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Wax on, wax off: mediatized Asian masculinity through Hollywood martial arts films

Abstract: This paper examines the mediatization of Asian masculinity in representative Hollywood martial arts films to expose the essentialism on which such films rely. Asian martial arts films are able to tap into viewers' familiarity with idealized images of Asian masculinity; such familiarity is an essential part of the pleasure provided by these films and hence of their economic success. This study focuses on non-Asian (that is, western) protagonists' appropriation of Asian masculinity because it succinctly encapsulates precisely how western hegemonies co-opt and commodify Asian-ness for their own purposes. Such appropriation is a use of intertextuality that not only allows western viewers to easily access a simplified model of Asian masculinity, but also allows them to reference earlier works to further facilitate the mediation and mediatization of Asian masculinity. This is a process which continues to Other and exoticizes Asian identities, even as it ostensibly carves out a niche for Asian bodies and identities in the institution of the film industry.

Keywords: Asian masculinity, martial arts film, mediation, mediatization, Othering, race

1 Introduction

This paper focuses on media discourse and visual representations in popular martial arts films to investigate how non-Asian protagonists are portrayed as martial arts heroes. Such portrayals involve processes of semiotization which work on multiple levels. In the interactional dimension, talks between characters establish the markers of "true martial artists," and by extension, begin the work of mediating who the true martial artists are. For example, the markers of

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membership in a *jianghu* "martial arts community" may include embedded constructions of Asian masculinity, as described in my previous works (Hiramoto 2012; Hiramoto and Teo 2014). However, unlike these other studies, the current study explores mediation and mediatization of both Asian and western masculinities as represented through Hollywood films by focusing on non-Asian martial arts hero characters in the selected film data. I examine how Asian martial arts masculinities are projected through appropriated discursive practices in scripted speech and how they are made to appear natural, even in non-Asian protagonists, to global viewers despite (or because of) cultural and historic gaps. The data suggest that one of the goals of the non-Asian characters is to understand the philosophy of Asian martial arts practitioners. While the non-Asian characters find that Asian ways of understanding the world and Asian martial arts skills are eventually made available to them, they simultaneously demonstrate a western masculine quality that is not made available to Asian heroes. In this paper, I will discuss (i) how such racialized representations of masculinities are mediated through characters played by actors of different races – Asians and non-Asians – and (ii) how these racialized masculinities are mediatized through cinematic discourse in Hollywood films. Before launching into a discussion on the data and methodology, I will provide some pertinent information related to current understanding of the language, gender, and sexuality in mainstream media discourse.

1.1 Gender ideologies in the media: mediation and mediatization

Dichotomous gender ideologies about masculinities and femininities have often been propagated through the media, as many scholars have discussed (e.g., Agha 2011a; Bucholtz 2011; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003; Fairclough 1989; Koller 2004; Lippi-Green 2012 [1997]; Talbot 1995). People readily treat constant reiteration of any such ideology as commonsensical, because the ideas appear so effortlessly acceptable within cultural and historical contexts. For instance, images of jocks, macho men, knights, cowboys, James Bond, or even butch lesbians in today's social life are often correlated with masculinity (Reeser 2010: 15). Such an essentialist understanding of gender occurs through a process which Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) refer to as naturalization. Linking the term to Gramsci's (1971) idea of hegemony, they argue that "the most effective form of domination is the assimilation of the wider population into one's worldview" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 43). Popular media have the power to naturalize their own conventions and to make viewers complicit in the process, be it within populist or academic discourses (MacDougall 2002: 150).

The naturalization of gender ideologies through media can also be inflected by race and ethnicity. Related to this study, Hiramoto (2012) examined processes through which discursive practices employed in Chinese *wushu* martial arts films began naturalizing a widely propagated concept of ideal Chinese masculinity. Traits that index such masculinity include the Asian heroes' reticence and use of formulaic or philosophical speech styles. The observations follow in the tradition of linguistic anthropological work (e.g., Bucholtz 2011; Higgins and Furukawa 2012; Hill 1993; Hiramoto 2011; Inoue 2003; Jaffe 2011; Lippi-Green 2012 [1997]; Meek 2006; Queen 2004; Ronkin and Karn 1999) which describes how specific speech styles are mapped onto specific racialized or ethnicized bodies through processes of semioticization in entertainment products such as movies, TV shows, novels, or online joke websites. Scholars have proposed that widespread reiterations of these speech styles lead to naturalization of stereotypical racial and gender representations. Important to the concept of naturalization is the concept of intertextuality. Naturalization and intertextuality in mediatized discourse go hand in hand because they are able to tap into viewers' familiarity with dramatic effects required for productions of entertainment, such as romanticization or legitimization.

To clarify, *mediation* in this case refers generically to communication processes that connect people and elements of society through the exchanges of meanings and ideas (Agha 2011a, 2011b; Jaffe 2011). *Mediatization* is used to describe specially formalized kinds of communication/mediation which occur through institutionalized means like news reports, political speeches, press conferences, and entertainment. It encompasses all representational strategies – choices made during production such as editing of linguistic resources – in the creation of media products such as text, image, and talk (e.g., Agha 2011b; Bucholtz 2011; Jaffe 2011; Park 2010; Wahl 2010). While the exact definition of mediatization may vary from researcher to researcher, the connotations of the term as used in the works cited above are all very similar, and in particular I follow the meaning expounded by Agha (2005a, 2005b), namely a specific form of semiotic mediation or an ongoing process in social life which unfolds through links between semiotic encounters that yield multi-sited chains of communication.

