

Hong Kong Film Archive

Exploring Hong Kong Films of the 1930s and 1940s

Part 2: Genres · Regions · Culture



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Nüxia in a Migrating *Jianghu*: Yam Pang-nin and Wu Lai-chu in 1940s Hong Kong

Yau Ching

Hong Kong *wuxia* films have been discussed within the discursive framework of cultural nationalism, while the imagery of *nüxia* is usually evaluated in terms of Euro-American feminist considerations.¹ I seek rather in this article to trace how the *nüxia* subgenre is informed by the Chinese *xia* (Chinese ‘do-gooder warrior’) literary tradition as well as by early 20th century Shanghai modernities. Through tracing the career trajectory of Yam Pang-nin (aka Ren Pengnian, 1894–1968), one of the first-generation *wuxia* film directors, and that of his wife Wu Lai-chu (aka Wu Lizhu, 1910–1978), dubbed ‘The Oriental Female Fairbanks’, from Shanghai to Hong Kong, and studying several of their Hong Kong films of the 1940s, this article seeks to examine the characteristics and development of the *nüxia* subgenre in relation to national(ist) imaginary and gender reconfiguration, and explore the ways in which post-war Hong Kong cinema regains its strengths, paving the way to the peak of martial arts cinema in the 1970s.

This article does not follow the conventional approach of fragmented generic differentiation in categorising kung fu vs martial arts/*wuxia* vs action vs spy. Instead, these are identified wholesomely as belonging to and growing out of the same major genre,² especially in the early days of Chinese and Hong Kong cinemas. This helps to highlight the way these films were marketed and received, as well as the fluidity of the creative personnel working within these subgenres and the audience consuming them.



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1. *Nüxia* in Chinese cinema is often translated as ‘woman warriors’ in English. However, *nüxia* is a variant of *wuxia*, which is traditionally defined in Confucian terms to the extent that the highest form of kung fu is to resolve a fight.
 2. The use of hyphenated genres like *wuxia*-action in this article is designated to highlight the hybridity of subgenres at the time.

First-Generation Wuxia Film Director

According to *The General Catalogue of Chinese Film* published by the China Film Archive,³ the Commercial Press in Shanghai bought some equipment from an American film crew in China, and built the first film studio in China by remodelling their printshop in 1917. A short film entitled *The Thief* was made in this studio, apparently based on an American detective fiction story (or on the film *The Great Train Robbery* [1903], another saying goes). Directed by Yam Pang-nin and premiered in Shanghai in 1921, this film was produced by the Motion Picture Department of the Commercial Press, showing a ‘man with ethics’ fighting with robbers on a train in action sequences, which was then coined a ‘wuxia-action’ piece. On 1 July 1921, China’s first narrative feature *Yan Ruisheng*, also directed by Yam, premiered in Shanghai, causing a sensation and becoming a big hit. The film was based on a true story of the murder of a sex worker by a clerk, who was then arrested and sentenced to death.⁴



Yam Pang-nin

Yam had joined the Commercial Press in Shanghai as an apprentice when he was 16, and was transferred to the Motion Picture Department in 1918. Partly due to the success of *Yan Ruisheng*, he founded his own company Shanghai Yueming Film Company in 1927, and produced and directed numerous features, mostly wuxia-action films. By 1949, record has it that he had already directed 73 films.⁵ A full-page coverage found in *Ta-ya Pictorial News* in 1929 publicised the silent film series *A Warrior of the Northeast* (13 episodes, 1928–1934) in production,⁶ reporting on Yam’s claim to fame, emphasising that Yam himself was a member of the Hong Kong Chin Woo Athletic Association who knew kung fu quite well, and was the most experienced action film director in China that enjoyed a reputation in Nanyang. A report in *The Chin-Chin Screen* in 1940 said that upon Yueming’s arrival in Hong Kong, the company was preparing its production for a talkie version of *A Warrior of the Northeast*.⁷

