

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Decoding Chinese Kung Fu films: Cultural symbolism, audience cognition, and the formation of national identity

Guangsheng Meng\*, Razi, Siti Aishah Binti Hj Mohammad\*, Diyana Kasimon\*

Department of communication, Faculty of modern languages and communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, UPM Serdang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, 43400, Malaysia.

\* **Corresponding author:** Guangsheng Meng, gs62227@student.upm.edu.my; Razi, Siti Aishah Binti Hj Mohammad, siti.aishah@upm.edu.my; Diyana Kasimon, diyana.nawar@upm.edu.my

## ABSTRACT

Films serve as potent cultural agents that shape collective consciousness and reinforce social identity. This study investigates the symbolic narratives and philosophical underpinnings in selected Chinese Kung Fu films through a semiotic and social psychological lens, drawing upon Social Identity Theory and cultural cognition frameworks. By analyzing key cinematic elements—such as martial arts choreography, narrative archetypes, and embedded Taoist and Confucian values—this research explores how these films promote in-group identity among Chinese audiences and evoke cultural fascination or exoticism among global viewers. The findings suggest that Kung Fu films do more than entertain; they operate as psychological tools that foster national pride, transmit collective memory, and mediate cross-cultural perceptions. This paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how symbolic visual culture influences affective responses, cultural belonging, and identity formation in diverse audience contexts.

**Keywords:** Chinese Kung Fu films; film semiotics; Chinese philosophy; national identity

## 1. Introduction to film and semiotics

In today's era of globalization and multicultural integration, film, as a vital cultural medium, serves not only entertainment and aesthetic purposes but also plays a significant role in cultural transmission and value orientation. Kung Fu cinema, as a distinctive emblem of Chinese film, has gained worldwide popularity through its exquisite martial arts choreography, profound cultural depth, and unique philosophical insights. It has been noted that "It is not because film is a language that it tells such fine stories, but because it tells such fine stories that it has become a language"<sup>[1]</sup>. As a unique cinematic language, Kung Fu films utilize fundamental visual and cinematic elements to intuitively convey symbolic relations. Within this alternative signifying space, the imagery constructs landscapes of meaning where the signifier and the signified converge into a unified whole.

Such films serve not only as narratives but also as semiotic systems that structure meaning across cultures. Peirce's triadic model—comprising icons (similarity-based signs), indexes (causal or factual connections), and symbols (convention-based meanings)—is particularly useful for understanding how Kung Fu imagery

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functions. For instance, the tiger fist mimics the form of a tiger, qualifying as an icon; its immediate connection to martial aggression renders it indexical; and its broader association with bravery and spiritual intensity transforms it into a symbolic sign. This progression from physical imitation to abstract cultural value illustrates how Kung Fu movements operate across Peircean categories of meaning<sup>[2]</sup>.

Our society is filled with an abundance of symbols, and people are constantly immersed in a world of signs. While we may not always have a clear understanding of what constitutes a symbol, symbols themselves are intimately familiar with us. Since Ferdinand de Saussure, the "father of semiotics," first established this field of study, semiotics has lacked a universally accepted and precise definition. In many Western texts, it is often described simply as "the science of signs." Clearly, such a definition remains vague and insufficient. To apply semiotics in the study of film—particularly to understand how meaning is expressed and perceived—it is essential to first clarify its fundamental concepts.

It has been proposed that "A sign is a perception regarded as bearing meaning: meaning must be expressed through signs, and the function of signs is to convey meaning"<sup>[3]</sup>. Conversely, there is no meaning that can be expressed without signs, nor is there any sign that does not express meaning." Since the early 20th century, semiotics has undergone continuous refinement and development. By the 1980s, it had evolved beyond structuralism into post-structuralism, integrating with other theoretical schools and being widely applied in empirical research. At this stage, semiotics entered a critical new arena—its application within cultural studies.

In the context of cross-cultural film dissemination, symbolic signs embedded in Chinese Kung Fu cinema are often interpreted differently by international audiences. For example, interviews with non-Chinese viewers reveal that the circular, flowing motions of Tai Chi are frequently interpreted as mystical or esoteric, rather than being understood as grounded philosophical expressions of balance and relational force. These findings suggest that symbolic meaning is not universal but shaped by cultural cognition and prior exposure<sup>[4,5]</sup>.

This divergence in symbolic interpretation invites reflection on Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity, which suggests that identity is formed in the "third space" where cultural signs are rearticulated. In this sense, Kung Fu films become sites of cultural negotiation: Chinese identity is both asserted and reconfigured through foreign reception, resulting in dynamic hybridity rather than fixed national representation<sup>[6]</sup>.