2 Commodification of race and masculinity in martial arts films

Western masculinity in films is often defined by characteristics such as physical strength and size, which are essential to the construction of hegemonic masculinity in the mainstream film industry as epitomized by the body types of tall,

strong figures such as Charles Bronson or Arnold Schwarzenegger (Boyle 2010). Historically, in mainstream western cultural productions, ethnically Asian males are usually excluded from hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995; Louie 2002; Reeser 2010). They are often labeled as weak, nerdy, feminine, and asexual as compared with idealized western masculinity *unless* there are martial arts skills involved (Hirose and Pih 2010: 209). Ever since the Bruce Lee films achieved international success in the 1970s, martial arts – also known as *wushu*[1] – films have increasingly portrayed Asian martial artists as masculine figures. Today, high-budget martial arts films featuring prominent Asian and non-Asian stars enjoy widespread popularity as mainstream blockbusters. Featured film stars have lent their social capital to the reproduction of martial arts imagery catering to general viewers in the modern global market, and in the process, conferred a certain masculinity on it. This type of masculinity is genre-specific to a martial arts category of action films. The cinematic representations shown in the films help to semioticize this specific genre, delivering mediatized expected semiotic interpretations of images associated with Asian martial arts to viewers. Such semiotization is often achieved through references to intertextual information about Asian martial arts that is available to general audiences. Thus, dynamic action images in the films have gained cultural capital even among audiences who do not share Asian cultural practices in a world where watching Hollywood films is a means of cultural consumption.

Beginning in the 1970s, western movie studios began to capitalize on the commodification of Asian martial arts masculinity with a first wave of Asian-influenced action films with heroes played by non-Asian stars, for example, Chuck Norris (*Tangsudo*, *Chun kuk do*), Jean-Claude Van Damme (*Shôtôkan karate*, *Taekwondo*, *Muay Thai*), and Steven Seagal (*Aikidô*). These films do not focus on the characters' life experiences involving a journey in which they master martial arts. Rather, the non-Asian heroes are expert martial artists to begin with, and they use their skills to combat enemies who are not necessarily part of a martial arts community. In many cases, the characters are police detectives, military special force personnel, FBI agents, or have other roles that allow the hero to engage in extreme action scenes. Like Arnold Schwarzenegger, who became an iconic action star with an image of invincibility that was circulated through the *Conan* and *Terminator* series beginning in the 1980s (Boyle 2010), these actors became iconic figures in part because of their martial arts expertise.

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1 Chinese traditional martial arts are often referred to as *wushu* "martial arts". As a side note, *kungfu* generally refers to the Hong Kong style of *wushu* while *wuxia* is understood as the Wudan style of *wushu*.

Besides the films that showcased their stars' pre-existing martial arts skills, several Hollywood films centering on the development of martial arts skills by non-Asian heroes also gained success. One of the first popular depictions of a non-Asian martial arts protagonist was *The Karate Kid* (1984); a more recent one, *The Last Samurai* (2003). These films mediatize the characters' learning of Asian martial arts masculinity through their growing acceptance of a *wen-wu* "cultural attainment–martial valor" philosophy that is ultimately based on Confucian ideals of masculinity (Louie 2002; Louie and Edwards 1994). All traditional Asian martial arts – for example, *kungfu* "Chinese martial arts", *karatedô* "way of empty hand", *bushidô* "way of samurai" – are based on this philosophy to some extent. For example, *bushidô* traditionally includes the study of *bunburyôdô* "literary and military arts". Although there are important differences among the martial arts that are reflected not just in their fighting techniques but in their manners of handling weapons, suicide rituals, tea-drinking customs, and so on, in this paper, I recognize the Asian martial arts philosophy, whether Chinese or Japanese, as a shared code following the *wen-wu* ideals. This paper investigates the mediatization of Asian martial arts masculinity by focusing on representations of the philosophy rather than on representations of fighting skills. Therefore, I discuss films that tell a story of how and why non-Asian protagonists become exposed to martial arts, and how they experience personal growth as a result of learning martial arts and assimilating into Asian martial arts culture.

The development of Asian masculine qualities in non-Asian heroes is often depicted through a combination of language and physical action. In the data analysis, I highlight the ways non-Asian heroes start emulating their Asian mentors by reproducing linguistic aspects of the performance of martial arts masculinity. Their stylized performances typically include the use of minimal oral communication, or reticence, as well as the learning of martial arts skills. Asian mentor characters typically converse with the protagonists in Asian-accented English and in peculiar ways (e.g., indirect or philosophical speech styles), and these conversational mannerisms help to highlight the mystical nature of martial arts. Among martial arts practitioners, this type of speech style can be interpreted as an indication of humility or the desire to make no imposition, or as a type of indirect speech that solicits a listener's nonverbal, extralinguistic, and/or affective responses. One good example of this is in the following scene of *The Karate Kid*, where an Asian teacher gives his first lesson to his new non-Asian student. The scene in example (1) implies that, by not answering his student's questions, the teacher helps the student gain a deeper understanding of both the point of the lesson and the martial arts philosophy.

(1) *The Karate Kid* (1984), Miyagi gives his first lesson to Daniel.