These write-ups clearly showed that one of the key markets for at least Chinese wuxia-action films at the time was Nanyang, which roughly referred to regions including

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3. *Zhongguo Dianying Zong Mulu (The General Catalogue of Chinese Film)*, Beijing: China Film Archive, 1960, p 7 (in Chinese).
4. Huang Zhiwei (ed), *Lao Shanghai Dianying (Old Shanghai Films)*, Shanghai: Wenhui Press, 1998, p 4 (in Chinese).
5. *Ibid*, p 147.
6. ‘A Feature Article on *A Warrior of the Northeast*’, *Ta-ya Pictorial News*, Mukden (Shenyang), Issue 177, 30 August 1929, p 3 (in Chinese).
7. ‘A Revival of Yueming Film Company in Hong Kong’, *The Chin-Chin Screen*, Shanghai, 5th Year, No 17, 30 April 1940 (in Chinese).

Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand, where there were large Chinese-film consuming markets made up of Cantonese and/or Hoklo-speaking migrant populations. This might serve to explain why Yam chose Hong Kong as a relocation site for the Yueming Film Company in 1940. Hong Kong, being geographically closer to Nanyang than Shanghai and being a tax-free treaty port, was a convenient production site to import raw materials, such as celluloid, and export prints. Many film production personnel moved from Shanghai to Hong Kong precisely to take advantage of Hong Kong's financial and geopolitical conditions for greater accessibility to the Nanyang market.

First Wave and Migration of *Wuxia*

Wuxia/kung fu/martial arts and action genres have often been assumed to be distinctive markers for Hong Kong cinema. However, *Hong Kong Filmography Vol I (1914–1941)* (Revised Edition) revealed that the mainstream film genres of Hong Kong from 1914 to 1935 were modern melodrama and romance, with several comedies making sporadic appearances.⁸ There was almost no documentation of any *wuxia*-action film. According to film historians Zhou Chengren and Li Yizhuang, the first Hong Kong kung fu film was *Village Hero* (aka *The Knight of the Whip*, 1936), a film advocating nationalist sentiments against the Japanese invasion.⁹ Not long after, Hung Chung-ho accepted the invitation from the Shaw brothers' Unique Film Productions' Hong Kong studio (later restructured as Nanyang Film Company [aka Nan Yeung Film Company]) to relocate to Hong Kong and made his Hong Kong debut with *The Young Fighter* (aka *The Adventures of Fang Shiyu*, 1938) for his own company. In contrast, the first Chinese *wuxia* production craze had already taken place in Shanghai around 1928–1931.¹⁰ During 1928–1932, it was documented that about 240 *wuxia* and hybrid 'martial arts-magic spirit' (*wuxia shenguai*) films were made by some 50 Shanghai studios¹¹; many of which featured female protagonists as the chief warriors. The subgenre of *nüxia* (re)produced a large number of screen heroines endowed with extraordinary bodily techniques; their transformation was signalled by mobility, visible iconography (costume and/or facial make up) and physiognomy (new body language and style), all distinctive from screen images of actresses from previous generations.¹²



8. Kwok Ching-ling (ed), *Hong Kong Filmography Vol I (1914–1941)* (Revised Edition), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2020 (in Chinese).
9. Zhou Chengren & Li Yizhuang, *Zaoqi Xianggang Dianying Shi (1897–1945)* (*The History of Early Hong Kong Cinema [1897–1945]*), Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (Hong Kong) Company Limited, 2005, p 249 (in Chinese).
10. Jia Leilei, *Zhongguo Wuxia Dianying Shi (A History of Chinese Martial Arts Film)*, Beijing: Culture and Art Publishing House, 2005, p 52 (in Chinese).
11. Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema 1896–1937*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, p 199.
12. Ibid, pp 200–233; Weihong Bao, 'From Pearl White to White Rose Woo: Tracing the Vernacular Body of *Nüxia* in Chinese Silent Cinema, 1927–1931', *Camera Obscura*, Durham, North Carolina, Vol 20, No 3 (60), 2005, pp 193–231.