Today, semiotics permeates nearly every aspect of daily life, including fields such as architecture, music, visual arts, and dance, each of which has developed its own branch of semiotic theory. As the founder of film semiotics, Christian Metz applied principles of structuralist linguistics and semiotic theory to creatively analyze cinematic signs, thereby opening a new path for the study of film narrative structures. In recent years, film semiotics has increasingly asserted its importance in the field of film and television criticism. With the popularization of cinematic aesthetics, what was once an obscure aesthetic discipline is now gaining broader acceptance and academic attention.

For a culture, changes in media forms do not simply represent shifts in the methods of information transmission but signify transformations in the entire cultural paradigm. In this sense, the medium itself becomes the true content of culture. It has been argued that "Cinema is a medium of infinite possibilities. Like the printing press, film is a tool for mass reproduction and dissemination of intellectual products. Its impact on human culture is no less significant than that of the printing press. The film medium marks a critical cultural turning point"<sup>[7]</sup>. This implies that technological advances precede the possibilities for content expression. In the case of Chinese Kung Fu cinema and traditional Chinese philosophy, this relationship exemplifies a perfect integration and articulation of both technology and content.

## **2. Related concepts and historical development**

## 2.1. The concept of Chinese Kung Fu films

Chinese Kung Fu films are defined as movies that use film art and martial arts culture as their fundamental elements, integrating martial arts into cinematic storytelling. These films also incorporate traditional Chinese moral philosophy and ethical concepts, guiding audiences to emotionally identify with the heroic characters or plotlines<sup>[8]</sup>. Through their distinctive artistic expression, Kung Fu films have become one of the most mature and unique genres in Chinese cinema. It has been remarked that “Kung Fu films represent the greatest contribution of the Chinese people to world cinema”<sup>[9]</sup>. While Hollywood has dominated global film culture relentlessly for decades, many foreign media have recognized Chinese Kung Fu films as one of the few genres capable of challenging this dominance.

## 2.2. The developmental history of Chinese Kung Fu films

In the developmental history of Chinese Kung Fu cinema, Bruce Lee is undoubtedly a foundational figure. He was not only a pioneer of global Kung Fu films but also a symbolic figure who propelled Chinese martial arts onto the international stage. His creation of Jeet Kune Do emphasized the philosophical concept of “using no way as way,” advocating for practical, direct, and simplified combat techniques that broke free from the rigidity of traditional martial arts. Lee’s fighting style was rapid, fierce, and rhythmically tight, focusing on efficiency by defeating opponents with a single strike, delivering a strong visual impact. His representative works such as *The Big Boss* (1971), *Fist of Fury* (1972), *The Way of the Dragon* (1972), and *Enter the Dragon* (1973) not only successfully shaped the image of a national hero but also introduced the world to the strength and dignity of the East. His films constructed a national narrative of “individual power overcoming oppression,” profoundly influencing the international dissemination of Kung Fu cinema<sup>[10,11]</sup>.

Following Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan pioneered a completely different Kung Fu aesthetic. He integrated traditional martial arts with acrobatic skills and comedic elements to create a distinctive “Jackie Chan-style Kung Fu comedy.” His action choreography often features improvisation, interaction with props, and humor-filled continuous fights, emphasizing the characters’ “grassroots” nature and human warmth. In representative works such as *Drunken Master* (1978), *Project A* (1983), the *Police Story* series (from 1985), and internationally successful films like *Rumble in the Bronx* (1995) and *Rush Hour* (1998), Jackie Chan shaped a series of “atypical hero” figures—characters who are not born strong but overcome numerous challenges through perseverance and wit. His films combine traditional Chinese chivalric spirit with modern urban settings, making Chinese Kung Fu more accessible and appealing to international audiences<sup>[12]</sup>.

Jet Li represents a Kung Fu narrative rooted in “tradition and patriotism” through his solid martial arts foundation and upright screen persona. Coming from a professional martial arts team, his fighting style emphasizes precision and fluid aesthetics characterized by speed, accuracy, and power, with expertise in styles such as *Changquan* (Long Fist), *Nanquan* (Southern Fist), and weaponry. After gaining fame with *Shaolin Temple* (1982), he starred in films like the *Once Upon a Time in China* series (from 1991), *Hero* (2002), and *Fearless* (2006), which often center around historical figures and narratives revolving around national crisis and patriotic sentiments. The characters he portrays typically embody strong moral values and cultural responsibility, with an action aesthetic that reflects a restrained and solemn national temperament, modernizing the traditional Chinese “Confucian hero” archetype<sup>[13,14]</sup>.

Moreover, in comparison to Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), which explores “literati martial arts” and internalized philosophical conflicts, Tsui Hark’s *Once Upon a Time in China* emphasizes collective struggle and external resistance. These contrasting symbolic systems reveal different approaches to national identity construction and philosophical representation.

