

School of Arts

Research papers from the School of Arts

Roehampton University

Year 2006

Fists of Fusion: Bruce Lee & Jacques
Derrida versus Martin Heidegger and
Slavoj Zizek

Paul Bowman
Roehampton University, p.bowman@roehampton.ac.uk



Fists of Fusion:

Bruce Lee & Jacques Derrida
versus Martin Heidegger and Slavoj Žižek

Paul Bowman

In terms of questions of ‘cultural fusion’, of ‘memory, migration, (re)mediation and mobility’,¹ Bruce Lee may strike you as trivial – kids’ stuff, even: a ’70s celluloid action man who defined a moment in a bygone era when ‘everybody was kung fu fighting’, or briefly wanted to be. Indeed, not only trivial, Bruce Lee might actually exemplify many of the things we might be better off without: silly boys’ crazes, faddishness, escapism, nerdiness, fantasies of physical violence; representations reliant on ultimately racist stereotypes, the commodification of oriental alterity. So: trivial, nerdy, fetishistic, violent, orientalist, exploitative, and typifying the western impetus to appropriation: Already this constitutes a fairly damning series of charges, charges which encompass the essential thrust of not only certain Marxian views on popular culture but also a fair few feminist and liberal humanist criticisms too.

Thus, if the question were: What is Bruce Lee? Then the one answer might be: A trivialised and trivialising, violent, masculinist, orientalist stereotype; a mythologized commodification of alterity packaged for a fetishistic Western gaze; the mythological reduction of ethnicity into posters, t-shirts, nerds’ film collections, and an entire lexicon of posturing, parading and pugilistic moves for bullies, show offs, fighters and fantasists the world over.



So, perhaps not even ‘kids’ stuff’ (once you start to think about it), Bruce Lee could ultimately come to strike you as *exactly* the sort of *putatively* trivial thing that is not *actually* trivial at all, and is in fact exactly the sort of thing you might want to keep very far away from kids: a dangerous supplement, an irredeemably patriarchal and fetishistic commodity, a sublime object of ideology.

Is this just empty hyperbole and caricature? Surely it is. Yet both the dismissals and the denunciations of Bruce Lee *do* occur – and very regularly – and particularly as a first reaction to the suggestion that something remotely serious or worthy of attention might condense in and around Bruce Lee. But even if there is indeed *something* in the sorts of criticism to which I have just gestured (wherein Bruce Lee is deemed trivial, deleterious or ideological), with Bruce Lee representing or participating in something to do with capitalism, commodification, popular culture, Western orientalism or patriarchy,² then there is indeed therefore something serious and worthy of attention here.

And what about in relation to the proposition of this conference, that there might be such a thing as cultural ‘fusion’ or even ‘fusion cultures’? Can there be such a thing as ‘cultural fusion’, or a fusion culture? But the question can be posed the other way around: Could there ever have been any culture that was *not* in some constitutive sense a fusion? So, here then, the proper question must be: what is fused with what when it comes to Bruce Lee? And in what sense of ‘fusing’: does fusing mean ‘articulation’ (as in linkage, connection) or does it mean short-circuiting? For, the title of Bruce Lee’s global blockbuster, *Enter the Dragon*, need not simply be read as meaning ‘Enter Bruce Lee!’ As the original film posters proudly declared, this was ‘the first American produced martial



arts spectacular'. So this was also Hollywood 'entering the dragon', in more than one sense.

So, what enters what when east allegedly meets west like this? With *Enter the Dragon*, what is entering what, and with what consequences? Lurking here are two equally appealing but diametrically opposed answers. On the one hand, we might decide, with one of Bruce Lee's many biographers, that Bruce Lee 'bridged cultures, revolutionized the martial arts, taught a fierce philosophy of individualism' and, through using films as *pedagogical texts*, deliberately and effectively 'remade the image of the Asian man in the West' (xi). Of course, 'bridging' cultures might not quite be 'fusion'. But Bruce Lee also radically expanded what his biographer calls the 'transmission' of putatively ancient Chinese martial arts (Wing Chun kung fu), and – as evidence of the disseminated *dif-fusion* (if not simple welding or melding) of cultures that this suggests – Lee's biographer invites us to ponder the 'fact that, as an Englishman, [he] was able to begin learning a Chinese martial art from a Welshman' (xii). This too may seem to be very little, almost nothing. But surely such diffusion constitutes a significant cultural change – and at both the representational and the micrological or bodily level of lived cultural practice.