Miyagi: First, wash all car. Then wax. Wax on...
Daniel: Hey, why do I have to...?
Miyagi: Ah ah! Remember deal! No questions!
Daniel: Yeah, but...
Miyagi: Hai! [makes circular gestures with each hand] Wax on, right hand. Wax off, left hand. Wax on, wax off. ... [walks away, still making circular motions with hands] Wax on, wax off. Wax on, wax off. ...

Figure 1: Miyagi's first instruction: "Wax on, wax off"
THE KARATE KID © 1984 Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
Courtesy of Columbia Pictures, 2012.

Miyagi shows a dozen cars in his backyard to Daniel, and tells him to wash and wax them.[2] This peculiar instruction confuses Daniel and dampens his initial excitement at the prospect of learning *karate*, which is motivated by his need to fend off bullies at his new school. Daniel attempts to question Miyagi, but Miyagi silences Daniel and carefully demonstrates the manner of handling the waxing sponges (Figure 1). This scene makes a point to viewers that felicitous exchanges within the domain of Asian martial arts are structured by a mentor who states instructions and a mentee who obeys no matter what. Without making it explicit, Miyagi plans to teach Daniel basic *karate* upper body movements, and this is the

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2 The actor who played Miyagi's role, Noriyuki Pat Morita, was a native speaker of English from California; the Japanese-accented English is thus all the more significant as a deliberate choice on the part of the director.

reason for his careful demonstration. Miyagi keeps his illustration concise and his oral communication minimal. Thus, the instruction seems indirect and simple, although it is sufficient to teach the student that the simple and repetitive movements of a mundane chore in fact impart the foundational movements of *karate* through muscular memory. Daniel later surprises himself when he realizes he has learned the basic *karate* movements from this line of lessons.

Example (1) also highlights the enigmatic nature of an Asian mentor's utterances in mediatized discourse. Non-standard speech often marks the non-normative nature of a character in scripted speech. Lippi-Green's (2012 [1997]) study on Disney films reports that Standard English is typically a code reserved for protagonists while non-Standard English is used by non-normative characters. Similarly, Kinsui (2003, 2007) demonstrates that the assignment of different regional and social dialects is dependent on characters' roles in Japanese scripted speech. In *The Karate Kid* 1984, Miyagi's Japanese-accented English helps to index his foreignness and mystical authority. Non-Asian protagonists' processes of learning to accept such mystical authority and to respect their mentors' peculiar (foreign) communication patterns typically become part of a rite of passage in their martial arts endeavors in these mediatizations. In the way that hip-hop-type linguistic features and embodiments of gangster style have come to index black masculinity in American popular culture (e.g., Alim 2004; Bucholtz 2011), Asian mentors engage in stylized linguistic performances, along with physical performances, to embody a gendered and racialized style of masculinity.

3 Data and methodology

The data for this paper come out of a larger project on martial arts films in which over eighty films have been examined.[3] For this study, I focused on films featuring non-Asians learning martial arts, including Japanese *karate* and *bushidô* and Chinese *kungfu*, and which have a wide range of release dates. The films I chose to examine closely exhibit an appropriation of Asian masculinity by racially non-Asian characters. The mediatized appropriation of Asian martial arts style by non-Asian protagonists represents a gradual semiotic

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3 Older movies include *Rashômon* (1950), *Seven Samurai* (1954), and *Come Drink with Me* (1966). The most recent ones are from 2012 (*Painted Skin 2*, *Rurouni Kenshin*, etc.). All of the films are in the action category while some are also cross-categorized as dramas and comedies.

process of their "becoming Asian" through learning martial arts skills and philosophy. The ultimate goals of the non-Asian heroes are typically to become more like their mentors, who are self-controlled, highly skilled, determined, capable, and selfless. However, there is an important exception: the non-Asian heroes have romantic or sexual relationships, while a noticeable characteristic of Asian martial arts heroes is an absence of such relationships in their lives. Romantic or sexual activities are common elements for heroic characters in western action films; however, the converse is true for Asian martial arts heroes, who often exhibit celibacy and disinterest in amorous affairs.[4] According to the *wen-wu* philosophy, martial artists are obliged to give the highest priority to publicly honoring their *jianghu* "martial arts community", such as their schools, teachers, fellow martial artists, and disciples, while excluding their loved ones, who belong to the private realm.

I analyze the semiotic processes of non-Asian protagonists' becoming Asian, which take place as they learn martial arts skills and philosophy in the mediatized appropriations of Asian martial arts style by non-Asian protagonists. These processes are represented at different stages that I call Initiation, Assimilation, Exemplification, and Hybridization, which are described below.

– Initiation: Protagonists encounter martial arts culture, their nemeses or antagonists, and their mentors for the first time. This part of the filmic discourse is accompanied by processes of distinction which highlight their racial differences.

– Assimilation: Protagonists begin to emulate their mentors beyond racial and cultural boundaries. At this stage, the non-Asian protagonists are enthusiastically taking lessons from their mentors while trying to negotiate the distance between their goals and reality.

– Exemplification: This stage usually corresponds to the climax of the film. Protagonists supersede expectations and exemplify martial arts masculinity according to the martial arts philosophy taught by their mentors.