Donnie Yen is more contemporary and is regarded as a significant innovator of Chinese Kung Fu cinema in the modern context. He integrates traditional martial arts with modern combat techniques and mixed martial arts (MMA), emphasizing rhythm, power, and practical combat effectiveness, thereby developing a “realistic” and “technical” fighting style. In modern action films such as *SPL: Sha Po Lang* (2005) and *Flash Point* (2007), he presents high-intensity, fast-paced fight choreography. In *Flash Point*, his use of MMA techniques deconstructs traditional martial arts icons, signaling a shift toward globalized action aesthetics and psychological realism in character construction. In the *Ip Man* series (from 2008), he portrays the Wing Chun style’s philosophy of “using softness to overcome hardness,” shaping a refined yet steadfast national martial arts master. Donnie Yen’s Kung Fu style goes beyond mere technical display; it embodies cultural will, emphasizing the inheritance of tradition and the upholding of dignity, further advancing the international dissemination and image construction of Chinese Kung Fu cinema<sup>[15]</sup>.

Furthermore, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) introduces complex female characters like Yu Jiaolong and Yu Xiulian, who represent the yin-yang balance of “softness within strength.” These women are not secondary to the male warriors but serve as carriers of inner conflict, moral ambiguity, and philosophical agency, contributing to a more inclusive and gendered interpretation of martial philosophy.

"It is noteworthy that the symbolic significance of female roles in kung fu films has long been marginalized. For example, the rebellious image of Yu Jiaolong in '*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*' (2000) not only subverts traditional feminine symbols but also conveys the yin-yang philosophy of 'softness within strength' through the imagery of the 'Green Destiny Sword'<sup>[16]</sup>, providing a new perspective for gender identity construction."

### 2.3. The philosophical foundations of Chinese Kung Fu cinema

Chinese Kung Fu cinema is not merely a display of martial arts action but also a profound transmission of philosophy deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture. Central to this philosophical foundation are the concepts of Tai Chi (Taiji) and Yin-Yang, which serve as core elements of Chinese thought. These ideas are extensively reflected and interpreted within the film’s narrative structure, character development, and choreography, forming an intrinsic logic that balances both form (“shape”) and meaning (“spirit”) in Kung Fu films.

The philosophy of Tai Chi advocates that all things have roots and emphasizes the harmonious interplay of movement and stillness, encapsulated in the principle of "stillness within movement and movement within stillness." It pursues a state of integration, balance, and harmony. This philosophical concept is often incorporated into the choreography of Kung Fu films. For instance, in the *Ip Man* series, Wing Chun boxing highlights centerline control and close-range strikes, with its smooth and gentle movements closely aligning with Tai Chi’s principle of "using softness to overcome hardness"<sup>[17]</sup>. Visually, these movements do not rely on brute force but instead embody the philosophy of "using an opponent's force against them," symbolizing Chinese wisdom characterized by restraint, balance, and adaptability.

Furthermore, *Ip Man*’s narrative arc—especially the dual burden of protecting his wife and resisting Japanese invaders—reflects the Confucian idea of “cultivating oneself, managing the family, and governing the nation.” This ethical continuum represents a moral vision where private virtue and public responsibility are inseparable, reinforcing the film's role as both personal and national allegory.

Another core concept closely related to Tai Chi is the philosophy of Yin and Yang, which emphasizes the dialectical relationship of opposites and the dynamic balance of mutual influence and transformation. Yin and Yang not only manifest in the narrative structure through character confrontations and conflicts between good and evil but also permeate the characterization of roles. For example, in *Hero* (2002), starring Jet Li, the

character "Nameless" continuously negotiates between the nation and the individual, peace and revenge, sacrifice and faith, embodying a philosophically rich process of Yin-Yang transformation. The film uses color symbolism, cinematography, and character choices to construct a cultural tension characterized by "stillness within movement" and "strength concealing weakness," allowing the audience to perceive the dialectical interplay of "giving and taking" and "advancing and retreating" central to traditional Chinese philosophy<sup>[18]</sup>.

The choreography in Kung Fu films not only serves the narrative but also carries profound philosophical meanings. Taking the *Once Upon a Time in China* series as an example, its action design, though intense and fierce, consistently emphasizes restraint and self-discipline, reflecting the traditional philosophy of "the harmony of hardness and softness" and the interdependence of motion and stillness<sup>[16]</sup>. Moreover, the philosophies of Tai Chi and Yin-Yang permeate not only the fight choreography but also the film's dialogue, character destinies, and even spatial composition, making Kung Fu cinema a cultural form where philosophy and aesthetics coexist.

In addition to Daoist and Confucian elements, Buddhist philosophy also plays a key role in some Kung Fu films. In *Shaolin Temple* (1982), the protagonist's journey from revenge to spiritual release is deeply aligned with the Buddhist concept of "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*). His gradual renunciation of hatred and attachment embodies the principle of transcendence through self-discipline and internal awakening, showing how martial practice can lead to inner peace and moral clarity.