The Kuomintang elitist government considered the *wuxia*-action genre lowbrow, full of remnants of feudal superstitions. In February 1931, the National Film Censorship Committee was established, requiring films to apply for screening permits. Within three years, more than 60 martial arts-magic spirit films, including the highly influential *The Burning of Red Lotus Temple* (1928), were banned, amounting to 70% of all banned Chinese films.¹³ With the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war, Shanghai entered the so-called ‘Orphan Island period’ (1938–1941). There were still some productions ongoing during this period, including a remake of *The Burning of Red Lotus Temple* (1940), and *The Red Butterfly* (1941), speaking to Shanghai’s semi-colonial resources. Political unrest, including censorship and foreign invasion, contributed to the mass exodus of human, technological and financial resources of the film industry from Shanghai to Hong Kong.

Genderised Modernity

The ways Republican Chinese modernity was genderised could be explored through the *wuxia* genre. The development of cinematic special effects technology was facilitated by the popularity of the *wuxia* genre. The production team for the earliest film episodes of *The Burning of Red Lotus Temple* invented visual illusions of characters riding winds and clouds or becoming invisible, plus animation effects showing flying swords and *qi* as weapons, on top of colouring techniques that highlighted the clothing of female protagonist-warrior in red on essentially monochrome film.¹⁴ The representation of these technologised female warriors reconciled with their feminised heritage by overstating a colourised image, in red no less, rendering their bodies more susceptible to spectacularisation; while their colourised images in a black-and-white reality made them literally outsiders of *any* realities or physicalities—in other words, more superhuman. From what we can see today, the modern characteristics of this genre in Republican Shanghai directly laid the groundwork for the development of *wuxia* films in post-war Hong Kong cinema, including but not limited to films such as *The Vagabond Master, Parts Two, Three and Four* (1948), which were marketed with taglines such as ‘featuring as rooftop-flashing kung fu-fighting Lady Red’ and ‘Lady Red dashing into midnight danger to rescue her son’ in advertisements, all the way to the mid-1960s, when Shaw Brothers (HK) Limited rolled out their ‘*Wuxia* Millennium in Technicolor’ campaign, as masterminded by Chang Cheh. The first film featured in the campaign was *Temple of the Red Lotus* (1965), which was yet another adaptation of *The Burning of Red Lotus Temple*, starring Ivy Ling Po as the female lead Lady Red.

13. See note 11, pp 235-236.

14. See note 10.



The 'Oriental Female Fairbanks' Wu Lai-chu's driving scenes were something rare and refreshing in the 1930s.

The popularity of action film stars facilitated a stardom-consuming market to come into being. The collective presence of these *wuxia* stars, many of them female, produced a genderised vernacular, from refreshing image representations to multiple desires from the audience. Zhang Zhen has analysed how female action stars in the *nüxia* subgenre transformed the prior normative and suppressed body language of women on screen into a different lingo of healthy, flexible, and sometimes muscular female bodies. The audience tended to conflate the female stars playing the warriors with the warriors themselves. Wu Lai-chu was coined the 'Oriental Female Fairbanks', for example.¹⁵

In the special feature on the aforementioned *A Warrior of the Northeast* series, the write-up on Wu was clearly the focus of publicity. One emphasised her smartness and sensitivity,

and most poignantly, her talent, training and skills in martial arts, making her 'second to no one', and hence the most appropriate star to play the Grand Master in the film. The captions for the stills included: 'Feminine or Masculine, a Mystery', 'Heroic Boys and Girls Share the Same Spirit', 'A Flower-selling Girl Turns Out to be a Hero', 'Building Up an Ironman Body'. Wu in the pictures was indeed pretty and fit, manly and feminine, all at once.

