

PART I

Revolution in Music

1

Enter the Voice of the Dragon

Fred Ho, Bruce Lee, and the Popular Avant-Garde

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I am trying to create a new American opera that appeals to today's youth—particularly inner city youth—who think of opera as something conservative and exclusionary [. . .] I at least want my artistic/theatrical concept to be more exciting and captivating, and for the martial arts to demolish the aesthetics of grade-B action films, boring Broadway and moribund modern dance.

—FRED HO, "Beyond Asian American Jazz"

I believe that I have a role [. . .] the audience needs to be educated and the one to educate them has to be somebody who is responsible. We are dealing with the masses and we have to create something that will get through to them. We have to educate them step by step.

—BRUCE LEE, *Words of the Dragon*

Fred Ho's *Journey beyond the West: The New Adventures of Monkey* (1996) is an "Afro Asian score for ballet," an eclectic brew of high and low culture, as well as Afrodiasporic and Asian American cultural elements. *Journey beyond the West* is a reinterpretation of popular Chinese Monkey King tales, a figure who protects the lowly and oppressed from evil spirits and the caprices of the gods. As Susan Asai notes, "Within the socialist framework of Ho's politics, The Monkey King can be thought of as the equivalent of a working-class hero defying the capitalist, bourgeois forces that oppress the masses."¹ Through all of his works Ho has built an aesthetic informed by political histories as well as his insistence on the efficacy of music to serve as a revolutionary tool of "the people."

It is not only Chinese mythology that inspires him. In the composition, “Monkey Decides to Return Home ‘To Right the Great Wrongs’” from *Journey*, Ho’s voicings for the horns recall Chinese opera themes, assisted in no small part by the use of instrumentation borrowed from Chinese operatic ensembles. Another work, *Voice of the Dragon: Once upon a Time in Chinese America* (1997), is a reinvention of ancient Chinese myths, the Chinese martial-arts tradition and its popular-culture form, the martial-arts action film, as well as Asian and Afrodiasporic musical influences Ho describes as “Afro-Asian new American multicultural music.”² We can hear this merging of political acumen and musical hybridity throughout his work.

His work is thus positioned in “already hybrid” spaces complicated by his use of elements gleaned from popular culture. Understanding his own work as operating within a tradition he terms the “popular avant-garde,” his use of popular-culture elements is both aesthetic strategy and political advocacy. Defining the popular avant-garde as an aesthetic program dedicated to “elevating standards, promoting the necessity and importance of experimentation but at the same time being rooted, grounded and vibrantly connected to the people,” Ho castigates accessibility in art as a needless “dumbing down, a pandering” to popular audiences.³ He is also wary of various connotations of “avant-garde” because “it can be both purveyor of change or perpetuator of privilege, solipsism and snobbish elitism [particularly if it implies] the completely anti-political position of *l’art pour l’art* (art for art’s sake, which I and others would assert, is political by asserting the autonomy of art and ideas as standing above society and thereby tacit acquiescence and accommodation to the status quo).”⁴

While Ho’s work operates within a context of an historical Asian American jazz movement and its set of political commitments, I pursue a slightly different tack in this chapter, focusing on Ho’s articulation of a popular avant-garde. A key element of his aesthetic that has been largely overlooked is the martial-arts film and, in particular, the philosophical texts (films and writings) of actor Bruce Lee as a way of representing Asian American struggles for recognition, thinking about Asian American sources of spiritual knowledge and aesthetic sensibilities, and as an example of the contradictory impulses Ho gathers together in the creation of the popular avant-garde.

In ways similar to the journey *hua pen* narratives took to become valorized as literati cultural production, Ho appropriates the work of Bruce Lee and the martial-arts action-film genre in the creation of his popular avant-garde in order to educate his audiences, provide models of revolutionary and liberatory political action, and to give voice to counterhegemonic perspectives.

Because engendering a revolutionary consciousness in his audiences remains Ho's primary goal, not merely entertaining them with high-concept spectacle (though he assuredly accomplishes that, as well), his creative work remains rooted in a dialectics of education and entertainment, popularity and populism, and tradition and innovation. Through his engagement of the martial arts action film genre, Ho also taps into a longer historical continuum that stretches back to Ming era literature. As Bruce Lee asserted, "In fact tradition is nothing but a formula laid down by experience. As we progress and time changes, it is necessary to reform this formula . . . box-office success is a formula, but will I forget my food and sleep for this dead formula? I, Bruce Lee, am a man who never follows those fearful formulas."⁵ Fred Ho is also a man who has chosen to "not forget his food and sleep for a dead formula," forging instead his own unique aesthetic.

Music, Manga . . .