From the perspective of cultural communication, Kung Fu films concretize traditional philosophical concepts such as "the Doctrine of the Mean," "following the natural course," and "non-contention" through vivid storytelling and physical performance. This enables global audiences to experience the unique appeal of Eastern culture, embodied in the idea of "martial arts as a vehicle for moral teaching"<sup>[19]</sup>. The cross-cultural success of these films does not solely depend on the intensity of fight scenes but is deeply rooted in their expression of profound cultural philosophy, thus evoking emotional resonance and cultural understanding worldwide.

### 3. Theoretical foundation

#### 3.1. Film semiotics and audience meaning-making

Film semiotics is a theoretical framework developed from linguistics and structuralism, aiming to reveal how the "sign systems" constituted by visual and auditory elements in films carry and transmit meaning. It regards film not only as a narrative art but also as a "language" that can be decoded, consisting of "morphemes" such as images, actions, sounds, and editing, which together form a meaning-production mechanism within specific cultural contexts<sup>[20]</sup>. As a key figure in film semiotics, Christian Metz emphasizes that film language possesses the characteristic of a "non-linguistic language," meaning that its conveyance of meaning does not rely on traditional linguistic signs but constructs a unique expressive system through the combination of audiovisual signs.

Film not only depicts reality but also constructs a cultural space of meaning and identity through signs<sup>[21]</sup>. In this sense, cinematic symbols do not merely convey narrative function but also activate psychological processes in viewers—such as emotional resonance, memory retrieval, and identity alignment—through their structured repetition and culturally charged coding<sup>[22]</sup>. In Chinese Kung Fu films, elements such as heroic characters, martial arts movements, and traditional settings are not merely visual components but also constitute important symbolic structures representing Chinese cultural spirit and national identity. These signifiers engage viewers in affective identification with culturally embedded archetypes, reinforcing collective beliefs and social belonging<sup>[23]</sup>.

Applying film semiotics theory helps to deeply analyze the multi-layered meaning-generation mechanisms within Kung Fu films, thereby understanding not only their underlying philosophical core and cultural narratives but also their psychological effects on viewers' perception, emotion, and sense of cultural membership.

### 3.2. Chinese philosophy and cultural cognition

Chinese Kung Fu films are deeply rooted in the philosophical traditions of Daoism, Confucianism, and the yin-yang cosmology, which collectively shape the worldview and moral foundations of Chinese culture. It is important to note that “Daoism” here refers specifically to the philosophical school of thought (Daojia), rather than the religious practices associated with Daojiao. These philosophical systems do not merely offer narrative themes or stylistic choices, but function as cognitive frameworks that guide how viewers interpret characters' actions, interpersonal relationships, and notions of self and community.

For instance, the Daoist emphasis on harmony with nature and the principle of *wu wei* (non-action or effortless action) are frequently reflected in Tai Chi-based martial arts choreography, where yielding and adaptability are portrayed as strengths rather than weaknesses. Such representations challenge Western notions of individual aggression and assertiveness, promoting a relational and fluid conception of power. These films embed the Daoist worldview into the moral logic of action design, inviting viewers to reconsider conventional ideas about agency, control, and self-realization<sup>[24]</sup>.

Confucian values such as loyalty (*zhong*), filial piety (*xiao*), and collective responsibility are equally central. These values manifest in plotlines where characters prioritize social harmony over personal gain and often make sacrifices for family or national integrity. The audience, particularly those with cultural familiarity or openness, may experience emotional and moral alignment with these collective ideals, reinforcing in-group social identity and interdependent self-construals<sup>[25]</sup>. Yin-yang thinking, as a cognitive style, encourages dialectical reasoning and holistic judgment, allowing viewers to reconcile seemingly contradictory character traits or moral outcomes—a dynamic that contrasts with the linear causality emphasized in many Western films<sup>[5]</sup>.

Drawing from cultural psychology, these philosophical motifs in Kung Fu films are not only aesthetic choices but also tools of cultural transmission that shape cognitive and emotional patterns in audience interpretation. Culture and cognition are mutually constitutive; thus, the reception of Kung Fu narratives is mediated by deeply embedded cultural schemas, which influence how individuals perceive virtue, agency, and identity in both personal and collective contexts<sup>[4]</sup>.

### 3.3. National identity, representation, and social identity theory

National identity, as conveyed in Chinese Kung Fu films, is not merely a matter of historical narration or cultural tradition—it is a process of symbolic representation that actively shapes collective belonging and audience self-perception. In Kung Fu narratives, the depiction of morally upright martial heroes, patriotic sacrifice, and cultural resilience plays a vital role in reaffirming shared values and imagined community. The concept of “imagined communities” underscores the function of such media texts in enabling individuals to perceive themselves as part of a national collective, even without direct social interaction<sup>[26]</sup>.