In the extant *nüxia* films of the late 1920s to early 1930s, it seems that male characters were either deliberately portrayed as absent or feeble so that women had to take up the roles in protecting the clan in crisis against invaders, or in planning revenge against enemies. During this process of assuming leadership, these female leads refabricated their physicality by picking up kung fu and becoming androgynous. The fact that they transgressed between genders and between human and superhuman boundaries, powerfully expanded the newly invented capacity of cinema in creating spectacles larger than life, and rendered projection of fluid desires from multiple genders possible.

15. See note 11, p 200.

It has been noted that Chinese modern *wuxia* literature, the vernacular language movement, and Chinese narrative films all emerged around the same time, serving as mediators of modernity for Republican China. Zhang Zhen reckoned that the vernacular modern in early Chinese *wuxia* films reconciled the historical *xia* from feudal times with superhuman, producing populist, charismatic beings that spoke to collective desires, lowbrow interests, avant-garde practices, and utopian folk culture.¹⁶ Experiments in cinematography, camera movement, special effects and editing technologies in this genre contributed to it being the early ‘cinema of attractions’ while its pacing and effects also imitated the quickening stimulation and visual spectacularisation of the city presented to the human body and eye in the modern world. Weihong Bao also noted that the Chinese *nüxia* subgenre was informed by muscular women’s bodies and their physical flexibility, as seen in American serial detective films which were circulating in Shanghai cinemas at the time.¹⁷

The development of the *wuxia* genre, if taken as a continuum at least from 1920s Shanghai to 1940s Hong Kong and hereafter, was indeed a venue for blending many diverse elements, including dance, theatre, legends, vernacular pulp fiction, magic and spirits, Euro-American influences, sci-fi, philosophical and moral values, hero, gangster, adventure, action and kung fu altogether. In affective terms, it granted its audience a safe escape route from their messy sociopolitical realities through rendering fighting non-violent, and delivering them to a black-and-white, evil-never-wins-over-good, ethics-centred comfort zone. Popular among colonised peoples, it offered moral solace as well as fulfilled desires in social mobility from non-normative identities (in terms of race, clan and gender).

Female Masculinity and Political Righteousness

A closer look at the films made by Yam Pang-nin and Wu Lai-chu in post-war Hong Kong revealed that *nüxia* was a prototype for Chinese modernity, and an object of desire for modern Chinese women simultaneously. In the first scene of *Female Spy 76* (1947), Spy 76 (played by Wu) was seen driving a small sedan to outside a building, and then in a long shot climbing up the tall wall via abseiling, all by herself and without any safety equipment. This introduction of the protagonist was clearly designed to demonstrate her extraordinary physical skills. Upon passing a few more physical and loyalty tests, 76 was sent by the party-state to ‘Island H’ to rival Kawashima Yoshiko. Once on board to Island H (and in most of the scenes set on Island H), she was dressed in male attire, mostly in business suit and tie, even in scenes without company. Her Westernised masculinity, with various capitalist signifiers of power, was particularly emphasised in shots of her mounting or unmounting male outfits, wearing male hats or looking at her (male) watch, etc.

16. See note 11, pp 203-206.

17. See note 12, Weihong Bao.

Female Spy 76 (1947)



Spy 76 (played by Wu Lai-chu) climbing up the tall wall via abseiling, demonstrating her agility



Spy 76 dressed in (male) business suit and tie

The film *Lady Robin Hood* (aka *The Adventures of Lo Bun Hon*, 1947) might have been made in the footsteps of *Chinese Robinwood* (1941, print no longer available), and the character's outfit and facial appearance closely resembled that of the protagonist in *The Valiant Girl Nicknamed White Rose* (1929), but Wu's body language was much more masculine than that of White Rose. Again, Wu was in menswear with a moustache on her face in the entire film except in the bedroom scene, in which she was ironically in disguise of *not* being Robin Hood. In the meeting scene, Robin's assistants expressed the gang members' desire: 'they all wanna see Brother Robin.' This line served also to voice the audience's desires of how they wanted to plant their gaze on Robin, whose performance of masculinity took up much more cinematic time and space than was required by the narrative or characterisation.

