

Nothingness in motion: Theorizing Bruce Lee's action aesthetics

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journals.sagepub.com/home/gch**Wayne Wong** 

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Abstract

This article argues that Bruce Lee revolutionized kung fu cinema not only by increasing its authenticity and combativity but also by revealing its inherent connection to *wuyi* (武意), or *martial ideation*. Martial ideation refers to a specific negotiation of action and stasis in martial arts performance which contains a powerful overflow of emotion in tranquility. Since the early 1970s, Bruce Lee's kung fu films have been labeled “chop-socky,” offering only fleeting visual and visceral pleasures. Subsequently, several studies explored the cultural significance and political implications of Lee's films. However, not much attention has been paid to their aesthetic composition—in particular, how cinematic kung fu manifests Chinese aesthetics and philosophy on choreographic, cinematographic, and narrative levels. In Lee's films, the concept of martial ideation is embodied in the Daoist notion of *wu* (nothingness), a metaphysical void that is invisible, nameless, and formless. Through a close reading of Laozi's *Daodejing* (道德經), it is possible to discover two traits of nothingness—namely, reversal and return—which are characteristics of Lee's representation of martial ideation. The former refers to a paradigmatic shift from concreteness to emptiness, while the latter makes such a shift reversible and perennial via the motif of circularity. The discussion focuses on films in which Lee's creative influence is clearly discernible, such as *Fist of Fury* (1972), *The Way of the Dragon* (1972), and the surviving footage intended for *The Game of Death* featured in *Bruce Lee: A Warrior's Journey* (2000). These films shed light on the complicated relationship between the cinematic (action and stasis), the martial (Jeet Kune Do), the aesthetic (ideation), and the philosophical (Daoism). The goal is to stimulate a more balanced discussion of Lee's films both from the perspective of global action cinema and Chinese culture.

Keywords

Action aesthetics, Bruce Lee, Daoism, Jeet Kune Do, kung fu cinema, martial ideation

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Introduction

In the past four decades, film critics and scholars have discussed Bruce Lee's enormous influence from a wide range of perspectives, including reproductions and exploitations of Lee in popular culture (Bowman, 2010, 2013; Hu, 2008), authenticity in performing and filming martial arts (Bordwell, 2000/2011; Hunt, 2003), his "Third World" legacy (Prashad, 2003), revolutionary fight choreography (Kreng, 2008), and negotiating nationalism, masculinity, and Chineseness (Berry & Farquhar, 2006; Chiao, 1981; S. L. Li, 2001; Louie, 2002; Rayns, 1980; Teo, 1997). In this corpus, more attention has been paid to the cultural and political aspects of the Lee canon rather than his martial arts performances. The latter are seen as bodily spectacles offering visual and visceral pleasures but possessing limited if any philosophical significance (Shaviro, 1993; Williams, 1990, 1995). This methodological bias has reinforced the marginal status of action choreography and aesthetics in the academic study of martial arts cinema (Yu, 2012, pp. 13-14).

As a corrective to this neglect of aesthetics, some film scholars began to theorize Hong Kong action aesthetics. David Bordwell influentially examined the formal qualities of Hong Kong action cinema and its stylistic differences compared to Hollywood action; he argued that the former emphasizes expressivity, while the latter emphasizes realism. As Bordwell observed, a "Hong Kong action sequence arrests us not because it mimics normal behavior but because it felicitously magnifies the most emotion-arousing features of pursuit or combat" (Bordwell, 2001, p. 86). Hong Kong action films achieve this by utilizing a method of expressive amplification which Bordwell refers to as the "pause-burst-pause" pattern, so named because of the short breaks that punctuate most sequences of action (Bordwell, 2000/2011, p. 138). Originally an operatic technique common in martial arts plays,¹ the pattern was remediated and perfected by the Shaw Brother's new-style *wuxia* films in the 1960s, especially those directed by King Hu and Chang Cheh (Bordwell, 2000, pp. 122-123). Bordwell has analyzed in detail how the kung fu genre manifests the pattern with reference to Lee's performance in *The Way of the Dragon* (1972) (Bordwell, 2000/2011, p. 140).