Antonio Gramsci understood "the popular" as a locus of intersecting interests, rhetorics, and representations, a space of both conformity and opposition to elite culture.⁶ Similarly recognizing popular culture's hybrid nature, yielding both conservative as well as radical energies, Ho channels his creativity into recognizable forms he can then implode from within, challenging audiences' expectations even as they are entertained. Because Ho's extravagant creativity and unapologetic embrace of consumer cultural signs occurs in tandem with his stated agenda of revolutionary creative production, he interrogates popular culture's commodification of creative work through a provocative set of inquiries into the meanings of various idioms, traditions and cultural hierarchies, especially as he points to "the people" for their tastes and legitimation. For example, Ho's admiration for *Lone Wolf and Cub*, a manga (Japanese comic book) and the movie series it inspired, is not only to participate in *otaku* (manga and anime fan) culture but is also an expression of his political and cultural solidarity with popular audiences.⁷

Ho has written about his idea of revolutionary art and its relation to popular culture, setting a four-point agenda—speak to the people, go to the people, involve the people, and change the people—and emphasizing the need to engage popular audiences, not as an effort to merchandise his art more effectively or to lessen the political impact of his art, but to increase the effectiveness of his creative work in creating a revolutionary consciousness in his audiences.⁸ His views echo those of Angela Davis, who has argued that "as Marx and Engels long ago observed, art is a form of social consciousness—a

special form of social consciousness that can potentially awaken an urge in those affected by it to creatively transform their oppressive environments. Art can function as a sensitizer and a catalyst, propelling people toward involvement in organized movements seeking to effect radical social change. *Art is special because of its ability to influence feelings as well as knowledge.*"⁹ Ho's idea of a popular avant-garde is fundamentally anchored to Davis's idea of popular culture engagement as a means to motivate audiences to question normative assumptions and ideologies.

Ho has been working toward this idea of the popular avant-garde for most of his career. Indeed, decades before he explicitly theorized the popular avant-garde, he looked to some of the most popular forms of jazz in order to drive his aesthetic, with a special attentiveness to the transcultural orientation jazz has long offered the perceptive listener. A robust muscularity energizes Ho's creative energies, and his hypnotic cover of Duke Ellington and Juan Tizol's "Caravan," a composition whose title speaks to cross-cultural exchange and whose dominant modal flavor connects jazz to non-Western musical traditions, speaks directly to a legacy of a "popular avant-garde" in jazz. Ably demonstrating his sympathies and abilities within a jazz tradition, Ho's arrangement of the song from *The Underground Railroad to My Heart* (Soul Note, 1990) highlights the centrality of cross-cultural fusions in Afro-diasporic music and, in particular, within jazz.¹⁰

The political tenor of jazz artists such as Charles Mingus, Max Roach, or Archie Shepp, who drew equally from the past as well as from their own individual musical aesthetics, were models for Ho's own developing sense of purpose for his music.¹¹ But it is not only African American precedents Ho recognizes. He cites earlier Asian American cultural expression, writing, "Other early Asian American folk cultural forms include oral tradition of folk stories, ballads, chants and folk songs brought over by the early Asian laborers from their peasant oral traditions." Importantly, "the great body of the Asian American cultural tradition emanates from the working class Asian communities and is [created and performed in] the Asian languages and dialects."¹² In fact, early Asian American folk culture was shaped by the structural racism Asians faced, and their poetry, music, and other cultural activities expressed their "feelings and experiences of separation, loneliness, disappointment, bitterness, pain, anger and struggle."¹³ He has also detailed the musical and political histories of an earlier generation of Asian American musicians such as Frank Chin and his group, A Grain of Sand, as well as the folk rock group, Yokohama, California.¹⁴ Ho has tapped into these reserves of Asian American culture in forming his Afro Asian new American multicultural music, the musical component of his popular avant-garde.

As ethnomusicologist Wei-hua Zhang observes, “Diversity is [one] of Ho’s musical qualities. He likes to synthesize different musical styles and genres and mold them. His expanding use of elements from a variety of musics such as West African, Latin, reggae rhythms, Filipino kulintang, Chinese and Korean instruments, Arabic and Japanese modes, has become characteristic of his compositions. Almost all of his works are marked by multiple sections and changing meters and moods.”¹⁵ More importantly to this chapter, the development of Ho’s multicultural music increasingly took shape as not only Asian instrumentation and musical aesthetics were blended with Afrodiasporic musical traditions, particularly jazz and rhythm ’n’ blues, but took place in conjunction with his idea of the popular avant-garde, utilizing links to Asia that were not bound to the high art cultural traditions such as Japanese Noh or Chinese Peking Opera, but to popular culture forms such as manga and samurai and kung fu film genres.