Wu's star persona in drag had been most familiar to Chinese audiences since 1930s Shanghai. Wu was featured as a swordsman on the cover of *Movie Weekly* (*Yingxi Shenghuo*) (Issue 14) published in 1931, with a commentary which highlighted her androgyny.¹⁸ This outfit of hers was quite similar to the one in *Lady Robin Hood* 16 years later, which only came without the moustache. Publicity stories emphasising Wu's masculinity, including her having acquired a driver's licence *on top of* her driving skills, were abundant in film trivia throughout the 1930s. Film magazine *The Screen Pictorial* (No 5), for example, contained a full page coverage of Wu smoking a pipe and driving a motorbike,



18. Yu Feng, *Movie Weekly* (*Yingxi Shenghuo*), Shanghai, Vol 1, Issue 14, 1931, cover (in Chinese).

with a tagline regarding her ‘manliness’, and a write-up on Wu picking up male hobbies even faster than men.¹⁹ What was most intriguing though, was while Wu’s cross-dressing was taken for granted in films such as *Female Spy 76*, the legendary role of Kawashima as a cross-dressing spy was completely displaced/replaced, to the extent that Kawashima was only portrayed as a middle-aged woman in modern female dress, with no cross-dressing whatsoever. All the cross-dressing was reserved for 76 solely; only the one in the politically correct camp in the film had the privilege of gender mobility. Likewise, the racial and cultural mobility of the legendary Kawashima was also displaced by the cultural mobility of 76, who said at the beginning of the film that she had come back from Japan for three years. This showed how *Female Spy 76*, within the parameters of the *nǚxia* subgenre, puts the female protagonist in the subject position of a Chinese patriot (and therefore morally correct), as a condition for her to be granted the largest flexibility in crossing gender and cultural boundaries; through such, she assumed the role in representing the most desirable form of modernity for the audience. This gender discursive tradition would have a lasting impact in Hong Kong cinema for the next 30 years, perhaps until the (re-)emergence of Bruce Lee on the Hong Kong screen in 1970 as the hypermasculine kung fu star, whose ethnocentric nationalism also granted him the most morally correct position and thus mobility in crossing geographical and cultural—but not gender—boundaries.

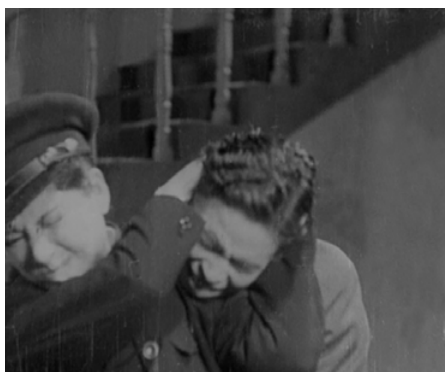
Real Kung Fu

The emergence of Bruce Lee in Hong Kong cinema was often considered a benchmark for realist and/or authentic representation of kung fu. This also marked the conventional differentiation of early *wuxia* genre films from the kung fu genre in most of film history.²⁰ Wu, however, had already made her fame with hand-to-hand combat on screen three decades before Bruce Lee, in works made by the first *wuxia*-action director in Chinese film history. In extant films including *Female Spy 76*, *Lady Robin Hood* and *Bloodshed in a Besieged Citadel* (aka *United as One*, 1948), there was much screen time dedicated to Wu’s fighting with no dialogue or post-production visual effects of flying *qi* or weapons (gravity-defying wire work had not yet been invented). The only way a man could stop 76 was to hold her at gunpoint, and even so, she could still flee without being hurt, simply by grabbing the man’s gun with bare hands and hit back. Fantastical it might seem, a fan from



19. ‘Ms Wu Lai-chu with Manliness’, *The Screen Pictorial*, Shanghai, No 5, 1935, p 2 (in Chinese).