Following Bordwell's lead, Leon Hunt has investigated how Lee's martial arts performances exemplify three different modes of authenticity: the *archival*, which refers to the use of real martial arts techniques; the *cinematic*, which refers to long shots and long takes; and the *corporeal*, which refers to the presence of genuine combative skill and genuine physical risk (Hunt, 2003, p. 29). M. T. Kato, meanwhile, has connected the archival with the sociopolitical. By way of an analysis of Lee's nunchaku in *Fist of Fury* (1972), Kato has argued that the weapon embodies not only "the history of cultural exchange between China and Okinawa" but also "their shared history of colonial conquest by Japan" (Kato, 2007, p. 42). Finally, Kyle Barrowman (2012, para. 4) has explored the aesthetic and choreographic dimensions of martial arts cinema via analyses of key fight scenes from *The Way of the Dragon*.

While such formalist approaches have explicated the significance of Lee's action aesthetics, the intimate connection between Lee's aesthetics and their philosophical roots remains to be analyzed. Solely focusing on the operatic discourse of expressivity or Daoist ideas of fluidity reinforce in the study of Lee's cinematic martial arts performance the regrettable theoretical segregation of the martial, the aesthetic, and the philosophical. Against this tendency, this article argues that Lee's action aesthetic is best theorized by the concept of *wuyi* (武意),² or *martial ideation*, which refers to the synthesis of action and stasis in tranquility. There are different configurations of such tranquility in the history of kung fu cinema.³ In Lee's films, such tranquility is epitomized in the vernacularized notion of the Daoist *wu* (無), or nothingness, which has a strong connotation with ideas of fluidity, adaptability, and arbitrariness. Applying *wu* to the martial ideational framework, it specifies the constant alternation of action and stasis as a form of serenity.

To locate the martial ideational *wu* in Lee's films, this article first traces the theorization of ideation (*yi* 意) back to Chinese literary-aesthetic criticism and examines how it can be recontextualized in cinema studies. Then, the discussion turns to the Daoist notion of *wu* in both its vernacular and scholarly discussions in order to reveal its martial ideational connections. Particular attention will fall on the motif of circularity as a vessel for both expressivity and tranquility. The final section scrutinizes how the dual nature of circularity is manifested in Lee's films through the concept of *fan* (反), or reversal and return, described in Laozi's *Daodejing* (道德經). In short, the martial ideational approach to Lee's action aesthetics offers an alternative to the dominant operatic discourse of expressivity and opens up a new comparative space between Euro-American film theories and Chinese aesthetic-philosophical traditions.

Theorizing ideation

Ideation (*yi*) has been a foundational concept in Chinese literary-aesthetic criticism since its original theorization in the pre-Qin (ca. 2100-221 BCE) period (Wong, 2018, pp. 202-207). The predominance of classical Confucianism at the time treated ideation as a political/pedagogical concept rather than an aesthetic concept, through which a gentleman can learn and study in order to potentially rule (Puett, 2002, pp. 289-315). During the Wei (220-265) and Jin (265-420) dynasties, in which Daoism and Buddhism were entering the mainstream alongside Confucianism, ideation started to acquire an emotional dimension as literature was viewed not merely as a governing tool but also as a means of personal expression (S. K. Zhang, 2004, p. 92). The discussion of ideation matured in the Tang (618-907) dynasty due to the availability of new terms acquired from the translation of the Buddhist classics from Sanskrit into Chinese. Wang Changling (王昌齡), a Tang poet, adopted Buddhist terms such as *jing* (境), or realm, and theorized ideation as a three-step process comprising *wujing* (物境), or the realm of objects; *qingjing* (情境), or the realm of affects; and *yijing* (意境), or the realm of ideation (B. W. Zhang, 1996, p. 149).⁴ Significantly, Wang did not treat ideation as an esoteric concept; rather, he considered it to be a straightforward step-by-step process applicable to artistry of all kinds.

The theorization of ideation continued among poets and literati from the late Tang dynasty (755-907) to the Song dynasty (960-1279), as evident in the works of Jiao Ran (皎然), Sikong Tu (司空圖), and Yan Yu (嚴羽) (Jiao, 1937; Sikong, 1987; Yan, 1986). Another breakthrough occurred in the Republican period in which Zong Baihua (宗白華), an influential Chinese aesthetician, defined ideation as the synthesis of *shi* (實), or presence, and *xu* (虛), or absence (Zong, 1994, p. 361). If the conventional understanding of ideation focuses on the absence side of the coin, Zong asserts that the aesthetic experience arises from the subtle interplay between the visible and the invisible, just as the empty white spaces of a Chinese mountain-river painting cannot be shown without layers of black strokes. It is in such creative interplay of the presence and the absence that ideation can emerge in the mind of the artist as well as the spectator. Transposing the frameworks of Wang and Zong into kung fu cinema, ideation (*yijing*) is the subtle moment of tranquility when the representation of martial arts performance transcends the faithful reproduction of forms (*wujing*) and the expressive amplification of emotions (*qingjing*).

