



The Visual Representation of Martial Arts Culture in King Hu's Films

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Abstract. The essence of martial arts in movies is the combination of reality and illusion. On one hand, the nature of movies is to turn the unreal into reality, even if it is something imaginary, it should be presented on the screen in a “realistic” form to give the audience a sense of reality. On the other hand, movies create illusions and blur the line between truth and falsehood, so the distinction between reality and illusion is relative. Therefore, we can understand that the essence of “kung fu” in martial arts films is a combination of the virtual and the real, traditional culture and modern technology. Its development and changes also constantly progress and evolve with the development of film technology, genre standards, and contemporary trends. Director King HU incorporates the arts of music, chess, calligraphy, and painting into his films, creating a harmonious blend of elegance, etherealness, and classical romance.

Keywords: Martial Arts Culture, Visual Representation, King Hu, Artistic Conception Creation, Cinematographic Language, Film Technology.

1 Introduction

Martial arts movies, regarded as treasures of Chinese culture, seamlessly blend traditional martial arts heritage with contemporary artistic expression, showcasing the beauty of Chinese martial arts. Within these cinematic masterpieces, the concept of “kung fu” is brought to life on screen through sophisticated technical means, representing a fusion of genuine martial arts prowess and cinematic craftsmanship. Among the many directors in the martial arts genre, Director King HU authentically captures the essence of martial arts in film, where reality and imagination coalesce. Leveraging filming techniques, martial arts choreography, musical composition, editing, and optical synthesis, the director establishes a distinctive style. This paper will analyze his “authorial imprint” from the perspectives of meticulous action choreography, unique kung fu montage aesthetics, and symbolically charged cinematography.

2 Innovative Martial Arts Design

King HU's martial arts movies stand out for their atmospheric intensity and evocative ambiance. He meticulously builds tension before the confrontations between protagonists and antagonists, vividly portraying their probing and standoff, which forms the most captivating narrative segments in his new martial arts movies. His focus during fight scenes is on the development of tension rather than mere violent catharsis. Clean and swift acrobatics, graceful arcs achieved through springboard jumps, and diverse angles capturing the leaping movements are seamlessly edited using pure montage techniques to create a continuous sense of motion on screen, effectively bringing the art of lightness to life. King HU emphasizes the importance of rhythm in martial arts movies, likening it to dance where the emphasis is not solely on action or realistic martial arts but on choreographing fight sequences akin to ballet.[1] His approach to Eastern artistry does not mimic nature but instead portrays the inner thoughts and ideas, eschewing the pursuit of brutal aesthetics and swift actions championed by directors like Zhang Che. His films often prioritize the expressive nature of martial arts, emphasizing the beauty of movement over sheer brutality.

2.1 The Action Setting of "Dance and Martial Arts Combined"

King HU's films are renowned for their unique action choreography and style. Unlike the hard-hitting fights typical of Bruce Lee's movies, he prefers to integrate martial arts movements with elements of traditional drama, dance, and acrobatics, aiming to evoke cultural memories and artistic experiences in the audience. In his works, one can often see actions such as straight sword slashes and arched leaps, not for the sake of realism but for an "artistic reality," aiming to create aesthetic beauty and poeticism on screen. This stylized approach to action design imbues the films with an artistic flair, evident in many mesmerizing "dance and martial arts combined" scenes in works like *Ripples of Spring Pavilion*, *Dragon Inn*, and *The Valiant Ones*.

2.2 The Clever Integration of Peking Opera Elements

King HU defines his films as cinematic adaptations of Peking Opera, blending elements of action and dance. He crafts confrontational scenes between protagonists through direction and editing, evoking a pure operatic sense of rhythm despite the absence of singing. In the design of combat sequences, King HU heavily incorporates elements from Peking Opera. Collaborating with Han Yingjie, he adapts martial arts scenes from the Peking Opera stage, employing techniques such as routines, running patterns, dramatic pauses, and somersaults. The character pursuits and leaps, as well as the atmospheric buildup, draw inspiration from the performance style of Peking Opera's martial arts stage.

The "Wheel Battle" in the ultimate showdown between good and evil is an adaptation of the Northern-style Peking Opera battle.