From a social psychological perspective, these portrayals align closely with Social Identity Theory (SIT), which posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from perceived group membership<sup>[27]</sup>. Kung Fu films offer symbolic scripts for affirming in-group identity through historical pride, cultural uniqueness, and moral superiority. This identification process is further reinforced when audiences view characters not only as

individuals but as archetypes of Chinese resilience and virtue—enhancing in-group favoritism and cultural pride.

Additionally, the multidimensional model of identity suggests that identification involves multiple layers, such as centrality, affective commitment, and perceived relevance to the self<sup>[28]</sup>. Kung Fu films appeal to these dimensions by emotionally engaging viewers (affective commitment), reinforcing the cultural salience of Chinese values (centrality), and connecting these symbolic representations to real-world perceptions of Chinese heritage (relevance).

Moreover, the Uncertainty-Identity Theory suggests that individuals facing uncertainty about their place in the social world often strengthen their identification with high-entitativity groups—those that are clearly defined and provide existential security<sup>[29]</sup>. In times of global crisis, identity fragmentation, or cultural dislocation, the clear moral codes and symbolic coherence presented in Kung Fu cinema offer psychological stability and group clarity, particularly to diasporic or intercultural audiences. These films serve as vehicles for cultural anchoring, enabling audiences to negotiate their identity in a rapidly globalizing media environment.

Therefore, national identity in Kung Fu cinema is not only constructed through narrative and aesthetics but also psychologically internalized by viewers. It becomes a lived, affective, and socially situated process of self-definition, shaped by shared cultural narratives and reinforced through repeated symbolic engagement.

## **4. Research methods**

This study primarily employs qualitative research methods, combining literature review, case study analysis, and comparative analysis to systematically explore the symbolic systems, philosophical connotations, and the construction mechanisms of national identity in Chinese Kung Fu films.

### **4.1. Literature review**

As the foundational method of this study, the literature review involves extensive collection and analysis of relevant theoretical and empirical research to construct the theoretical framework. The scope of the review covers classical film semiotics theories, such as film narrative theory<sup>[30]</sup>, theories related to cultural representation and national identity construction, as well as scholarly works on Chinese Kung Fu films. By consulting a wide range of domestic and international journal articles, monographs, and film critiques, this study integrates theory with practical materials to ensure the scientific rigor and applicability of the theoretical foundation.

### **4.2. Case study method**

This study selects four representative Kung Fu film stars—Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Donnie Yen—and their classic films as case studies to conduct an in-depth analysis of the symbolic representations and cultural meanings within their cinematic texts. The selected films include *The Way of the Dragon*, *Police Story*, *Once Upon a Time in China*, and *Ip Man*. Through detailed interpretation of the narrative structure, action choreography, visual symbols, and philosophical connotations in these iconic works, the study aims to reveal how Kung Fu films construct national identity and facilitate cultural transmission across different historical periods and cultural contexts<sup>[31]</sup>.

### **4.3. Comparative analysis method**

The comparative analysis method aims to explore the diversity and evolution of national identity and cultural recognition in Chinese Kung Fu films by horizontally comparing the cultural expressions of films directed by different filmmakers and from different eras. The focus is on comparing the similarities and

differences in nationalist representations between Bruce Lee and Donnie Yen, as well as the distinctions in hero image construction between Jackie Chan and Jet Li. This method helps to understand how Kung Fu films adapt their cultural symbols and narrative strategies in response to social changes, reflecting the shifting contours of national identity at different stages.

Specifically, the horizontal comparison centers on how different eras articulate “narratives of resistance.” For instance, Bruce Lee’s works often portray overt physical resistance against racial oppression, emphasizing direct confrontation and the reclaiming of dignity through bodily dominance. In contrast, Donnie Yen’s recent portrayals—particularly in the *Ip Man* series—highlight a more implicit form of resistance, rooted in moral restraint, cultural confidence, and symbolic strength, reflecting a matured and internationally aware sense of Chinese identity.

Similarly, comparisons between Jackie Chan and Jet Li reveal divergent modes of heroic construction: Jackie Chan integrates humor and vulnerability to humanize the martial hero, thereby promoting mass appeal and cross-cultural accessibility, whereas Jet Li typically embodies disciplined strength and internalized philosophy, often serving as a cultural ambassador of Confucian or Taoist virtues. These comparisons allow for an in-depth understanding of how Kung Fu cinema evolves across time to express both continuity and innovation in national identity.