There are two major approaches concerning how ideation is evoked in cinema studies. The first approach emphasizes absence. Mary Farquhar (2009) argues that "the power of the concept [of ideation] lies in an acknowledgment that neither the cinematic nor painterly image is real" (p. 100). To Farquhar, ideation manifests the operatic tradition of the Chinese cinema since it seeks to amplify "motion emotion" (Bordwell, 2000/2011, p. 127) through highly

stylized martial arts performance. The second approach emphasizes presence. Victor Fan (2019) contends that ideation “is best achieved not by abstracting forms out of such concrete reality; rather, it is attained when landscape and the human figures within it are captured as is” (p. 182). In other words, Fan attributes ideation to the realist tradition of Chinese cinema popular in the 1930s and 1940s, especially in the works of Fey Mou (費穆). Despite the utility of these approaches in and of themselves, they both fail to address the duality of ideation (and, by extension, of kung fu cinema) as a synthesis of presence and absence (and, by extension, of the operatic and the realist traditions).

If ideation does play a pivotal role in kung fu cinema, then the first question to ask is, to what do “presence” and “absence” refer? The answer lies in the Chinese character of martial arts, or *wu* (武).⁵ According to the earliest Chinese dictionary, *Shuowen jiezi* (說文解字), or *Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters*, written in the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) dynasty, *wu* consists of a dual meaning: *ge* (戈), or action, and *zhi* (止), or stasis. The dual meaning allows the concept of ideation to be appropriated in the martial dimension for the formulation of martial ideation. Granted, film scholars have noticed the significant roles played by action and stasis in kung fu films, as in the aforementioned pause-burst-pause pattern. In addition to action choreography, the camera mediates such a pattern through rapid zooming. On the narrative level, the interplay of action and stasis is found in moments when a particular kung fu hero needs to withhold his or her anger in a hyper-tense situation, such as the opening of *Fist of Fury* when Chen Zhen (Bruce Lee) is humiliated in public.

For another wrinkle, beyond the aesthetic domain, the emphasis in Chinese opera on expressivity and theatricality to some extent marginalizes the vital roles that Chinese philosophy and martial arts practice play in the theorization of cinematic kung fu. The operatic performance functions as entertainment and therefore stresses the exaggeration of emotions, whereas the philosophical and martial traditions take an entirely different stance on emotions. In Confucianism, for example, emotions are regulated through ritual performance so that *ren*, or humaneness, can be cultivated in the process. As to kung fu learning and practice, it demands a high degree of control and stabilization. The southern kung fu schools such as Hung Gar, for example, place great emphasis on lower body stability, which is the prerequisite for all upper body techniques.

In this light, the philosophical and the corporeal are just as important as the theatrical in the theorization of action aesthetics. The hegemony of the operatic tradition in the study of kung fu cinema, however, has caused problems inasmuch as it occludes the ideational dimension. While the alternation of action and stasis, or bursts and pauses, is a distinctive characteristic of kung fu cinema, it is too simplified to account for the intricate relationship in kung fu cinema among the martial, the philosophical, and the aesthetic. The key is not merely the synthesis of action and stasis, but how their creative interplay brings out different aesthetic experiences, from the reproduction of forms to the amplification of emotions to their stabilization in equanimity. To elucidate this interplay and its implications, the following discussion focuses on the films of Bruce Lee, in which martial ideation is configured by the Daoist notion of *wu*.