The film utilizes the drum beats and wooden clappers of Peking Opera's literary and martial arts stages to create a tense atmosphere before the fight. These elements serve

to regulate the rhythm of the actors' movements, with the strategic beats of the drums and the actors' eye movements guiding the pacing of the editing, thereby controlling the development of the martial arts scenes. The character performances tend towards the stylized facial expressions of Peking Opera, and their entrances are as spectacular as those in Peking Opera. In the confrontation scenes of *Dragon Inn*, the characters' turns, appearances, and the removal of cloaks are all reminiscent of the appearances of characters in Peking Opera.

2.3 Aesthetic of Combat in Confined Spaces

Analyzing director King HU's films reveals a consistent tendency: he often deliberately selects confined indoor spaces for martial arts filming. Settings such as the temple in *Spirit of the Mountain*, the inn in *Dragon Inn*, the small restaurant in *Drunken Master*, the desolate inn in *Ripples of Spring Pavilion*, the Qinglu stronghold in *Heroic Women*, the island in *Loyal Picture*, and the commandery in *Legends of the Mountain* are all enclosed environments. King HU once remarked, "Ancient inns in our country, especially those in the wilderness, are the most dramatic places. Few places can encapsulate time and space as they do, where all conflicts have the potential to erupt." [2] To achieve a multi-angle cinematic effect within these confined spaces, he meticulously plans the timing, space, and angles in advance, mapping out all the different perspectives on a flat surface. Leveraging rich camera movements and post-production editing techniques ensures the smoothness and logical progression of scenes, transforming relatively limited theatrical spaces into diverse cinematic experiences.

In King HU's works, small inns or temples are like battlefields in the martial world, showing scenes of bloodshed and violence. These scenes seem to be the stage of Peking Opera, with characters accompanied by Peking Opera music, engaging in intense duels in different floors and rooms, presenting compact and rhythmic fighting scenes. Although it is difficult for the characters' actions to be concentrated in a small space, King HU is good at using the characters' movements to highlight the tension and dynamism, creating a dramatic tension between the two sides. This approach makes his films more vivid and captivating, while also highlighting his profound understanding and creativity in ancient inn dramas.

In *Dragon Inn* and *Ripples of Spring Pavilion*, the inns depicted, as well as the temple in *Spirit of the Mountain*, showcase director King HU's captivating approach to storytelling. King HU, using his human body brush to draw his strengths, depicts men Bruce Lee and Qinglong who are fascinated by blood and death. The display of his body and comedic sci-fi martial arts films, the combination of East and West or stateless fantasy Wong Fei hung, end with the beginning of martial arts films, from Hong Kong to China[3].

3 Unique Kung Fu Montage Aesthetics

Director King HU created a unique aesthetic concept and technique called "Kung Fu Montage Aesthetics," which enhances the explosive power, speed, and mystique of

martial arts through a series of imperfect means. These techniques include blurred processing, jumping shots, information overload panoramic shots, directionless fast shooting, dislocation, omission, and fast editing, etc. In his films, what the audience sees is not the projected reality, but a carefully designed and processed artistic expression.

King HU's montage technique has a groundbreaking effect. The most iconic scene of "The Heroine" where she descends from the sky to attack the enemy, is achieved through the use of juxtaposition editing. Half of the scene is shot at Sun Moon Lake, while the other half is shot in a bamboo forest, creating a visually unified and spatially definite effect. The fight in that scene uses a total of 18 shots, cut back and forth, creating a unique visual phenomenon that is overwhelming. [4]The height of the actor's jump has also been carefully designed, and after multiple jumps, the camera is picked up to make the whole action look more smooth and magical.

King HU's films have an innovative role in montage techniques, fully demonstrating his love and understanding of Eastern culture. The film is filled with a sense of light and shadow and mystery, combining psychological montage and symbolic montage to present the audience with a visual feast full of mystery and fantasy. Through the use of close-up shots to create a sense of physical proximity and the manipulation of editing to create "magical" cause-and-effect relationships, Hu Jinquan successfully immerses the audience in the dreamlike realm of Buddhism, demonstrating his unique understanding and creativity in film art.

