevych

To discuss publication or to submit
a paper please contact:

martial.arts.studies@gmail.com

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