. . . and Martial Arts

Ho’s interest in cultivating a youth audience partially motivated his incorporation of the martial-arts action film, a genre he once found demeaning for its depiction of Asian males as cold-blooded asexual killing machines—a representation of Asian masculinity Ho described as nonhuman at its most basic level.¹⁶ However, Ho was admonished by black Cherokee activist Day Star to recognize the martial arts as part of his tradition and to not allow how it had been “appropriated and misrepresented [in films] influence you because then you’re just reacting to it. Take it back! Make it something revolutionary.”¹⁷ Her advice forced him to recognize the liberatory possibilities of the martial arts and, by extension, martial-arts movies. In fact, *Voice of the Dragon* was part of Ho’s program to “de-Europeanize” the world, fueling his search for alternative models and forms onto which he could transpose his larger creative ambitions.¹⁸

Soon after his conversation with Day Star, he began incorporating martial-arts choreography and, similar to classical Chinese literary works such as Luo Guanzhong’s *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, from which martial-arts movies have also taken their narrative cues, Ho’s use of Chinese folk tales and mythology has linked these two traditions in his work since the mid-1990s. Significantly, his scores, which are a blend of African American musical practices and instrumentation with Chinese instrumentation and musical aesthetics, form a kreolized accompaniment to his martial-arts-themed works. Ho asserts: “Martial arts and music, for me, have many parallels. Each is a metaphor for the other. Music is about developing a sound

that will bring down the walls of Jericho, it's about finding *chi*. Martial arts [also develops] a way to transform form so that it becomes highly individual, agentive and impactful."¹⁹

For Ho, a compelling component of the Chinese martial arts is the willingness of martial artists to confront and contemplate conflict, particularly confrontations situated beyond emotional, interpersonal antagonisms. Quoting from Bruce Lee's film, *Enter the Dragon*, Ho recalled Lee's words as the final battle commences between Lee and the film's archnemesis Han: "You have offended my family. And you have offended a Shaolin temple." As Ho noted, "[Martial arts] did not *deny* human conflict as so much of the [arts] but deals with real human conflict. [Most artists] want to deal with conflict on the level of emotions but not physical conflict." Importantly, Ho is drawn to the martial arts for his theater productions not only because it appeals to youthful audiences but because modern dance "aesthetics and politics are in complete denial to the real physical world. It has an idealized view of the body and an idealized view of physical reality in which conflict doesn't really exist [. . .] I mean, you can't explain war (or imperialism or colonialism) simply by [pointing to] emotions and interpersonal conflict. [But] the martial arts offers that dimension to movement/performance that modern dance can't."²⁰

It is Ho's insistence that the benefits of martial-arts training are not merely manifested in the physical realm but are manifested in its inculcation of self-discipline and a finely tuned sense of ethical, even moral, standards that motivate his utilization of kung fu in his theatrical productions. Ho argues that while conventional action heroes such as James Bond act in "heroic" ways, Bond is not only motivated by self-interest but also works for the state—a conservative, even reactionary, "hero." Bruce Lee, on the other hand, operates on the basis of honor and ethical principles. Ho notes, after quoting Lee's line to Han about offending his family and the Shaolin temple, "[Lee] didn't say, 'You have offended *me*'! His motivation [stemmed] from principle, he's fighting for principles [. . .] Otherwise you're just an opportunist, a hired gun, a mercenary."²¹ Importantly, Ho reminds us that blacks and Latinos embraced the martial arts, as well, because it revolutionized, to use his term, their sense of identity by fostering camaraderie and self-discipline.

We can see the ways in which conflict moves beyond the merely personal in order to engage a larger ethical dimension explicitly in *Deadly She-Wolf Assassin at Armageddon!* Ho based *Deadly She-Wolf* on the Japanese manga series *Lone Wolf and Cub*, which recounted the travels of a lone *ronin*, or masterless samurai—the Lone Wolf of the title—and his infant son, Cub. They

are on “the road to Hell” in Lone Wolf’s efforts to avenge his wife’s murder. The series ends with Cub finally killing the man who planned his mother’s death. Inspired by Kazuo Koike and Goseki Kojima’s tale of vengeance, Ho and Margraff produced *Deadly She-Wolf at Armageddon!* as a parable about an individual’s journey toward self-awareness by characters whose destinies are bound by interpersonal as well as larger social histories.