The vernacular *wu*: Bruce Lee, Jeet Kune Do, and the American counterculture in the 1950s

Bruce Lee discussed on many occasions that Jeet Kune Do (JKD) and its resulting action aesthetics are pertinent to fluidity and adaptability (Lee, 1975/2015, pp. 212–215; Little, 2016, pp. 117–118). In *Fist of Fury*, Lee demonstrates such unpredictability in his fight with Robert Baker, in which he

escapes Baker's armlock by biting his leg. Kato (2007, p. 48) points out that the choreography demonstrates the "conceptual elements of 'chaos' and 'spontaneity.'" In *The Way of the Dragon*, Lee manifests the necessity of making continual adjustments in his fight with Chuck Norris. Norris's defeat results from the fact that he fails to "adjust to [Lee's] mercurial changes in attack" (Bordwell, 2000/2011, p. 32). In *The Game of Death*, Lee uses a flexible bamboo in his fight with Dan Inosanto, a Filipino kali/eskrima master who wields a pair of solid sticks. Paul Bowman (2010, pp. 158-159) points out that the contrast in their weapon use reflects the Daoist connection of Lee's JKD ideas, namely, "where there is flexibility, therein lies the 'strength to overcome rigidity.'" Such flexibility is also demonstrated in Lee's ability to interrupt Inosanto's rhythm, thereby creating a "broken rhythm" during attacks (Lee, 1975/2015, p. 62). Meaghan Morris (2001, p. 179) approaches the motif of adaptability from the perspective of cultural pedagogy. She writes that being adaptive is one of the "clichés of martial arts cinema, as of many self-development regimes," and that "the point of a pragmatic aesthetic pedagogy is always to shape a socially responsive as well as physically capable self that can handle new experience."

One common observation among these critics and scholars is that they acknowledge a close connection among Lee's action choreography, JKD's martial philosophy, and Daoism. Of these three dimensions, the Daoist connection receives the least attention and is more ambiguously addressed. Although synonyms such as "spontaneity," "flexibility," and "perpetuity" frequently appear in English-language scholarship (Barrowman, 2012; Bowman, 2010, pp. 158-159; Kato, 2007, p. 48), there is not much elaboration on what these terms mean and why they are used in reference to Lee's kung fu films. To address these two problems, it is crucial to examine Lee's understanding of Daoist philosophy in the context of 1960s America, which is where and when Lee first incorporated Daoism in his writings.

Surely, Daoism is not the only philosophical school Lee references in his martial arts writings. Apart from Daoism, Lee was interested in Zen Buddhism, mainly through the works of Alan Watts and Daisetz T. Suzuki, and the writings of Jiddu Krishnamurti. Lee was also fond of the writings of Thomas Aquinas, David Hume, René Descartes, Carl Jung, and Carl Rogers (Polly, 2018, p. 108). Nevertheless, as Bowman (2010, pp. 93-94) points out, Lee was more interested in Eastern philosophy not only because of the practical need to distinguish himself as a "Chinese kung fu" practitioner but also as a result of the predominance in the 1960s-1970s American counterculture of "East Asian culture and thought."⁶

From the early 1960s on, Lee projected himself as a "martial arts philosopher" who was familiar with Chinese philosophy via his interviews, writings, and film dialogue (Bolelli, 2003, p. 157). In a newspaper interview in 1967, Lee expressed that "the essence of kung fu is *wuwei*," thus connecting his martial arts vision to one of the central Daoist concepts (Luo, 2010, p. 98). Other Daoist traces can be found in the striking resemblance between the JKD and Tai Chi logos as well as his direct references in his writings to ideas such as *xu* (虛), or emptiness, *jing* (靜), or stillness, *ziran* (自然), or nature, and *rou* (柔), or softness (Lee, 1975/2015, pp. 212-215). All these ideas, to some extent, can be traced back to Lee's early days training in Wing Chun, a southern kung fu style emphasizing flexibility, adaptability, and spontaneity. Compared to Hung Gar, another prominent kung fu style in southern China, Wing Chun's delicate stance, minimalist forms, and training routines on sensitivity (e.g. sticky hand) demonstrate a closer affiliation with the above Daoist concepts.

It is true that Buddhism also plays a vital role in his martial arts philosophy. The Buddhist notion of Zen appears multiple times in his notes (Lee, 1975/2015, pp. 12-14, 78, 84, 212-213). While vernacularized Buddhist and Daoist ideas overlapped in Lee's mind, the latter is more connected to

JKD's practical application vis-à-vis adaptation. The seemingly strong philosophical connection of his martial arts practice and performance, however, masks the inconvenient truth that Lee's philosophical training is suspect.