## **5. Research findings**

### **5.1. Philosophical expressions within symbolic systems**

The unique symbolic system of Chinese Kung Fu films is primarily reflected in their rich visual elements and action language. These symbols are not merely narrative aids but carry profound cultural meanings. For example, weapons, costumes, and fight routines are endowed with specific cultural symbolic connotations—such as swords representing bravery and justice, and clothing colors reflecting identity and personality<sup>[32]</sup>. Furthermore, the rhythm and names of martial arts moves form chains of symbols that help the audience understand the psychological states of characters and the development of the story. This symbolic treatment enhances the cultural distinctiveness of the films and strengthens viewers’ sense of identification.

The construction of the symbolic system in Chinese Kung Fu films is not limited to visual symbols but also includes sound symbols and narrative symbols. For example, traditional instruments such as the erhu and flute are incorporated into the background music to reinforce the cultural atmosphere; environmental sound effects in fight scenes, such as the clashing of wooden swords and battle cries, form an auditory symbolic system<sup>[33]</sup>. These symbols engage multiple senses, enhancing the audience’s immersive experience of the cultural connotations of Kung Fu films, making the transmission of symbols more vivid and profound.

More importantly, these symbolic systems exhibit variation and innovation across different Kung Fu film works, maintaining cultural continuity while inspiring new artistic expressions. Core symbols are often repeatedly used throughout film series<sup>[34]</sup>, but through differences in character settings, storylines, and choreography, new meanings are assigned to these symbols. This dynamic evolution of symbols reflects the vitality of culture and promotes the enduring influence of Kung Fu films as cultural carriers. These recurring symbols not only function as narrative devices but also serve as cultural cues that activate collective memory and strengthen a sense of shared cultural heritage among viewers. Through symbolic anchoring, audiences cognitively align these cinematic elements with their own social identity schemas.

The water element in Eastern philosophy symbolizes flexibility, flow, and inclusiveness, a concept vividly embodied in the traditional Chinese martial art Tai Chi. Tai Chi emphasizes “using softness to overcome hardness,” achieving victory by yielding to the opponent’s force rather than direct confrontation, which aligns



closely with the Daoist principle of “following the natural way” (Dao Fa Zi Ran). Kung Fu films often utilize the philosophical essence of Tai Chi to shape the martial style and spiritual realm of characters. For instance, the film *Tai Chi Master* (1993) portrays Master Zhang Sanfeng’s cultivation of Tai Chi, highlighting the beauty of water’s flow and transformation, symbolizing a life philosophy of harmony with nature and the integration of softness and strength<sup>[35]</sup>. The slow and continuous movements of Tai Chi represent the cycle and balance of vital energy, reflecting the core idea of “yin-yang complementarity” in Eastern philosophy.

Meanwhile, the integration of the element of alcohol with *Drunken Fist* (Zui Quan) embodies the Eastern philosophical concepts of “order within disorder” and the balance of “hardness and softness.” Drunken Fist is known for its agile, flowing, and unpredictable style, which mimics the irregular movements of intoxication to confuse opponents but actually contains profound martial arts philosophy<sup>[36]</sup>. In the film *Drunken Master* (1978), Jackie Chan’s portrayal of Wong Fei-hung’s disciple demonstrates not only the defeat of formidable foes through mastery of Drunken Fist but also the wisdom of “following the flow” and inner ease. This martial art style is a vivid interpretation of Daoist philosophy of “wu wei er wu bu wei” (effortless action accomplishing everything), emphasizing spontaneity and freedom in accordance with the natural state.

In these cinematic presentations of philosophical elements, water and alcohol serve not merely as material symbols but as carriers of culture and spirit. Through action choreography and narrative, abstract philosophical ideas are transformed into concrete visual experiences. The water and alcohol elements represented by Tai Chi and Drunken Fist respectively enhance the cultural depth of Kung Fu films, making them not only intense physical confrontations but also rich philosophical expressions. Thus, Kung Fu cinema, by drawing on natural elements from Eastern philosophy, creates a unique aesthetic value and cultural identity, becoming a vital window for both domestic and international audiences to understand Eastern culture<sup>[37]</sup>. The visualization of Daoist, Confucian, and Yin-Yang principles fosters not only aesthetic appreciation but also shapes audience perceptions of personal conduct, ethical behavior, and relational harmony. These philosophical frameworks operate as cognitive templates, influencing how viewers interpret social order and individual responsibility.

## 5.2. Historical evolution of identity construction

As an important form of ethnic cultural expression, Chinese Kung Fu films play a vital role in shaping and disseminating national identity. Through the portrayal of heroic figures, these films emphasize the resilience, wisdom, and moral virtues of the Chinese nation. The success of early Kung Fu stars like Bruce Lee not only challenged Western stereotypes of Asian identities but also inspired a strong sense of ethnic pride within Chinese communities<sup>[38]</sup>. This construction of national image has become a crucial resource for fostering cultural identity.