Ho’s attraction to Japanese samurai and Hong Kong kung fu films as creative models increased as he began to note these genres’ oppositional aesthetics. Additionally, using popular forms such as the martial-arts action film as inspiration and foundation for his aesthetic principles, Ho created works openly celebrating their populist origins.²² Similar to writer Lu Xun’s revolutionary use of woodblock prints in early twentieth-century China, Ho chose to appropriate a degraded form of commodified culture, such as the martial-arts action film, in order to create revolutionary works that subvert hegemonic or corporate-economic signification and authorization.²³ The martial-arts movie *Enter the Dragon* and, in particular, its star, Bruce Lee, influenced Ho’s aesthetic and political vision for *The Voice of the Dragon*, a work he describes as a “music and martial arts cantata,” ironically citing a high art musical form in tandem with the martial arts.

An example of the value of Lee’s work for Ho is his borrowing of Lee’s iteration of “the art of fighting without fighting” as an ideal. In *Enter the Dragon*, Lee’s character is challenged to a fight by another martial artist, known simply as Parsons, after Lee answers a question about his fighting style with the aphoristic “My style is the art of fighting without fighting.” Unable to avoid his challenger, Lee points out that the ship’s deck is too small for a fight and suggests taking one of the lifeboats to a small island nearby. Parsons agrees and steps into a lifeboat. Without getting into the lifeboat himself, Lee lets out its lead line, stranding Parsons as he and the lifeboat separate from the larger ship. Handing the line to Chinese ship workers who had suffered abuse from Parsons earlier in the scene, Lee cleverly “fights without fighting.”

Clearly echoing Lee’s dialogue, Chen Jack, a character in Ho’s *Voice of the Dragon*, declares, “To subdue your enemy without fighting is the highest skill.” In Ho’s popular avant-garde, popular culture is the repository of “folk” knowledge and the subaltern epistemes of “the people,” who, he recognizes, are no longer the peasants of rural seventeenth-century China (the period in which *Voice of the Dragon* is set) but are, to varying degrees, cosmopolitan subjects whose common ground can be found in popular culture. Thus, Ho positions his music and creative work within the same discursive turf populated by devalued popular culture forms such as the martial-arts film genre

in order to reach those audiences he is most interested in educating—people, particularly the young, who are marginalized and oppressed because of their skin color, class, and/or gender positioning.

Defending his decision to use martial arts films as a creative template, Ho cited an introductory scene in *Enter the Dragon* of a conversation between Lee and his Shaolin master teacher to illustrate how Lee was a philosopher-fighter whose martial-arts skills had “gone beyond the mere physical level [to reach] the point of spiritual insight.”²⁴ When asked to name the highest technical level he hopes to achieve, Lee replied, “To have no technique.” Ho views this intuitive, “down to the cellular level” act of *immersion* in an aesthetic and technical tradition acts to *transcend* conventional limits and, as his self-taught musicking attests, mirrors his own immersion in jazz through working with established jazz artists such as Archie Shepp as important first steps that enabled him to work through the jazz tradition and eventually transcend it.

The idea of going “beyond technique” in order to educate, enlighten, and perhaps, provoke audiences to “fight for righteousness” also speaks to Ho’s ideas about the nature of aesthetics in the twenty-first century. Keeping in mind V. I. Lenin’s dictum, “Ethics will be the aesthetics of the future,” he writes, “[Musical] notation is not the enslaver, the oppressor of spontaneity and improvisation. Calcification, de-African Americanization, co-option is not caused by musical deviations and practices, but, in my view, by *ethical violations* [. . .] As a non-African American, but a person of color (oppressed nationality in the US), *I was drawn to and inspired and revolutionized by [Afro-diasporic] music’s musical and—possibly more profoundly—extramusical qualities.*”²⁵ In other words, the fusion of musical and dramatic materials function not as an aesthetic end in itself but to serve liberatory goals.

Ho further links the martial arts and black music by asserting that Lee was “the Asian John Coltrane.”²⁶ In order to understand this comparison, it helps to recall Amiri Baraka’s assertion (writing under the name LeRoi Jones) that “John Coltrane [. . .] is an example of the secular yearning for the complete change, for the religious, the spiritual.”²⁷ Coltrane, recognized widely in the jazz world as one of the most visible advocates for the spiritual impulse running through jazz music, cast a wide influential net. For his part, Coltrane recognized music’s affective powers and looked for ways in which to focus his music toward benevolent ends. Coltrane explains:

I’ve already been looking into those approaches to music—as in India—in which particular sounds and scales are intended to produce specific emotional meanings [. . .] I would like to bring to people something like happiness. I

would like to discover a method so that if I want it to rain, it will start right away to rain. If one of my friends is ill, I'd like to play a certain song and he will be cured; when he'd be broke, I'd bring out a different song and immediately he'd receive all the money he needed. But what are these pieces and what is the road to travel to attain knowledge of them, that I don't know. *The true powers of music are still unknown. To be able to control them must be, I believe, the goal of every musician.* I'm passionate about understanding these forces. I would like to provoke reactions in the listeners to my music, to create a real atmosphere. It's in that direction that I want to commit myself and to go as far as possible.²⁸