– Hybridization: Protagonists demonstrate masculine qualities found in both Asian and western norms, typically through the attainment of martial arts skills as well as success in romantic love. Rather than being a temporal stage, Hybridization can be ongoing throughout the film.

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4 For example, model warrior Guan Yu in *Three Kingdoms* (Luo 1995 [ca. 1500]) displays stoic attitudes toward women.

Accordingly, the movies I investigate share the following essential elements: they (i) are produced by Hollywood studios, (ii) have non-Asian protagonists who appropriate the quintessence of Asian philosophy, (iii) have (potential) female love interest(s) for the main character(s), and (iv) contain predominantly English utterances in the database.[5] Three movies which satisfy these requirements are *The Karate Kid* (1984, Ralph Macchio and Pat Morita), its remake *The Karate Kid* (2010, Jaden Smith and Jackie Chan), and *The Last Samurai* (2003, Tom Cruise and Ken Watanabe). In addition, I will make reference to *Enter the Dragon* (1973, Bruce Lee and Jim Kelly), a film which does not satisfy the second requirement fully as it features Lee, an Asian, as the protagonist, but it also features supporting non-Asian martial artists. Further, it contains a particularly effective scene which provides useful data for subtler distinctions between Asian and non-Asian martial arts masculinity. Details of the films are listed in Table 1.

As far as martial arts philosophy is concerned, there are few noticeable distinctions between the Chinese (*Enter the Dragon*, *The Karate Kid* 2010[6]) and the Japanese (*The Karate Kid* 1984, *The Last Samurai*) cultures which are appropriated by the non-Asian characters. This could be partially due to a conflation of such differences in favor of mediatization of a generic Asian martial arts philosophy designed for consumption by viewers who may or may not recognize the difference. Moreover, in most cases, even the distinctions between whiteness and blackness are erased among non-Asian martial artists' characters. The study will therefore proceed with terms such as *Asian* and *western* to indicate the homogenized, mediatized products of such stylizations.

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5 For this reason, well-known films that are circulated mostly in non-English languages or without non-Asian martial artists have been excluded, e.g., Akira Kurosawa films (*Seven Samurai* 1954, *Kagemusha* 1980), the Shaw Brothers or Golden Harvest films (e.g., directed by Cheng Cheh, Liu Chia-Liang, Yuen Woo-ping, Tsui Hark), Japanese *Jidaigeki* series (e.g., *Nikkatsu*, *Tôei*, *Shôchiku*), new lines of *wuxia* films involving actor/producers like Stephen Chow, Sammo Hung, Jet Li, Donnie Yen, etc. Additionally, while there are some popular films that feature female non-Asian martial arts fighters (*The Karate Kid 4* with Hilary Swank, the *Kill Bill* series with Uma Thurman, Cynthia Rothrock films, etc.), they are excluded from the analysis because the female gender of the "hero" adds rather different ideological configurations to ideas of masculinity.
6 Although this film is a remake of the Japanese *karate*-inspired original production, the type of martial arts involved in the remake is not *karate* but *kungfu*.

Table 1: Details of the selected films

Film	Protagonist	Mentor	Love interest	Plot
Enter the Dragon Dir. Robert Clouse (1973, Concord & Golden Harvest)	Lee martial artist/private investigator (Bruce Lee)	Shaolin abbot monk (Roy Chiao)	N/A	A martial artist agrees to spy on a reclusive crime lord using his invitation to a tournament there as cover.
The Karate Kid Dir. John Avildsen (1984, Columbia)	Daniel high school student (Ralph Macchio)	Mr. Miyagi maintenance man (Pat Morita)	Ali Daniel's classmate (Elisabeth Shue)	A handyman/martial arts master agrees to teach a bullied boy *karate* and shows him that there is more to the martial art than fighting.
The Last Samurai Dir. Edward Zwick (2004, Warner Bros)	Nathan Algren US military trainer (Tom Cruise)	Katsumoto samurai leader (Ken Watanabe)	Taka Katsumoto's sister (Koyuki)	An American military advisor embraces the samurai culture he was hired to destroy after he is captured in battle.
The Karate Kid Dir. Harald Zwart (2010, Columbia)	Dre Parker junior high student (Jaden Smith)	Mr. Han maintenance man (Jackie Chan)	Meiying Dre's classmate (Wenwen Han)	Work causes a single mother to move to China with her young son; in his new home, the boy embraces *kungfu*, taught to him by a master.

Source: Internet Movie Database (2014).

4 Reticence and chattiness in linguistic processes of mediation

4.1 Initiation: *You don't mind if I call you Bob, do you?*

The western characters are often shown as learning to emulate the behavior of an Asian tutor, who serves as a role model. One of the most significant linguistic mannerisms in martial arts behaviors is that of reticence and silence. Quiet and subtle behavior is highly regarded according to the *bushidô* "the way of samurai" and its source *wen-wu* "cultural attainment–martial valor" philosophy. In the earlier stages of learning, the non-Asian protagonist is often portrayed as too talkative, even chatty, while being contrasted with other Asian characters in ways that highlight the protagonist's inadequacy. I see this dynamic clearly in *The Last Samurai*, in the contrast between non-Asian hero Captain Nathan Algren and his native samurai guard whom he irreverently names "Bob." In

the plot, initially, Algren is an out-group stranger to everyone in the territory of the samurai leader, Katsumoto. As the film progresses, the film shows Algren's near-Stockholm-syndrome experience as he loses his resentment at being held captive, and he begins to learn ideal samurai behaviors by emulating Katsumoto and his people. Example (2) shows Algren's initial exposure to ideal samurai behavior, which later influences his own.