20. This generic differentiation of *wuxia* vs kung fu is common in Chinese film history and film criticism. One recent example: ‘Beginning with Shanghai productions in the 1920s, early martial arts films drew influence from Chinese opera and *wuxia* novels: narratives set in Ancient China focusing on heroes with supernatural martial arts abilities. Fight scenes in these early films emphasised flowing dramatised movements, but rarely showcased actual martial arts skills. This changed with the transformation of Hong Kong cinema in the 1970s. Resisting the fantastical elements of the *wuxia* style, local studios Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest put actual martial artists into their films. With this move, the kung fu genre was born.’ See Joyleen Christensen, ‘From Bruce Lee to Shang-Chi: a short history of the kung fu film in cinema’, 26 September 2021. <https://theconversation.com/from-bruce-lee-to-shang-chi-a-short-history-of-the-kung-fu-film-in-cinema-168273>. Accessed on 18 October 2021.



Defeating the enemy with bare fists in *Female Spy 76* (1947)



The extraordinary archer who never missed a target in *Lady Robin Hood* (1947)



Intense fights at close range in *Bloodshed in a Besieged Citadel* (1948)

Xiamen commented on how impressed s/he was with Wu's 'real kung fu'.²¹ Would 'real kung fu' here mean a form of realist/authentic representation of choreographed fighting that emphasised verisimilitude and the possibility of reformulating the human body and its intervention into physical reality and interpersonal encounter, involving real martial arts skills while limiting cinematographic or editing manipulation to a minimum? As such, was the claim of 'real kung fu' also a response to the Shanghai martial arts-magic spirit craze from the 1920s to 1930s and its heavy reliance on the inventions of visual effects technology, while deliberately calling for a more tactile (i.e. 'anti-superstitious' modern) imagination of bodily physicality in moving away from the spectacular attractions of early cinema? In this light then, these films, while bringing with them their Shanghai memories and heritage, could also be seen as speaking to a Chinese Hong Kong colonial present.

About 18 minutes into the film, there was a two-minute sequence of 76 approaching and arriving at Island H with her assistants. Here they were seen on a boat in Victoria Harbour, on a tram in Central, then arriving at Repulse Bay Hotel in a car. The speed and convenience of modern transportation were featured in this arrival scene as well as the protagonists themselves. While 76 was monitoring the conversations of Kawashima next door, we heard the names of Hong Kong's places in the soundtrack and saw them



21. Han Chao, 'On Local Wuxia Films', *Movie Weekly (Yingxi Shenghuo)*, Shanghai, Vol 1, Issue 29, 1931, pp 2-3 (in Chinese).

on Kawashima's map, including Mount Cameron, Sha Tin, Kennedy Town, Aberdeen, Kowloon City, and so on. Kawashima referred to Island H as 'the military outpost in the Far East, together with Singapore they form the eyes of the empire'. Hong Kong's colonial modernity was placed in the midst of this struggle between powers; its position in the centre of history was emphasised through the visuality of it being a cosmopolitan spectacle. The migration of battlegrounds for 76 and her team could be seen as a metaphorical encore of Yam's and Wu's personal journey from Shanghai to Hong Kong, how they moved and rebuilt a possible space to continue to perform their cinematic skills, not unlike 76's travels to Hong Kong to continue her spy mission.

Family-State Reunion

The *Ta-ya Pictorial News* (Issue 177, 1929) on *A Warrior of the Northeast* described that one feature of Yam's work was his tendency to use family members as crew and cast. He founded Oriental First Film Company in Shanghai, where he employed his first wife Wu Aizhu (aka Ren Aizhu) as the main actress, and his younger brother Ren Pengshou as actor. After Aizhu passed away, Yam married her younger sister Lai-chu, who then became the key actress in Yam's films. In both *Lady Robin Hood* and *Female Spy 76*, Yam Pang-nin's daughter Ren Yizhi was also cast as the supporting actress, assistant to the protagonist. In the former picture, Robin Hood played by the cross-dressing Wu Lai-chu had a (somewhat) romantic relationship with the fisherman's daughter played by Ren Yizhi, Wu's stepdaughter in real life. How was Yam's investment in the *wuxia*-action-spy genre related to his commitment to this tightly knit circle of family members on and off screen?