Ho views the creation of an Afro Asian multicultural music in the same way, declaring, "I was profoundly drawn to and inspired by African American music as the expression of an oppressed nationality, for both its social role as protest and resistance to national oppression, and for its musical energy and revolutionary aesthetics," commenting further on the various ways African musicians transformed various Western European musical practices and assumptions through their own aesthetic frameworks to create vital African American music cultures and traditions.²⁹ As stated earlier, Ho, like Coltrane, believes the shamanistic power of African music—and by extension, African American music—enables the music to "reach down to the cellular level" and empower both musician and listener.

He further supports his comparison of Lee and Coltrane by noting that both were iconoclastic innovators. In 1960, Coltrane recorded *The Avant-Garde*, announcing his immersion in free jazz aesthetics, which did much to legitimize the style for some jazz critics due to Coltrane's proven stature within mainstream jazz. In Lee's case, his "total system," as Ho calls it, known as *jeet kune do* was a break from traditional kung fu, incorporating not only martial arts techniques but a philosophy with a strong Taoist influence, as well. Furthermore, Ho points to Lee's assertion that, using self-discipline and a high degree of intuition, an individual who has been "trained" by philosophical ideas found in Taoism and Buddhism, must often act in opposition to hegemonic interests in order to maintain her political, ethical, and artistic integrity.

Traditions of Change

Tradition has its uses, though the contradiction of using traditions to break away from traditions further problematizes the use of popular culture elements. Lee consciously utilized Chinese literary tropes in the subversion

of stereotypes of the Asian male in the film *Enter the Dragon*—a move Ho would also initiate for his multimedia martial-arts stage extravaganzas. Lee was aware of the philosophical underpinnings of this engagement and used Chinese philosophy, particularly Taoism, as a way to subvert Chinese traditional culture as well as Western representations and misrepresentations of Chinese ethnicity. Two Ming novels involved with the martial arts and the uses of tradition, including religious ones—*The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Outlaws of the Marsh*—also inverted the traditions they faced, forming a tradition of Chinese letters that periodically “turned on itself.” In his attempt to raise the level of discourse in a Chinese martial-arts film, Lee used strategies that earlier Ming novelists employed and for the same purpose that would inspire Ho in his revolutionary works, namely, to create works that challenged hegemonic interests and questioned normative assumptions held within dominant ideological positions.

The idea of connecting a creative artist to philosophical, spiritual, and/or political interests is foreshadowed in Chinese letters by Luo Guanzhong, the author of *Three Kingdoms*. Chinese literature scholar Andrew Plaks writes about these dual roles in the Ming period: “Many of the individuals who were prominent in the sparkling successes of various fields of literati culture in the sixteenth century, including drama, were directly involved in one way or another in the formation of the vernacular novel genre. . . . We may recall, by the way, that Lo Kuan-chung (Luo Guanzhong) was also a man of the theater; in fact, what little we know about him derives from this connection alone.”³⁰ The fact that these novelists drew on older historiographical works is another indication of the periodical reframing of Chinese literary signification.

Still, for all his philosophizing, Lee placed a high value on the utility of martial-arts skills; namely, the ability to physically attack and counterattack adversaries. This is not the usual position of philosophers—they may argue vehemently with one another, but there is a low tolerance for physical negotiation. Lee addressed this martial-arts ideal:

I say that if you want something beautiful, take modern dancing. What good would it do a boxer to learn to meditate? He’s a fighter, not a monk. It’s all too ritualistic, what with bowing and posturing. That sort of Oriental self-defense is like swimming on land. You can learn all the swimming strokes, but if you’re never in the water, it’s nonsense. These guys never fight. They all want to break three-inch boards or two bricks or something. Why? That doesn’t make them fighters.³¹

This emphasis on utilitarian values separates Lee from what he perceived as a false reliance on tradition or an overemphasized valorization of historical precedent. Lee was explicit about the need to remain flexible, stating, "At present I am working on the script for my next film. I haven't really decided on the title yet, but what I want to show is the necessity to adapt oneself to changing circumstances. *The inability to adapt brings destruction.*"³²

The emphasis on practical—educational, transformative—agendas for their creative work connects Ho and Lee to earlier Chinese philosophical traditions, as well. Chinese historian Ronald G. Dimberg writes of Confucian practice, "Confucius was not interested in the Way of Heaven as an abstract concept, but in its practical application in the realm of human endeavor."³³ When a disciple of Confucius told him a hermit was teaching people to renounce the world, Confucius answered, "If I am not to be a man among other men, then what am I to be? If the Way prevailed in the world, I should not be trying to alter things."³⁴