(2)   *The Last Samurai*, Algren's exposure to ideal samurai behavior.
        a.   Algren regains consciousness and steps outside after having been captured and knocked out. He sees a guard outside his accommodations.

            Algren: Morning.
            Samurai: ...
            Algren: What's your name? You got a name, don't you? You don't know what I'm saying, do you? I know why you don't talk. You're angry. You're angry because they make you wear a dress. Son of a bitch!
            Samurai: ...

        b.   After Algren gets beaten to the ground by a very skilled swordsman, Uijo.

            Algren: I just realized, I've been remiss. Forgive me, I forgot to thank you for protecting me yesterday. That is your job right? Protecting me. Well done Bob. You don't mind if I call you Bob, do you? I knew a Bob once; God, he was ugly as a mule. Are you a ladies man, Bob?
            Samurai: ...

As the story progresses, Algren ends up befriending Katsumoto and his men in the village, and opens himself to the *bushidô* philosophy. This develops into the main arc of the film which drives the character's growth. Example (2) shows some of the key scenes in which Algren witnesses samurai philosophy in practice, and which include displays of the samurai adherence to reticence as demonstrated by "Bob" and others in Katsumoto's village. As for Bob, his only utterance in the entire film which was directed toward Algren is his warning shout of "Aruguren-san!" ("Mr. Algren!") while he acts as a human shield to save Algren in a battle. This character's role in the film carries a suggestion that unobtrusive silence during the discharge of one's duties and a quiet acceptance of one's social station and fate is part of the *bushidô* philosophy.

    In *The Karate Kid* movies, the protagonists learn that despite the dynamic appearance of martial arts, its principles are actually simple and humble. The

non-Asian protagonists describe their own exotic, self-mystifying images of martial arts shortly after they start their lessons. Their mentors usually pay little attention to such ignorant expectations about the mysteries of martial arts and continue their instructions.

(3) *The Karate Kid* 1984 and 2010, the teachers and students.
    a. Miyagi and Daniel, on the origin of *karate*
      Daniel: I thought it [*karate*] came from Buddhist temples and stuff like that.
      Miyagi: You too much TV.

    b. After practicing the same moves over and over, Dre finds Han's *kungfu* lessons are not really *kungfu*. He finally snaps at Han and tries to leave.
      Dre: I'm done! … [furiously walks away] Do you know why you only have one student? Cause you don't know *kungfu*!
      Han: Xiao Dre!
      Dre: What?
      Han: Come here! [He starts showing Dre how to use the moves he has been practicing in *kungfu*. Dre is surprised at his own skills. Han grabs Dre's shoulders, looks into the eyes.] *Kungfu* lives in everything we do, Xiao Dre! It lives in how we put on the jacke', how we take off the jacke', and it lives in how we trea' people! Everything is *kungfu*.

The protagonists' imaginary expectations about martial arts are constantly ignored by their mentors, as in example (3). Toward the end of the Initiation stage, the protagonists start adjusting their own myths about martial arts culture, and they start accepting their masters' teaching styles.

4.2 Assimilation: *Your focus needs more focus!*

It is considered ideal in martial arts when a teacher is capable of training his students without being explicitly vocal. Likewise, a good student should be able to learn without wasting his time and energy on excessive movements and speech. *The Karate Kid* protagonists Daniel and Dre are unfamiliar with martial arts philosophy until they start interacting with their teachers; in the Assimilation stage, they still have a great deal to learn about the martial arts philosophy. A main difference between the first two stages of Initiation and Assimilation is the protagonists' willingness to accept their mentors' instructions. Nonetheless, the

masters still have to teach the protagonists to work on simple moves and to attain focus, rather than fixating on the flashy techniques which the boys originally hoped to learn. In the following example, *The Karate Kid* protagonists are condemned for their desire to perform showy movements.

(4)   *The Karate Kid* 1984 and 2010, the teachers and students at their regular training sessions.
   a.   Miyagi is teaching more technical movements – how to punch.
       Miyagi: Hai ("yes")! Wait! Hai! Wait, Daniel-san! [trying to stop him]
       Daniel: What do you think, Mr. Miyagi? [hopping around very quickly and still playfully punching Miyagi]
       Miyagi: [knocks Daniel down] I tell you what Miyagi think! I think you *dance around* too much! I think you *talk* too much! I think you not concentrate enough! Lots of work to be done!

   b.   Han is trying to give Dre a lesson, but Dre is not interested in the simple movements of the lesson.
       Dre: I just kinda wanna learn the cobra thing.
       Han: Cobra takes a lifetime, requires a great focus!
       Dre: But I have a great focus... [Han suddenly puts him in an unbalanced position] Ah, wow, wow... Oh my god! Mr. Han!
       Han: Your focus needs more focus!

It is only when the protagonists start embracing martial arts silence that they are shown to gain confidence and fighting skills. In *The Last Samurai*, Katsumoto's men practice their martial arts quietly and diligently in nature, and Algren describes the life in Katsumoto's village with the word *tranquility* in his diary before he joins them in practicing. Even in the middle of winter, the samurai in the village continued their rigorous martial arts practice and meditation outside. Indeed, acting in accord with nature is part of the *wen-wu* philosophy, as one is expected to attain harmony with Mother Nature.