3.1 Omission Editing

In the process of the heroes leaping, soaring, and landing, a few frames are stolen or deliberately omitted, making the techniques abrupt and disconcerting. The Heroine boldly employs jump cuts, linking together a sparse number of frames, causing the audience to perceive a spiraling leap due to the phenomenon of retinal persistence. Director King HU, thanks to this editing technique, was awarded the Grand Prize by the Cannes Film Festival's Higher Film Technology Committee. By portraying the attackers with greater force, it implies their exceptional martial arts skills. While other martial arts films often extensively depict actions such as leaps, lightness skills, and drifts, King HU achieves the same effect with just a few sporadic movements, allowing the audience only a fleeting glimpse of the martial artists' accomplished skills. This rapid editing creates a miraculous sense. The use of omissions and quick cuts allows the heroes to appear elusive, while applied to villains, it renders them ghostly, emitting an eerie atmosphere.

3.2 Quick Editing

Examining the directorial journey of King HU, it is evident that in his works from the 1960s, the average shot length was 5.5 seconds, decreasing to 4.5 seconds in the 1970s. In *Ripples of Spring Pavilion*, the final shots averaged 2.4 seconds, while in the beach duel scene in *Loyalty and Betrayal*, the average shot length was 1.6 seconds. In the opening sequence of *The Great Cycle*, shots lasted only 1 second. These short shots generate a burst of visual intensity in fight scenes, portraying the extraordinary agility

and dexterity of the heroes. With as many as 8 frames and as few as 2 frames, *The Heroine* depicts the entire process of the dive to kill the enemy, seamlessly connected with lightning-fast editing, resulting in fleeting glimpses of the heroes' formidable martial arts skills, almost reaching mythical proportions. By shooting from a high vantage point and employing short shots, a sense of oppression and impact is created. However, when the same martial arts skills and shots are applied to the villains, the outcome is drastically different. In *Loyalty and Betrayal*, after a series of grand aerial maneuvers, the antagonist injures his foot and falls directly from the sky, showcasing King HU's humor.

4 Imagery Presentation

The essence of martial arts in movies is the combination of reality and illusion. On one hand, the nature of movies is to turn the unreal into reality, even if it is something imaginary, it should be presented on the screen in a "realistic" form to give the audience a sense of reality. On the other hand, movies create illusions and blur the line between truth and falsehood, so the distinction between reality and illusion is relative. Therefore, we can understand that the essence of "kung fu" in martial arts films is a combination of the virtual and the real, traditional culture and modern technology. Its development and changes also constantly progress and evolve with the development of film technology, genre standards, and contemporary trends. Director King HU incorporates the arts of music, chess, calligraphy, and painting into his films, creating a harmonious blend of elegance, etherealness, and classical romance.

After the fight started, the director used trampolines to create curved fighting movements, while keeping the characters tense while running. This technique makes the action scenes more vivid and tense, while also speeding up the pace of the film. In addition, the director uses four medium shots to present each character's individual scene, as well as four very short shots to enhance the tension of the scene, making the audience more focused and the plot more compact. In the entire scene, King HU enhanced the dramatic tension of the fight in the natural environment through carefully designed settings, character movements, and camera techniques, which had a profound influence on later martial arts films. The delicate directing skills and mastery of creating atmosphere make this scene one of the classics in *The Heroic Trio*.

In *The Heroine*, Shi Jun utilizes the wisdom and military strategies of Zhuge Liang to devise tactics and fight alongside the female protagonist, Xu Feng. In one scene, Xu Feng runs through a bamboo forest, with close-up shots capturing her face as she swiftly navigates through the trees. Rather than having a cameraman chase after her, which lacks intensity, the director first outlines the protagonist's running path on the ground and attaches a rope around the actor's waist. King Hu's films paradoxically combine features usually kept separate: high with low in terms of genre, straightforward characterization with complex situations and motivations, and action sequences with visual and temporal stoppages.[5]

5 Conclusion

The martial arts culture in King HU's films has a strong artistic personality and style, maintaining consistency and level in artistic pursuit, constantly deepening and innovating. In his films, the audience not only sees martial arts stories and fighting scenes, but also Chinese-style Zen, Buddhist philosophy, poetic imagery, and artistic landscapes, as well as the posture, demeanor, temperament, and broad-mindedness of the Chinese people. Here, there exists an immersive cultural experience. [6]From the wisdom interpretation of martial arts movements, the creation of kung fu montages, to the presentation of imagery shots, King HU has demonstrated his unique understanding of martial arts, and has also created the brilliance of new martial arts films.

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