Likewise, Ho envisions his creative works as performances of social change, as ways to create new social relations. For instance, for *Warrior Sisters: The New Adventures of African and Asian Womyn Warriors*, he "encouraged a 'Third World' cross-cultural casting [of African and Asian women], *hoping to encourage greater 'Third World' consciousness and solidarity.*"³⁵ He went beyond merely casting African and Asian women, however, by insisting on having "singers of African descent perform Asian roles and singers of Asian descent perform African roles," clearly demonstrating the realization of a multicultural perspective that is not rooted in essentialist notions attached to race or nationality.³⁶ He further complicated the high/low cultural hierarchical divide by mixing singers of both Western opera and "pop-soul" backgrounds.³⁷

Adaptability and flexibility also resonate across both men's work in their relationship to improvisation. Ho argues that Lee was a master improviser, stating unequivocally that Lee's *Jeet Kune Do* is a manual and a manifesto for improvisation. [Lee] says, for example, the point of technique is to have no technique. [Lee] talks about learning to be intuitive. He says, yes, you can study forms and so forth but you can't be a prisoner of them."³⁸ Ho has claimed that the same attitude pervades his artistic work, arguing that "tradition is not something you go back to—it's something you build upon and hopefully [you are able to] make an innovation. Tradition doesn't go backward, it goes forward because it has a lot of struggle in it."³⁹ As I have been arguing, both artists operate within a devalued popular idiom, the martial-arts action genre, and must negotiate between the Scylla of attracting and entertaining popular audiences and the Charybdis of the hegemonic interests

that authorize and legitimize cultural production of any kind (or, at the very least, significantly impact the ideological and discursive positioning of both popular culture and its audiences).

Similar to Ho, Lee saw “backwardness” in strict adherence to Chinese tradition. “What is *Jeet Kune Do*? Chinese martial art, definitely! It is a kind of Chinese martial art that does away with the distinction of branches, an art that rejects formality, and *an art that is liberated from tradition*.”⁴⁰ Lee tackled hegemonic power by subverting what had been fetishized by colonial powers, namely, traditional arts frozen in an exoticized, pre-European contact past. “The classical man [Lee’s term for a tradition-bound subject] is just a bundle of routine, ideas and tradition. When he acts, he is translating every living moment in terms of the old.” Moreover, “[If] you follow the classical pattern, you are understanding the routine, the tradition, the shadow—you are not understanding yourself.” He also asks, “How can one respond to the totality with [a] partial, fragmentary pattern?” His answer is that “[when] one is not expressing himself, he is not free. Thus, he begins to struggle and the struggle breeds methodical routine. Soon, he is doing his methodical routine as response rather than responding to what *is*.”⁴¹

Lee also criticized the nativist view that maintains that “preserving” a cultural essence is an act of resistance showing, instead, that it is merely a posture of acquiescence to hegemonic discourse. Lee addressed the real world of negotiation: “In daily living, one must follow the course of the barrier. To try to assail it will only destroy the instrument [the fetishized object]. And no matter what some people will say, barriers are not the experience of any one person, or any one group of persons. *They are the universal experience*.”⁴² Lee’s martial art “non-style,” *jeet kune do*, had as one of its defining tenets this goal of “liberation from tradition.”

Ho has also refused to remain tied to either external political and artistic trends or even to his own political stances. As the Asian American movement began to fracture, he began associating with younger activists who criticized the earlier Asian American movement for its sexism and unexamined patriarchal notions regarding gender relations. He admitted, “Many twenty-something womyn activists educated me about the question of patriarchy,” and his studies of Marxist and radical feminist theory eventually led to a collaboration with Ann T. Greene on *Warrior Sisters: The New Adventures of African and Asian Womyn Warriors*, an “action adventure opera about the escape from a New Jersey prison of Black Liberation Army leader Assata Shakur told as a myth-epic.”⁴³ Ho’s use of current popular culture to educate

audiences to “hidden histories” such as the story of Shakur echoes the Neo-Confucian *hua pen* storytelling legacy of the Sung and Ming dynastic periods, a popular form of oral storytelling among children and peasants as well as elite adults that was officially circumscribed as folk culture and thought unworthy of the serious attentions of elite literati of the period.⁴⁴