With the development of time, the construction of national identity in Kung Fu films has become more diverse and complex. Modern works not only focus on ethnic traditions but also integrate contemporary values such as individual liberation and social justice, reflecting the changes in contemporary Chinese society<sup>[39]</sup>. This multidimensional shaping of national identity helps enhance cultural inclusiveness and international influence while deepening the sense of ethnic belonging.

Moreover, Kung Fu films have become an important medium for cultural identity among overseas Chinese. Through these films, overseas Chinese communities connect with their homeland culture, strengthening their sense of belonging and cultural pride. The global dissemination of Kung Fu films not only expands the influence of Chinese culture but also promotes cross-cultural communication and understanding, forming a culturally significant global network of identity. The portrayal of cultural pride and resistance reinforces in-group identification, especially among diasporic or culturally ambivalent audiences. As posited

by social identity theory, such representations increase the salience of national belonging and contribute to a stronger sense of symbolic inclusion.

Bruce Lee, as the pioneer of Kung Fu films, not only transformed Western perceptions of Asian identities through his exceptional martial arts skills and on-screen presence but also propelled the global development of Kung Fu cinema<sup>[40]</sup>. His philosophy, which integrates martial arts with self-cultivation, created a unique screen hero archetype that profoundly influenced subsequent action film production and cultural dissemination.

Jackie Chan injected new vitality and a broad popular appeal into Kung Fu films through his unique blend of action and comedy. His global success exemplifies cultural crossover and the widespread dissemination of popular culture<sup>[41]</sup>. Chan's works emphasize universal values, making Kung Fu movies more inclusive and entertaining, thereby expanding their influence.

Jet Li and Donnie Yen, on the other hand, elevate the artistic quality and cultural depth of Kung Fu cinema with their serious, meticulously choreographed action sequences and complex character portrayals. Their films not only showcase technical breakthroughs but also reinforce the modern image of Chinese culture, fostering international cultural exchange. The success of these stars reflects not only their personal charisma but also represents an important aspect of the soft power of Chinese Kung Fu cinema. Through parasocial interaction and symbolic modeling, iconic Kung Fu stars become identity exemplars for both domestic and international audiences. These figures facilitate observational learning, enabling viewers to internalize cultural values and behavioral ideals through emotionally resonant identification.

### **5.3. Cross-cultural interaction and identity crisis in the cultural transmission of Kung Fu films**

With the global spread of Kung Fu films, their cultural symbols have generated diverse interpretations and interactions across different cultural contexts. Western audiences often simplify the "Oriental mysticism" stereotype portrayed in Kung Fu movies, and such misinterpretations sometimes lead to distortion and alienation of cultural identity<sup>[42]</sup>. This phenomenon in cultural transmission highlights the challenge for filmmakers to balance maintaining cultural authenticity while catering to the demands of the international market.

To address the cross-cultural identity crisis, Kung Fu films have gradually adopted more diversified narrative strategies. For example, by integrating modern story elements and multicultural perspectives, these films preserve the essence of Eastern culture while becoming accessible to global audiences<sup>[43]</sup>. This approach promotes cross-cultural communication and fusion, while also stimulating a rethinking and redefinition of cultural identity.

A key example of this tension can be seen in the comparison between *Kung Fu Panda* (2008) and *Ip Man 4* (2019). The former, a Hollywood production, successfully popularized Chinese martial arts iconography but stripped away much of its philosophical depth, reducing complex traditions to humorous tropes. In contrast, *Ip Man 4*, produced in Hong Kong and set in the United States, reinforced themes of Chinese dignity and resilience abroad—yet its assertive nationalism sparked polarized responses from international audiences. These cases reflect the symbolic struggles in localizing global narratives and the contested terrain of meaning in cross-cultural reception.

However, cross-cultural interaction also exposes the fragility and tensions of cultural identity in the context of globalization. As a vehicle for cultural transmission, Kung Fu films must continuously adapt to evolving cultural contexts, balancing the demands of cultural heritage and innovation<sup>[44]</sup>. This dynamic

adjustment process represents both a challenge for cultural dissemination and a driving force for the sustained development of Kung Fu cinema.

As Kung Fu films traverse cultural boundaries, they provoke shifts in viewers' interpretive frames and sometimes trigger identity negotiation or cultural dissonance. This process reflects the dynamics of bicultural identity and the psychological complexities of cultural frame switching in global audiences. When Kung Fu symbols detach from their original context, what Peirce termed "symbolic signs" may regress to "indexical signs"—Western audiences simplify "Drunken Fist" to comedic actions, overlooking its philosophical essence of "order within chaos"<sup>[2]</sup>. This symbolic reduction supports Homi Bhabha's theory of "cultural hybridity": cross-cultural communication inevitably involves negotiation and loss of meaning<sup>[6]</sup>.

