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Martial Artist

Yuen Wo-Ping, action cinema's puppet master

By David Chute Wednesday, Dec 13 2000

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"Imagine you're an actor putting on a corset," says James Schamus, co-writer and executive producer of Ang Lee's martial-arts fantasy Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. It's "a heavy canvas corset with a bunch of metal cables attached, and you're getting strung 75 feet up in the air while hanging from a crane. The crane is just an arm supporting wires on pulleys that are being manipulated by five guys wearing construction gloves. They have to maneuver in sync, both with the other cranes and with a team that is pulling another set of wires, attached to another actor who is whipping through the air only a few feet away. One slip-up, just two or three steps in the wrong direction, and someone could get really badly hurt."

In Crouching Tiger, the distinctive Hong Kong style of airborne stunt choreography known as "wirework" offers an eye-popping showcase for this technique. As 17th-century crusading Chinese kung fu masters, Asian superstars Chow Yun-Fat and Michelle Yeoh balance in treetops and leap tall buildings, righting wrongs as they go. To achieve these stunning effects, Lee hired Yuen Wo-Ping, the world's pre-eminent vaulting-wire specialist, for his unique expertise in the 400-year-old sword-and-sorcery genre known as wu xia, or "martial chivalry."

You probably know Yuen Wo-Ping's work, even if you've never heard his name. He's the guy who dangled Keanu Reeves from a great height in The Matrix, in sequences that you may have assumed were done with computer graphic imaging and trick machines like the motion-freezing Timeline camera. "Maybe consciously people assume that The Matrix is all CGI," Schamus contends. "But I think the grain of reality comes through. That's why those scenes were so spectacularly well received. You felt that these people were actually in the air, flipping and kicking and jumping. What you didn't see was the highly trained core of people that Yuen works with, pulling all the wires." One of the producers of The Matrix, Barrie Osborne, calls the technique "a form of puppeteering, only with people."

Like all fans of Chinese action movies, Lee had known about Master Yuen (as he is nearly always called) for years. This was, after all, the man whose first two films as a director, Snake in the

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career for years. This was, after all, the man whose first two films as a director, *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* (1978) and *Drunken Master* (1979), had vaulted Jackie Chan to international celebrity. Most of the glory fell to Chan as the star, but for Lee, "It was Yuen Wo-Ping who really revolutionized the kung fu genre in those films, by making the action into a form of slapstick. He took away some of the grimness, some of the self-importance and the violence, the lust for revenge, that got into the genre after Bruce Lee."

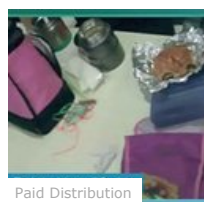
In person, Yuen Wo-Ping doesn't look much like a revolutionary. He is a mild-mannered, middle-aged gentleman with big, curious eyes, who, on a breezy day in Santa Monica, comes to a poolside table in a tightly zippered windbreaker, with a baseball cap jammed on his head. He presents himself as a blunt and practical man, but also speaks frequently of what he was trying to "express" in the martial-arts sequences: "I want to bring out the aestheticism of the art form, because I really believe that this is a type of art. I want to bring out its beauty by incorporating dance movements, so that the elegance of the gestures can be seen more clearly."

Master Yuen's formative training wasn't in combat martial arts, but in a Chinese performance tradition he is always careful to refer to as "stage wu shu, theatrical kung fu," which is a whirlwind form of acrobatic dancing. Born into a family of Beijing opera performers in 1945, Yuen also has deep roots in the central traditions of Hong Kong action cinema. He was trained by his father, opera performer turned movie actor Simon Yuen Hsiao-Tien, and entered the Hong Kong industry in the late 1950s as a stuntman and background fighter in old-school martial-arts films. "In the early days, I was always the one who was picked to die first," he says. "I was very good at falling down dead."

For all his traditional background, Yuen has proved amazingly adaptable, scoring major box-office hits as a director over three decades. In the '70s, he made rambunctious old-style period films like *The Magnificent Butcher* (1979) and then switched to kung fu--flavored contemporary cop movies, notably *Tiger Cage* (1988), after John Woo's gangster pictures set a new trend. Yuen was uniquely equipped to reinvigorate sword-based Chinese martial arts that had survived mostly on the Beijing opera stage. He used these with great flair as the producer and stunt choreographer of the first two films in director Tsui Hark's mid-1990s *Once Upon a Time in China* series of jazzed-up retro revivals with swashbuckling heroics. "In those films," Lee explains, "Wo-Ping was moving away from the hard Hong Kong--based kung fu of his early work, taking the exhilaration to another level. The style was more operatic than anything he had done before, and his talent for wirework really came to the fore." The *Once Upon a Time* films helped kick off a new wave of interest in the wu xia genre.

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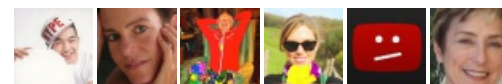


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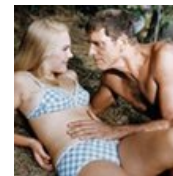
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