   As for Daniel and Dre, they also display their acquisition of martial arts ideals via self-training scenes similar to Algren's. Example (5) below shows Miyagi's explanation of the importance of getting along with nature in *karate*.

(5)   *The Karate Kid* 1984, Daniel sees Miyagi practicing a "crane stance" on an empty beach.
   Daniel: Could you teach me?
   Miyagi: First learn stand, then learn fly. Nature rule, Daniel-san, not mine.

Daniel, learning that even Miyagi still continues humbly practicing his martial arts, also begins practicing by himself at the beach as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Daniel learns how to merge himself into nature's stillness through *karate*
THE KARATE KID © 1984 Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Columbia Pictures, 2012.

Throughout the films, the mentor characters expect their mentees to learn appropriate behavior, such as respecting silence, learning self-control, and gaining focus. After some struggles, the protagonists become able to put the martial arts philosophy into practice toward the end of the Assimilation stage.

4.3 Exemplification: *No mind…*

In the Exemplification stage, the protagonists reach the point where they embody the same ideal Asian martial arts qualities demonstrated by their mentors. In *The Last Samurai*, the originally angry and agitated Algren, through his interactions with *bushidô* experts like Katsumoto and his men, comes to appreciate that mental calmness is ideal in situations where frustration cannot be immediately alleviated. In the following example, Algren was losing badly during a *bokken* "wooden sword" practice session when he receives a piece of advice from a samurai who considers Algren a fellow martial arts practitioner.

(6)   *The Last Samurai*, Algren keeps losing in sword sparring; Katsumoto's son, Nobutada, discretely runs to Algren and whispers a few words.
Nobutada: Please forgive… too many mind.
Algren: Too many mind?
Nobutada: Hai ("yes"), mind the sword, mind the people watch, mind enemy – too many mind. [Looking into Algren's eyes] No mind.
Algren: No mind…

Here, Nobutada's "no mind" means to focus, highlighting the importance of mental concentration. In fighting, one needs to concentrate and should not be distracted. Algren absorbs the meaning while repeating the word. In the next practice match against Ujio, Katsumoto's right hand man, Algren closes his eyes and whispers "no mind" to shut out the distractions.

The camera work merges Algren into the landscape in the background while he holds a moment of meditation. Algren then manages to fight Ujio to a tie, to everyone's surprise including his own. Toward the end of his stay at the village, Algren's rage dissolves and he learns to fight rather sophisticatedly. Eventually, Algren leaves Katsumoto's village and returns to the United States' protection in Yokohama; however, he has become a target of assassination by some Japanese officials for political reasons. There is a scene where Algren calms himself down by muttering "no mind" to himself when he gets ambushed in the city, followed by a successful fighting sequence. His repeated use of the phrase "no mind" suggests his adherence to the Asian martial arts philosophy that he learned from his mentors.

The protagonists of *The Karate Kid* films exhibit the Exemplification stage in their final fighting scenes, where they face hyped-up, powerhouse opponents. Both Daniel's and Dre's opponents are specifically instructed by their enraged teachers to break the protagonists' bones during the fights. The opponents' uneasiness is highlighted, as they are confused by such unprincipled directions. Despite their extremely intense situations, Daniel and Dre calmly demonstrate the most challenging stances they have learned from their teachers. Daniel uses the crane stance (Figure 3), and Dre shows the cobra movement that he saw with

Figure 3: Daniel defeats his opponent at the tournament with his crane stance
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Courtesy of Columbia Pictures, 2012.

Han earlier in the film (see example [3b]). Both boys, in special attire given them by their teachers, dramatically embody Asian martial arts masculinity in these scenes.

5 Mediation of non-Asian-ness

5.1 Mediating sexual desires

In over fifty *kungfu* movies produced in Asia (Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, and Japan) between 1966 and 2011, Hiramoto (2012) found only a few films that feature heroic *kungfu* practitioners who prioritized their loved ones over their *kungfu* obligations. For example, in *Fist of Legend* (1994) with Jet Li, the protagonist prioritizes his lover and leaves his *jianghu* "martial arts community". However, even then his non-normative choice is explained as a matter of honor – he was indebted to his girlfriend because she had risked her life to save him. In another film, *The Bride with White Hair* (1993), the protagonist played by Leslie Cheung keeps his lover secretly behind his *jianghu* because of his uncontrollable feelings for her. Consequences for martial artists who are too attached to their lovers are usually tragic for both heroic and non-heroic characters. In *Fist of Legend* and *The Bride with White Hair*, both protagonists are forced to part with their lovers in the end, and they also lose the respect of their fellow *jianghu* members. In Japanese films, too, non-villain samurai rarely prioritize their love or lust over the *bushidô* code. When they disobey it, they usually face dire consequences, typically in the form of a dishonorable death. This stereotypical pattern is perpetuated in relatively new films including *When the Last Sword is Drawn* (2003), *Shinobi* (2005), *Goemon* (2009), and *Sword of Desperation* (2010). All in all, Asian martial arts movies are often set in predetermined moral universes, which punish practitioners who do not obey the vow of self-control, including celibacy, as described in the *wen-wu* philosophy. Ideal Asian martial arts heroes do not fight for their loved ones, nor do they explicitly disclose their feelings toward their love interests, and this is true even for married male characters in most cases.