But on the other hand is an argument about the *inauthenticity* of any such cinematically constituted and disseminated entity as 'Bruce Lee'. In other words, the claim that any 'fusion culture' created here must be an instance of and synonym for commodified culture. It is easy to dismiss this as nothing more than *ad hominem* economic reductionism, and simply by observing that, as the example of the bodily practice of martial arts shows clearly, the *money* relation (when, for example, we pay to see



a Bruce Lee film) is neither the *only* relation nor the *entire* aspect even to the economic relation itself.

However, the question of ‘inauthenticity’ that arises here is important. For the possibility that *authenticity as such is impossible* exceeds crude pseudo-Marxian economic reductionism. In other words, there remains a multifaceted question about the very possibility of anything like authentic inter-cultural encounters, multiculturalism, cultural ‘hybridity’ or ‘fusion’, whether authentic fusion, or even an authentic encounter. In this regard, there are several strains of thought, stretching at least from Hegel to Žižek, which question the very possibility of anything like an authentic encounter taking place between the cultures of East and West. Ignoring the obvious anthropological Eurocentrism that dogged the likes of Hegel (what Derrida would call the Western logocentric metaphysical bias), one finds a quite refined expression of the issue in Heidegger. In his Socratic-dialogue-style text, entitled ‘A Dialogue on Language Between A Japanese and an Inquirer’, Heidegger proposes that because of what this text calls the domination of ‘the European conceptual systems’ and because of the Western-led ‘modern technicalization and industrialization of every continent’, then ‘for this reason alone a true encounter with European existence is still not taking place, in spite of all assimilations and intermixtures’. ‘Perhaps [a true encounter] cannot take place’, suggests the Dialogue’s Japanese character.

‘Can we assert this so unconditionally?’ asks Heidegger (3). The answer, of course, would seem to be, no, one can’t assert this ‘unconditionally’. But under what conditions is there unconditionality? The ‘Dialogue’ is clear: certainly not those dominated by ‘European conceptual systems’ and the ‘modern technicalization and industrialization of every continent’. Thus, as Stella Sandford points out, Heidegger’s ‘Dialogue’ is



in fact fundamentally ‘preoccupied with the issue of the possibility or impossibility of an East-West dialogue’, and that while scholars like Reinhard May have read it ‘as proof both of Heidegger’s indebtedness to East Asian sources and his attempts to cover this over, it is equally plausibly read as a statement of Heidegger’s belief in the fundamental and incommensurable *differences* between philosophical traditions, and of the extraordinary difficulty, if not the outright impossibility, of a true dialogue, despite the best intentions of the interlocutors’.³

So, Heidegger suggests that a ‘true encounter [between East and West] is still not taking place, in spite of all assimilations and intermixtures’, owing to what Sandford calls the ‘extraordinary difficulty, if not the outright impossibility, of a true dialogue’ between such vastly different cultures. Of course, there is an essentialism at play here. The essentialism of proposing a unitary and singular ‘*The East*’ and defining this against a purportedly unitary and singular ‘*The West*’. So, the problem with Heidegger’s position is, as Sandford points out, that in fact there *is* no ‘essential East’ or ‘essential West’ other than in the fantasy production of some reductive, essentialist, Eurocentric/orientalist paradigm. Indeed, she reminds us, *any* interest that Heidegger might have had in ‘*the*’ East is purely an index of his investment in fantasies about ‘*the*’ West.

But, still, the aporia with which Heidegger is concerned remains pertinent and cannot be dismissed. For, recalling his discussions with a Japanese philosopher, Heidegger virtually laments, ‘Whatever we spoke about was from the start forced over into the sphere of European ideas’ (14). This is what would now be called a classic case of ‘hegemonisation’: the encounter is dissymmetrical: because of Western hegemony, the dominance, of Western modes and codes, conventions and conceptual



systems, the conditions of possibility for any ‘encounter’ are also what deconstruction would call the conditions of impossibility. It is translated into and by the West. And to translate Heidegger’s talk of ‘modern technicalization and industrialisation’ into the terms of political economy, what this means is: the East in the West is the East as a field of commodities whose market is sustained by a fantasy. Buddhism, Taoism, Shinto, feng shui, yoga, tai chi, oriental calligraphy and aesthetics all become reduced to commodities. (I once had a Japanese student who showed me a picture of a picture being sold in Ikea. It was Japanese calligraphy on cloth, in a frame. She pointed out that what the beautiful characters actually said was ‘Half Price in the Sale!’)