Ho’s “irreverent” use of both high and low cultural elements—indeed, his reengineering of cultural elements—is predicated on his four-point agenda of speaking to, going to, involving and, ultimately, changing the people. In his ironic use of the term *opera* to describe his multimedia works, Ho, like Lee and their antecedent storytellers, fixes his sights on two aspirational ideals. The first is the innovative extension of tradition, that is, using traditional elements but in reconfigured ways that speak to contemporary realities rather than reinscribing hidebound dogma. The second involves the movement of vernacular traditions into valorized art forms that follow from the refiguring of prior tradition. It is this cycling and recycling movement of innovation, sacralization, and back again that marks the dialectical dance between popular artists and high cultural legitimation. Ho’s formulation is all the more powerful for not simply invoking an “eternal return” but a spiraling “changing same,” to borrow Amiri Baraka’s term for black cultural variation that retains a unique, core aesthetic perspective. While strategically essentialist, Baraka’s formulation explains the continuing power of Afrodiasporic culture and helps us comprehend Ho’s use of popular cultural forms that in their articulation of radical politics constitute an “avant-garde.”

Ho uses this idea of cyclical innovation and cultural reinvigoration in his use of popular forms such as martial arts and samurai films—and particularly their international appeal—as a means to “capture and evoke the spirit of folk music” in his shaping of an Afro Asian new American multicultural music.⁴⁵ Arguing for their value in opening up spaces of opposition to and recalibration of cultural norms *that are embedded within the forms themselves*, Ho creates manga-inspired operas that express both a populist desire for a better vision of reality (heroic tales of the individual overcoming institutionalized adversity, for example) as well as his own political ideas that might be harnessed to such a vision. Or, as he succinctly put it, “My goal is a radical unity of form and content.” Similar to Bruce Lee’s admonition that swimming on land is a nonsensical exercise, Ho is uninterested in enacting a “methodical routine as response.” In fact, challenging routine allows Ho to reconfigure martial-arts narrative tropes in ways that recall Ming period literary aesthetics.

Conclusion

Daniel Inosanto, a martial-arts student of Lee's as well as an expert *kara-teka*, noted in an interview, "[Bruce Lee] felt very strongly that if he could get people to appreciate something in the Chinese culture, then they would appreciate something in other cultures as well. He felt that he was doing his small part in establishing something toward world peace and harmony and understanding among other people of different cultures."⁴⁶ Lee, himself, states unequivocally, "Although others may disagree, to me, racial barriers do not exist in reality. If I say that 'everyone under the sun is a member of a universal family,' you may think that I am bluffing and being idealistic. But if anyone still believes in racial differences, I think he is being too backward and narrow in his perspective. Perhaps he still does not understand man's equality and love."⁴⁷

Ho's Afro Asian multicultural music is an aural complement to the idea that a multicultural ethos might arise to subdue or overcome the divisive idea of "pure" cultures or the unyielding allegiance to conservative notions of culture. While using the characterizations and scenarios that have been handed to him from the Ming novels, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Outlaws of the Marsh*, via the martial-arts film genre, Ho has used them to show the inability of tradition *by itself* to give contemporary Asian Americans a voice as well as to reveal how tradition can be used to evoke a multicultural perspective that transcends the limits of race, gender, and nationality. As Rey Chow writes, "In the 'third world,' the displacement of modernism is not simply a matter of criticizing modernism as theory, philosophy, or ideas of cognition; rather, it is the emergence of an entirely different problematic, a displacement of a displacement that is in excess of what is still presented as the binarisms of modernism-postmodernism."⁴⁸

Indeed, it is Ho's innovations on the myriad set of influences and traditions through which he creates that lend his work such remarkable power. The popular avant-garde, then, is more than a means to educate—it is a powerful cultural adjunct to revolutionary action. Ho asserts, "Many would say: Fred, let's focus on what's possible. Or, Fred, your ideological and political predilection seems to preclude propensities for the here-and-now possible reforms. But I will only quote Sun Ra in response: Everything possible has been tried and nothing has changed. What we need is the Impossible. The music we make must embrace the Impossible in the arduous journey to make the music a true force for social revolution."⁴⁹



Figure 5. Asian American Art Ensemble, 1985. Credit: Ken Shung



Figure 6. Asian American Art Ensemble. Credit: Unknown

In sum, Ho's popular avant-garde is a masterful blend of Afrodiasporic and Asian musicking, Chinese martial arts and the martial arts action film genre and draws its counterhegemonic power from its ability to reach audiences without having to dilute its revolutionary message or massage its transformative ideological impulse. Asian martial arts such as *kung fu* and *karate*, after all, originated in the practical strategies for confronting elite power by oppressed populations who had been stripped of weapons other than their bodies and intellects. Binding the popular avant-garde to his iteration of an Afro Asian new American multicultural music, Ho's creative works demonstrate the inherent power of subaltern cultural production despite its marginalization, occlusion, and/or defamation by dominant cultural hierarchies by voicing truth to power. By placing these "impossible" examples of multiple multicultural perspectives within his hybrid cultural productions, Ho ably demonstrates the possibilities his popular avant-garde art hold for advancing progressive, even radical, social transformation.