Enter the Dragon offers an interesting contrast in its treatment of the masculinity of Asian and non-Asian martial arts practitioners. In the film, international martial artists gather for a tournament on a private island owned by a wealthy martial arts enthusiast, Han. As part of the pre-tournament entertainment, Han offers women's company to the participants. In this scene, two pretentious smooth talkers, Williams (African American) and Roper (Caucasian),

boast of their libidos and select their female companions. A participant from Hong Kong, Lee, chooses a woman he saw earlier at a reception. However, in contrast to the non-Asians, Lee is motivated by his undercover mission – it is later revealed that the woman he picks is also an undercover investigator. When she is in his room, they quickly discuss their mission and do not engage in any kind of sexual behavior. Among all the martial arts practitioners in this film, only the heroic Asian character (Lee) follows martial arts ideology and its rejection of sexual relationships. In the following section, I examine how the acceptance of sexual or romantic relationships distinguishes non-Asian martial artists from their Asian counterparts.

5.2 Hybridization: *Gomennasai* "I'm sorry" *for your husband*

The last stage of these semiotic processes of appropriation is hybridization. This is where non-Asian martial arts heroes show a conflation of their Asian and western masculine qualities. Specifically, they combine the ideal masculine qualities called for by Asian martial arts practitioners with those required of western action heroes. That is, while they embody the martial arts philosophy, they also develop and attain a romantic relationship. This is why I call this stage Hybridization.

In *The Last Samurai*, romantic feelings blossom between Katsumoto's younger sister, Taka, and Algren, near the conclusion. This follows a dramatization of different turning points in Taka's attitudes toward Algren throughout the film. In the beginning, she despises Algren because he has killed her husband, but takes care of him on Katsumoto's command. Algren is also apprehensive about being taken care of by the wife of the man he killed. However, they open up to each other as the story progresses and develop a romance. Taka and Algren share some ordinary and extraordinary experiences together. This includes daily life, interactions with Taka's children, combating *ninja* when the village comes under attack, and recounting extremely painful memories – Taka shares the loss of her husband, and Algren, his traumatic past in the war against Native Americans.

At first, Taka resists hosting Algren, but Katsumoto gives her no choice. Although Taka tries to keep a distance from Algren, he tries to show her his appreciation for her care. He also befriends her children and a nephew, Nobutada. Algren eventually apologizes to Taka for killing her husband, which becomes a turning point in their relationship. Finally, Taka accepts Algren as a lover. This scenario, where a hero nurtures and consummates a romantic relationship, does not typically happen to Asian martial arts heroes. The following excerpts show the changing relationship between Taka and Algren.

(7) *The Last Samurai*, change of Taka and Algren's relationship.

    a. Algren is still new to Katsumoto's village. He joins the family meal for the first time with Taka, her children, and Nobutada. Taka complains to Nobutada about Algren's presence.

        Algren: [Taka serves him a meal] Thank you...

        Nobutada: *Dôzo.*
                    "Please."

        Taka: *Taerarenai kono kemono no yôna nioi. Aniue ni itte kudasai.*
                    "He smells like the pigs. Tell my brother I cannot stand this."

        Nobutada: *Gojibunde ittara dôdesu?*
                    "Why don't you tell him?"

        Taka: *Demo semete ofuro kurai...*
                    "At least make him take a bath."

    b. Algren has spent a few months in the village and he is now used to Taka and her children. Algren starts to open up to Taka. One day, he finds a chance to apologize to her.

        Algren: ... I'm sorry... *Gomenna...sai? Gomennasai* for your husband, Hirotarô.

        Taka: [surprised look, tears well up] *Anohitowa samurai toshite honkaio togemashita. Anatamo anatano subeki kotoo shitamade desu. Okimochi dakewa...*
                    "He did his duty. You did your duty. I accept your apology..."

    c. Toward the end of the film, before Algren leaves for the last battle with Katsumoto and his men, Taka dresses him in her husband's armor as a token of her acceptance of him.

        Taka: *Algren-san, kochirae.*
                    "Can you come with me?" [looks at her husband's armor] *Koreo kiteitadaketara ureshû gozaimasu.*
                    "If you wear this armor, it will honor us."

        Algren: [stares at Taka] ... [kissing]

Taken together, these mediatize a desirable quality of western heroes in mainstream American films: they usually win their love interests over in a dramatic way. In the closing scene, Taka welcomes Algren back from a battle wherein all the other samurai have been killed, which implies a happy end to their romantic relationship and the tragic events in the film.

    Even in movies like *The Karate Kid* series, where the protagonists are not adults, the stories possess positive romantic elements. In both versions, the

protagonists are introduced to prospective girlfriends near the beginning of the films. One of their motivations to take up martial arts training is to win the girls by defeating the bullies who also happen to be their romantic rivals. In *The Karate Kid* 1984, Daniel magically manages to attract the school's most popular girl, Ali, shown in Figure 4, despite being the new and unpopular kid on the block. She becomes Daniel's best friend at school and then his girlfriend, against all odds.

Figure 4: Daniel and Ali going out on a date behind the bullies' backs
THE KARATE KID © 1984 Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
Courtesy of Columbia Pictures, 2012.