The traditional Chinese *nūxia* is usually caught in a mission involving revenge and/or paying a debt of gratitude, as the *xia* tradition obliges the warrior to comply with Confucian values concerned with communal, social and/or state benefits beyond the self. The characterisation of *nūxia* in Yam's films, as in *For the Righteousness* (1924), *The Patriotic Umbrella* (1924), *Bloodshed in a Besieged Citadel* and *Female Spy 76*, translated the motif of loyalty and revenge into patriotic obligations, modernising and politicising the genre in specific ways to respond to contemporary needs. The Robin Hood legend has been narrated as a yeoman turned fugitive since the 13th century; and since the 15th century the character has developed into an anti-authority hero righting the wrong. Though sometimes represented as loyal to King Richard/Richard I, partly due to the rewrite in *Ivanhoe* (1820) by Sir Walter Scott²², Robin Hood's commitment to supporting the royal was rarely the central motif. *Lady Robin Hood*, however, began with a state crisis of the king having fallen ill, making a will for his court to hand the throne to the prince. Upon the king's death, Minister Situ Yangming (played by Wang Hao) forfeited the king's will and imprisoned the prince. To keep his life, Minister Luo Zhengqing (played by Jiang Rui) resigned from court



22. Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (Revised Edition), London and New York: Penguin Classics, 2020.



In the scene of an honours ceremony in *Lady Robin Hood* (1947), it was only when Robin Hood (played by Wu Lai-chu) removed 'his' moustache after a bow that Minister Luo (played by Jiang Rui) recognised 'him' as his daughter.

and moved to the countryside with his daughter (played by Wu Lai-chu), who cross-dressed as Robin to organise the rescue of the prince and restore his reign. In the last scene, Robin Hood, bowing humbly in front of the newly crowned prince, removed her moustache so Minister Luo recognised her as his daughter.

So, the trope of cross-dressing/gender transgression in *Female Spy 76* and *Lady Robin Hood* served ultimately as a ploy to uphold state sovereignty. Women warriors stood in for male literati in the Confucianism-infused state—in which the male literati, family and state were seen as a continuum—to protect the wholesomeness of the family and the state, at a time when the Chinese nation-state, and by implication Chinese masculinity and the literary tradition, was undergoing unprecedented crisis. In this light, the employment of family members on and off screen, could be read as a self-empowering or self-defensive tactic when the state, and by implication the family, was under serious attack.

A Jianghu of North-South Cultures

Yam Pang-nin and Wu Lai-chu moving from Shanghai to Hong Kong marked the beginning of Hong Kong's *nüxia* tradition, with its tendency to train and use non-Cantonese actresses

as the martial arts stars hereafter, including Beijinger Yu So-chau and Hubei-born Suet Nei. By the 1960s, we saw Yu starring in Yam's films as the chief woman warrior, with Wu as the supporting actress. Ren Yizhi, who made her first screen appearances in *Lady Robin Hood* and *Female Spy 76*, joined the Feng Huang Motion Picture Co in the 1950s and became a screenwriter as well as a director, one of the few women directors in Hong Kong film history, making no fewer than 20 films.

Post-war Hong Kong provided a new meeting platform for people all over China, from the North and from the South. The Hong Kong film scene took advantage of the city's geopolitical position, utilised cultural and financial resources from the pre-war Republican film industry to diversify and strengthen itself, and developed new possibilities for a new *Jianghu*, taking the *nüxia* tradition to stunning new heights in decades to come.

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Part 2: Genres · Regions · Culture

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Part 1: Era and Film History