Notes

1. Asai, "Cultural Politics," 98.
2. Ho, "'Jazz,' Kreolization and Revolutionary Music for the 21st Century," 142.
3. Interview with the author, September 5, 2007.
4. Ho, "Imagine," original emphasis.
5. Lee, *Words*, 119.
6. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, trans. William Boelhower (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991, c1985).
7. Interview with the author.
8. Ho, "Revolutionary," 289.
9. Davis, "Art on the Frontline," 236, added emphasis.
10. For a cogent investigation of Ho's work in relation to jazz, see Asai, "Cultural Politics." She also provides a succinct biography of Ho's early activist and musical activities. For a more detailed biographical sketch, see Zhang, "Fred Wei-han Ho." Ho provides an autobiographical outline of his public activities in his "Beyond Asian American Jazz."
11. Ho mentions Mingus, along with Ellington, John Coltrane, and Archie Shepp, as musical influences in an interview with Fiona Ma, "Talking about a Revolution."
12. Ho, "Revolutionary," 384.
13. Ibid.
14. See Ho, "An ABC from NYC."
15. Zhang, "Fred Wei-Han Ho," 96.
16. Ho is aware of other U.S. popular culture misrepresentations of Asian males such as the emasculated laundry boy and cook, employed in the domestic tasks gen-

dered female under U.S. patriarchy. See R. Lee, *Orientalism*, for a cogent study of the ways in which Asian males have been represented and misrepresented in popular culture. Lee addressed other stereotypes of Asian males in a response to an offer to portray Charlie Chan's son in a television series that was to be titled *Number One Son*. Lee, in rejecting the offer, said, "It's about time we had an Oriental hero. Never mind some guy bouncing around the country in a pigtail or something. *I have to be a real human being*. No cook. No laundryman" (Lee, *Words*, 98, added emphasis). His constant struggle was to "be a real human being." This was not just an internal struggle but a battle that he waged in the world, in the society of men, much like the heroes of *Three Kingdoms* and *Outlaws*. As noted in the text, Lee placed himself within a contemporary perspective that transcended historicism or an overly reverential reliance on tradition.

17. Interview with the author, September 5, 2007.

18. See Kyle Gann, "Monkey Business."

19. Interview with the author.

20. Ibid.

21. Interview with the author.

22. See B. Lee, *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, a journal of Lee's philosophical and aesthetic thoughts.

23. For more on Lu Xun and the historical context in which he operated, see Spence, *Gate of Heavenly Peace*.

24. This quotation begins the conversation between Bruce Lee and his master teacher under discussion. This scene was cut from the original theater and video releases of the film.

25. Ho, "Revolutionary Asian American Art," 288–89, emphasis added.

26. Ho, interview with the author.

27. Baraka, *Black Music*, 198.

28. Quoted in Porter, *John Coltrane*, 211, emphasis added. I am indebted to Porter's explication of these interviews for the information contained in this paragraph. The chapter titled, "So Much More to Do," from which this quotation is taken, deals at length with Coltrane's interconnected interest in spirituality and music.

29. Ho, "'Jazz,' Kreolization and Revolutionary Music for the 21st Century," 135.

30. Plaks, *Four Masterworks*, 44.

31. B. Lee, *Words*, 65.

32. Ibid., 138, added emphasis. The film to which Lee refers, *Game of Death*, was uncompleted at the time of his death, and the ending was constructed from the footage that was already shot. However, it is highly unlikely that the *Game of Death* film one sees today is a product Lee would endorse, as it abandons much of his philosophizing.

33. Dimberg, *Sage and Society*, 3.

34. Quoted in *ibid.*, 3.

35. Ho, "Beyond," 49, emphasis added.

36. Ibid., 49.
37. Ibid., 49.
38. Ho, interview with the author.
39. Ibid.
40. B. Lee, *Words*, 127, added emphasis.
41. B. Lee, *Tao*, 16, 17, 16–17, original emphasis.
42. Little, *Warrior Within*, 47, added emphasis.
43. Ho, “Beyond,” 49.
44. For informative surveys on the Ming and Sung literary traditions, see Hsia, *Classic Chinese Novel*, and Hsun, *Brief History of Chinese Fiction*.
45. Ho, “‘Jazz,’ Kreolization and Revolutionary Music for the 21st Century,” 140.
46. Little, *Warrior Within*, xxxiii.
47. B. Lee, *Words*, 82.
48. Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 57.
49. Ho, “Imagine,” n.p.

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