This is a highly idealized situation common in western plots. Something similar happens to Dre and Meiying in *The Karate Kid* 2010, where Meiying becomes very significant for Dre during his challenging times, and he does not want to give up building a closer relationship with her despite a number of obstacles.

In my observations of Hollywood martial arts films, even parodic non-Asian martial arts heroes, be they Caucasian, African American, or even non-human, have romantic relationships (cf., *Beverly Hills Ninja* 1997, *Black Dynamite* 2009, and *Teenage Mutant Turtles* 1987,[7] respectively). However, sometimes this aspect of the plot is comedic in itself. For example, in *Beverly Hills Ninja*, it is a physically unfit Caucasian hero who saves the female protagonist and

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7 One of the *ninja* turtles, Raphael, meets a girlfriend, Ninjara, in the animated TV series, as well as in the original comics.

ends the film together with her, while none of his Asian *jianghu* comrades build any relationships with women, including the highly capable and attractive teacher or *ninja* brother. Nonetheless, this pattern shows us that romance is a crucial element concerning action heroes, and common to the point of parody.

6 Conclusion

Films frame their cast within the story's time and space, and this framing works well to fulfill a function suggested by scholars like Jaworski (2007) for ideologized mediatizations. Moreover, authenticity is often used as tools of Othering in such framing (see also Jaffe 2011; Bucholtz 2011). That is, concerning this paper, film mediatization continues to Other and exoticizes Asian identities, even as it ostensibly carves out a niche for Asian identity in the film industry. This study examines how Asian martial arts masculinity is naturalized and commodified in Hollywood martial arts films by depictions of non-Asian heroic characters – a topic relevant to current work on mediatized representations of race and gender. By focusing on the processes of mediatized appropriation of Asian martial arts style by non-Asian protagonists represented at different stages, namely, Initiation, Assimilation, Exemplification, and Hybridization, I have attempted to highlight how martial arts masculine norms are performed by the non-Asian characters. I argue that the mediatization of non-Asian martial artists is valued in a global market for their exotic appeal. The characters, however, remain accessible to a general audience – that is, an audience that does not share Asian cultural traditions – and the stories are told from the non-Asian characters' viewpoints. As their associations with the martial arts culture develop, their degree of ideal masculinity also grows. At the Initiation stage, the characters are supposed to be clueless before they are baptized by immersion in martial arts philosophy. Their initial status as racialized others in relation to martial arts ideology provides a space which facilitates the empathy of a global audience which comprise non-Asian viewers. The non-Asian heroes' continuous endeavor in practicing their martial arts is highlighted in the Assimilation stage, and their bonds with their Asian mentors grow as they are welcomed into a *jianghu* "martial arts community". In the Exemplification stage, the mentees publicly prove that they are worthy of their inclusion into the *jianghu*, demonstrating their full commitment to their martial arts practice by fighting and bringing honor to their mentors as well as the *jianghu* at large.

Physical and mental strength – the quintessence of martial arts philosophy – is well embodied by idealized martial artists (Asian or not) in the films as seen in

the famous "wax on, wax off" illustration presented in example (1). A striking difference which distinguishes non-Asian men from their exemplary Asian counterparts is their interest in women and their ability to attract desirable women. The women they connect with fit in the narrow range of acceptability on the heteronormative gender and sexuality scale – this is necessary as an affirmation of a masculine quality required for an ideal western man. As for Asian martial artists, their detachment from women indexes strong self-control, as sexual or romantic relationships are secondary to their martial arts philosophy. This distinction between non-Asian and Asian heroes is either reintroduced or newly established in these films through a process of hybridization. The mediatization of the non-Asian heroes takes elements from both Asian and western epitomes of masculinity, instead of replicating the former exactly. Hybridization allows the non-Asian protagonists to display a quality of an ideal western male that is opposed to the stoic and almost-asexual nature of the Asian masters they have otherwise emulated.

The cinematic discourses described in this paper attempt to appropriate an idealized, exoticized Asian-ness through semiotic processes that embody the ways of Asian martial arts in non-Asian characters. Such discourses help audiences conceptualize ideologies about the nature of Asian ways of dealing with problems by meeting the audience's idealized expectations, for instance, by viewing the *wen-wu* philosophy from westerners' viewpoints. These martial arts films rely on stereotypical images that allow the audience to easily access a simplified model of Asian masculinity; at the same time, they exploit the exoticism of Asian martial arts to provide visual spectacle to the audience. Viewed from this perspective, non-Asian martial arts practitioners as mediatized figures are a safe combination of the familiar and the foreign in terms of how action heroes are conventionally represented in films. In short, the Hollywood martial arts films discussed here mediatize specific characteristics of martial arts culture and practices to viewers through the eyes of the non-Asian martial artist characters. Though the non-Asian protagonists learn martial arts, they also do not lose traits commonly associated with the idealized western man, namely, a babe-magnet quality. The hybridized masculinity of these characters combines both Asian and western features by emphasizing ideals of race, gender, discourse patterns, and ideologies in Asian martial arts films while also maintaining the basic ideals of western action films. In the same way that other mediatized styles have certain linguistic and symbolic criteria that must be met – for example, African-American Vernacular English and an often brusque or aggressive manner for rap and hip-hop artists, or labcoats and technical jargon for scientists – so too is the special position of the Asian martial arts category defined in western media by its gendered, racial, and linguistic enactment.

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