Although Lee claimed that his major in the University of Washington was philosophy, he only took two related courses ("Introduction to Philosophy" and "Chinese philosophy") before dropping out of school (Polly, 2018, p. 108).⁷ Most of Lee's philosophical schooling was of the self-taught variety. Consequently, Lee had a strong tendency to idiosyncratically merge different philosophical traditions in his formulation of JKD principles, which inevitably leads to a certain degree of simplification and generalization. From this perspective, it is crucial to take a closer look at the philosophical connection of Lee's martial arts performance. The fragmentary cultural translation of Daoism may promote new possibilities of interpretation. However, it is equally, if not more, important to investigate how Lee carves out a fuzzy, indeterminate space. Through such liminal space, Lee positions himself between the vernacular and the scholarly as a way to negotiate his ambiguous identity not only as a Chinese American who was born in San Francisco yet raised in Hong Kong but also as an avant-garde martial art actor-practitioner who bridges the chasm between the traditional and the modern, the local and the global, and the performative and the practical.

The scholarly *wu*: The interplay of reversal and return

Wu (nothingness) is one of the most significant concepts providing the metaphysical basis of Daoism. The most elaborate discussion of *wu* is found in the *Daodejing*, a philosophical classic ascribed to Laozi (老子). One of the most challenging tasks in studying the Daoist discourse is to give a concrete and distinct definition to Laozi's metaphysical concepts. Laozi's tendency to use analogy increases the ambiguity of his teaching and leads to a multiplicity of interpretation (Chen, 1970/2017, p. 50). Concepts such as *dao* (the way), *de* (virtue), and *wu* (nothingness) overlap conceptually, and it is not easy to identify one crucial concept that gives a précis of Daoism while making a lucid connection to the concept of martial ideation.

While the concept of *dao* is the most reasonable choice to encapsulate Laozi's teaching, it would be too broad for the study of cinematic kung fu. One reason is that the term is shared by both the Confucian and Daoist philosophical traditions. While both traditions emphasize the concept's sociopolitical application—namely, *de* (virtue)—they take different paths. The former accentuates the significance of self-cultivation through studying proper rituals (*li* 禮) and following moral codes, whereas the latter aims at following natural forces (*ziran*) and letting things run their courses.

Due to the theoretical complexity of *dao*, it is necessary to choose another central concept in the Daoist discourse that is equally representative yet different enough to manifest the intricacy of Laozi's teaching. In this light, *wu* is the bridging concept that connects Daoism to martial ideation. There are significant manifestations of *wu* that make it applicable to the martial ideational framework, namely, the cosmological, the material, and the martial. Among the three, the focus of discussion falls on the martial as it is directly related to Lee's martial arts performance.

The cosmological meaning of *wu* addresses the synthesizing nature of martial ideation, in which presence and absence, action and stasis, are inseparable. It is a primal state where being and non-being are not yet separated or named (Laozi, 2008, chap. 1). In this sense, it is regarded as equivalent to the Daoist *dao* (The Way; Laozi, 2008, chap. 40). *Dao* is not a static unity, but an ever-transforming state containing endless possibilities rather than a fixed entity connoting

negation (Chen, 1970/2017, p. 62). The nameless nature of *dao* does not imply its non-being. It is a form of being that has the potentiality of bringing everything into life (Laozi, 2008, chap. 42). It is such creative potentiality that makes “nothingness” a better translation of *wu* than “non-being.”

The material meaning points to the significance of absence in Laozi’s worldview. As *wu* is reflected in the natural world, it is characteristic of non-interference and inaction, hence its connection to the Daoist concept of *ziran* (nature) (Laozi, 2008, chap. 25). What Laozi means by *ziran* is not merely the Earth or the cosmos but the fundamental force that governs all things seen and unseen. In terms of application, the force embodied by *ziran* is not forceful but gently and continuously applied to all things as if the force were nonexistent. It is a form of (in)action (signifying non-action and action) that sustains a state of ongoing stability and a perpetual cycle of balance possessed by nothingness.

The martial meaning of *wu* is not explicit in *Daodejing* as Laozi is known for his anti-war stance. However, it is possible to see the term’s implicit connection to martial arts learning and practice through the Daoist notion of *fan* in chapter 40 of *Daodejing*. It is a vital concept delineating the specific motion of *wu*:

反者道之動；弱者道之用。

Reversal [or Return] is the moving of the Way;

Weakness is the using of the Way. (Laozi, 2008, chap. 40)

Fan has a double meaning, referring to both reversal and return. For the former, it connects to the material meaning of *wu* that the negative is more revealing than that of the positive in the Daoist universe. As to the latter, it describes a process of circularity in which all things, after countless reversals, will return to a state of tranquility.