From a cultural psychology perspective, such symbolic reductions may impair the audience's ability to construct meaningfully integrated cultural identities. While some viewers internalize hybrid narratives, others experience symbolic dissonance or cognitive disconnection—suggesting that Kung Fu films are not only cultural artifacts, but also psychological agents in identity formation.

## **6. Discussion**

This study has explored the symbolic systems, philosophical elements, national identity construction, and cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese Kung Fu films. The discussion synthesizes key findings through the lens of cultural-environmental psychology, critically reflecting on how Kung Fu cinema functions not only as an aesthetic and cultural artifact but also as a psychological medium that shapes viewers' collective cognition, affective responses, and social identity.

### **6.1. Cultural expression and identity construction in Kung Fu films**

The findings reveal that Chinese Kung Fu films construct a unique cultural discourse through their symbolic systems and philosophical narratives. These visual, kinetic, and sonic symbols not only serve narrative functions but also stimulate cognitive associations that reinforce in-group identity and cultural belonging. Film language functions as a semiotic system<sup>[1]</sup>, and this system—when repeatedly viewed—shapes shared mental representations of "Chineseness" among domestic and diasporic audiences.

Kung Fu cinema, by portraying culturally resonant heroic figures—such as Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan—helps encode a collective memory and imagination aligned with the notion of "imagined communities"<sup>[26]</sup>. These films are not only performative texts but also psychological scripts that trigger emotional engagement and pride in viewers, reinforcing both cultural values and social identity.

### **6.2. The cinematic translation and re-creation of eastern philosophy**

Taoist and Confucian principles—such as balance, yielding, and moral righteousness—are embedded within narrative arcs and action choreography in Kung Fu films. These traditional philosophical themes are not simply visual motifs; they shape viewers' interpretation of justice, self-cultivation, and human agency. In doing so, they subtly influence affective and cognitive responses, cultivating emotional resonance and meaning-making processes grounded in cultural heritage.

Kung Fu films should be seen as vehicles of philosophical embodiment<sup>[37]</sup>. However, when abstract concepts like yin-yang or wu wei are translated into commercial film language, the potential arises for symbolic dilution or misinterpretation. Some scholars warn against this in the context of cultural globalization, noting how commodification can reduce nuanced cultural symbols to exoticized tropes, weakening their cognitive and emotional impact<sup>[43]</sup>.

### **6.3. The dynamic evolution of symbolic systems and modern challenges**

Kung Fu films are not static vessels of tradition—they are dynamic cultural texts responsive to socio-political change and generational shifts in value systems. From Bruce Lee’s anti-imperialist resistance to Donnie Yen’s ethical introspection, each symbolic evolution corresponds to broader psychological realignments within Chinese identity narratives. Hall, Evans and Nixon<sup>[45]</sup> reminds us that representation is an ideological struggle, and Kung Fu cinema offers a visual battleground for negotiating authenticity, modernity, and cultural pride.

The genre also exposes a psychological tension: while global audiences seek cultural specificity, producers often universalize content for commercial success. This dual demand necessitates a delicate balancing act between tradition and innovation—one that tests the psychological elasticity of cultural identity and its transmission .

#### **6.4. Cultural negotiation in global dissemination**

Cross-cultural dissemination of Kung Fu films reveals both the power and fragility of symbolic communication. Western audiences may simplify or stereotype Eastern philosophies, reducing complex semiotic systems to the idea of “mystical East”<sup>[42]</sup>. Such reductive decoding triggers identity dissonance, where original meanings are distorted, and cultural authenticity is compromised. From a psychological perspective, this can lead to symbolic alienation and a diminished sense of cultural self in both producers and consumers.

To address this, contemporary Kung Fu films increasingly integrate hybrid narratives and intercultural motifs. Such strategies open new psychological pathways for global audiences to engage with Chinese values, thereby reinforcing a sense of cross-cultural empathy and shared symbolic meaning<sup>[43]</sup>. However, some scholars caution that hybridity also entails identity volatility—audiences may embrace surface-level aesthetics without internalizing deeper philosophical messages<sup>[44]</sup>.

In addition, the rise of new media platforms presents fresh challenges for symbolic coherence. Short-form content dissemination—such as TikTok clips of Kung Fu fights or visual montages—often isolates visual spectacle from its cultural and philosophical contexts. This fragmentation undermines the narrative and symbolic integrity of Kung Fu films, reducing them to decontextualized entertainment. As a result, the psychological impact on viewers becomes increasingly superficial, emphasizing affective arousal over reflective cultural cognition<sup>[46]</sup>.

Ultimately, Chinese Kung Fu films must continue their symbolic evolution while safeguarding philosophical coherence. This ongoing negotiation—between historical rootedness and global adaptability—is not only a cultural imperative but also a psychological strategy for shaping resilient, inclusive, and emotionally engaging forms of collective identity in a global age.

### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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