But what is the underpinning of this perspective? Put simply, it is economic reductionism – economic essentialism – which conflates the exchange relation for the *entire* relation. Economic reductionism says: All that is taking place here is the buying and selling of commodities, and nothing more. But, to return to Bruce Lee, we ought now to ask: what entered what with a film like *Enter the Dragon*? *Enter the Dragon* was publicised in 1973 as ‘the first American produced martial arts spectacular’, the first US film with an Asian male lead (well, nearly: the male lead role was in fact divided among three men: the white James-Bond-like Roper (because of fears that white Americans might not go to see a film without a white lead), the Black Williams (because the popularity of martial arts flicks with black audiences was already well known by the industry), and the Asian Bruce Lee (the real star of the show)). Was this mere hegemonic appropriation; a recuperation of the other to the same? Or was it really a moment of cultural change – the whittling away of monolithic whiteness, the lessening of a Eurocentric bias?



This depends. A Žižekian Marxian perspective would insist that it was the former: the capitalisation on a difference. This may be so in one regard, or as one moment in a movement. But there were myriad other effects. As Bruce Thomas – one biographer of Bruce Lee – points out: because of Bruce Lee films, he ‘an Englishman ... was able to begin learning a Chinese martial art from a Welshman’ (xii). This may seem very little, almost nothing. But it also signifies a profound change. As Douglas Wile has argued of t’ai chi, perhaps in a strong sense, Bruce Lee might be regarded as one of ‘China’s cultural ambassador[s] to the world’. What Wile says of t’ai chi ch’üan may perhaps be amplified vis-à-vis Bruce Lee. As he puts it: ‘Millions of Westerners today have been exposed to media images of elderly Chinese practicing t’ai-chi ch’üan in China’s urban parks’, and ‘hundreds of thousands of Westerners have taken at least one class in the art themselves and tens of thousands practice on a daily basis for physical and mental health, or as a serious self-defense system’. So ‘t’ai-chi ch’üan – the internal, or soft style, martial art – might well be considered China’s cultural ambassador to the world’. He continues: ‘Touching the lives of more Westerners, and perhaps more deeply, than books, films, museums, or college courses, t’ai-chi ch’üan is often the entrée into Chinese philosophy, medicine, meditation, and even language’ (Wile 1996: xv).

However, as testified by Lee’s biographer, at least *some* films can touch the lives of *some* Westerners very ‘deeply’ indeed – so deeply, in fact, that their physical daily routines and activities as well as their aesthetic and other investments are actually *reorganised*. Thomas’s anecdote is not just the story of ‘an Englishman [who] was able to begin learning a Chinese martial art from a Welshman’. Instead, just like the Wu Tang Clan’s encounter with ‘The 36 Chambers of Shaolin’ or Luce Irigaray’s encounter with yoga, it is at least an insight into the micrology of



cultural movements, and at most evidence (or symptom) of a wider cultural movements. But what might be the nature of that movement? Or, of what are such cases evidence or symptoms? One might say: *why* was ‘everybody was kung fu fighting’, if indeed they were, and what might this signify, entail, or portend?

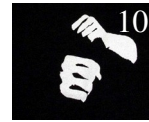
Gary J. Krug points to ‘three stages’ in what he calls ‘the Appropriation of Okinawan Karate Into Anglo-American Culture’. The first stage was the ‘discovery and mythologizing’ of karate between the 1920s and 1970s. ‘At the moment of its discovery by the West’, Krug observes, ‘karate was, in a sense, frozen as a cultural moment, much as rainforests or “primitive” tribes become relatively fixed signifiers in the instance of their discovery’. ‘In this form’, he argues, ‘the martial arts ... function as signifiers of all that Asia was in the imagination of the beholders’ (398). We see ‘secret traditions’ and ‘fabulous stories’ about martial arts which ‘paralleled beliefs about Asia in general as mysterious, inscrutable, violent, and with links to unpleasant, illegal, or immoral activities. Many of these ideas had their roots in early Portuguese, Dutch, and English writings from the 16th and 17th centuries and continued to be expressed through the Vietnam War era, revealing the durability of ignorance and stereotyping’ (398). He places the arrival of Bruce Lee onto mainstream screens in this ‘discovery and mythologizing’ phase (400). Krug’s second and third stages are overlapping and often concurrent. The second stage, which is also the adding of a degree of ‘depth’ and ‘texture’, was the instituting of Asian martial arts as *practices* in western lives. This development was enabled in large part by the ‘the transmission of martial arts to America, England, and Australia’ by military personnel (409). Once appropriated as a set of practices either like sport (often becoming sport) or as a kind of New Age mysticism, a third stage or level of texture arose in the



western appropriation of Asian martial arts: their discursive appropriation and demythologizing. As Krug argues:

Karate emerged as one of the individual signifiers operating around the Western discourses of Asia. Now, many Asian discourses appear in Western translations: TCM, meridians, acupuncture, ch'i, *ki*, *prana*, and so forth. Within the Western societies, Karate and the other Asian marital arts are no longer Other but neither are they Asian. Rather, Western cultures have incorporated significant depths of Asian discourses into their own cultural systems. The West has woven new cultural textures to position the martial arts in ways that fit closely with other practices, such as capitalism, sport, and the cult of the individual. In time, we may see these newly incorporated discourses introduce subtle changes to Western culture in unimagined ways. Cultural appropriation is always a process of cross fertilization. (408)

Now, Krug's account of the Western encounter with Japanese martial arts is valuable and, I believe, reliable. But there is something jarring about his final sentence. This is the final sentence of his entire article: 'Cultural appropriation is always a process of cross fertilization'. This *may* be so; but there has been no evidence or argument to support this claim at all throughout the entire article. The entire argument is about Western culture.⁴ The reference to 'cross fertilization' – good as it sounds – is simply a blatant *non sequitur*. For Krug does not draw a picture of a two-way street. So much so that a more consistent final sentence would have been something like 'Cultural appropriation is always a process of dissymmetrical hegemonisation' – or indeed expropriation, reterritorialisation, or even colonisation.



Stephen Chan goes further...

what he calls “mythologizing” more than muddies the waters of reality: it actually constitutes it. As he points out, there are millions “worldwide who practice the Japanese martial arts and believe that these arts have antique and spiritual values beyond what passes for history and cultural value in the constructions of their own cultures.”⁵ Indeed, he suggests that those who have bought into many of the myths of Japanese martial arts have in a sense been duped by the cynical ministrations of what he calls “the Japanese cultural authorities.” These, he argues, have deliberately worked as the “editor of mythologies”⁶ in order to deliberately make Japanese culture into a commodified artefact. This mythology is commodified in myriad ways: both “in fact” (through the production of new “ancient” martial arts) and “in fiction” (through film, literature and other such productions). These artefacts are produced and consumed as if authentically ancient culture, when in actual fact they have been deliberately produced: conjured up, exported, (re)imported and consumed



Notes

¹ This paper was written for the conference *Fusion Cultures: Memory, Migration, [Re]mediation, Mobility*, Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College, 9th December 2006

² I won't be directly addressing this latter possible criticism – that Bruce Lee exemplifies or perpetuates something negatively patriarchal – and mainly because I don't know of anyone who has seriously made such a supposedly feminist criticism. In fact, I can only imagine it coming from a caricature of the most puritanical form of militant feminism. On the other hand, however, it is possible to find contemporary critical positions which could dismiss or denounce Bruce Lee as Western capitalist orientalist commodity. So these will be my primary concerns – although to engage with the questions of gender politics I would reiterate the approach I will take to explore the cultural significance, consequences and effects of 'Bruce Lee' in terms of the question of 'cultural fusion'.

³ (Sandford 2003: 14)

⁴ 'First "discovered" by Anglo-Americans following the Second World War, karate has undergone a series of changes in the way in which it is presented and taught in the United States and Australia. In the 1990s, the publication of key secret texts, the establishment of a large body of historical information, the rapidly growing acceptance of traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture, and the establishment of second- and third-generation dojos and instructors in Euro-American cultures have contributed to the demystification of karate and a lessening need for attachments to the people and culture of Okinawa. With these new representations of karate, the art is being remade as a set of Western knowledge and practices. These changes in the representation of karate trace a trajectory that transforms the pragmatic and spiritual characteristics of karate first into a marker of Asianess, then into a myth of origins, and finally into a set of historical and semiscientific practices.' (395).

⁵ Chan, *Ibid*: 71. He aligns this with the postmodern condition, proposing that "These days you choose your own myths."

⁶ *Ibid*. 71.