Although the Daoist universe is comprised of *yin* and *yang*, Laozi pays particular attention to *yin*, or absence (Laozi, 2008, chap. 11). He believes that the notion of emptiness signifies a space of potentiality (e.g. an empty cup) and therefore is more revealing than that of concreteness, hence *wuzhi yiwei yong* (無之以為用), or “take it as nothing to make it useful for you” (Laozi, 2008, chaps. 5, 11). One of the most prominent terms in the Daoist discourse, *wuwei* (無為), or inaction, exemplifies such a reversed logic (Laozi, 2008, chap. 37). The term tends to be applied in sociopolitical contexts with reference to the idea that a ruler should not actively seek great achievement and should instead remain calm and static in his ruling to ensure societal stability. In this light, the concept of reversal rejects presence (concreteness, rigidity, and regularity) in favor of absence (emptiness, flexibility, and irregularity).

As to the concept of return, Laozi described the movement of *wu* as involving a degree of amplification while eventually returning to a state of tranquility. In chapter 25 of the *Daodejing*, Laozi delineates the movement of *wu* as follows:

周行而不殆。。。大曰逝，逝曰遠，遠曰反。

She turns full circle and is not used up [. . .]

What is great goes afar; going afar she turns, turning she comes back. (Laozi, 2008, chap. 25)



Figure 1. Daoist logo (left) and JKD logo (right).

Wu first expands into all things, hence *da* (大), or expansion. Then, in its circular motion, which is *shi* (逝), or passing away, things drift away, which is *yuan* (遠), or far away. Eventually, they are driven back to the original point, which is *fan* (反), or return (Chen, 1970/2017, p. 12).

There are two implications regarding this passage. First, the circularity of *wu* states that the reversing movement from concreteness to emptiness is not unidirectional; it is reversible. Such reversibility is demonstrated by the Daoist logo, in which the relationship between Blackness and Whiteness is fluid and interchangeable. Lee makes explicit such fluidity in his JKD logo by adding two arrows to indicate the constant movement of the two sides (Figure 1).

In this light, the tranquility obtained is characteristic of the cosmological meaning of *wu* in that it is ever-changing and transforming, hence reconciling the conceptual discrepancy between fluidity and tranquility. Second, the amplifying motion of *wu* is vital in the martial ideational framework as it incorporates the theory of expressivity on one hand and sublimating into tranquility on the other. It corresponds to Wang Changling's aforementioned three-step process of artistic creation.

In sum, what distinguishes the martial ideational *wu* from its vernacular and scholarly counterparts is that it reveals the distinct motion of *wu* in cinematic martial arts performance. On one hand, the martial dimension emphasizes the double movement of reversal and return through the notion of circularity. On the other hand, the ideational dimension emphasizes the aesthetic objective of sketching a sense of tranquility. In Lee's films, the most crucial aesthetic device that exhibits the martial ideational *wu* is the imagery of circles. While extant scholarship focuses on the circle's connection to theatrical expressivity, more attention should be paid to its connotation with ideational tranquility.

Circles of tranquility: visualizing the martial ideational *wu*

What makes the martial ideational reading of Lee's films different from existing approaches is that it stresses how the motif of circularity contributes to the tranquility of Lee's martial arts performance. Martial ideational *wu* refers not to Lee's deployment of unpredictable or unorthodox techniques, such as the biting of Baker's character's leg in *Fist of Fury*, grasping Norris's character's chest hair in *The Way of the Dragon*, and hitting Ji Han-jae's character below the belt in *The Game*



Figure 2. *The Big Boss* highlights emotional expressivity through explicit violence and exaggerated martial arts performance. Cheng Chao-an (Bruce Lee) thrusts his fingers into Hsiao Mi's (Han Yingjie) rib cage in the final battle.

of Death. Instead, it is the manifestation of reversal and return through his negotiations of circles of different sizes and shapes. Those are the critical moments where circularity signifies more than expressivity and sublimates into tranquility.

Not all films in Lee's oeuvre demonstrate the same degree of philosophical and aesthetic intricacy. It depends on how much control Lee had over the film in question: The greater Lee's authority and autonomy were, the clearer the manifestation of martial ideation was. For example, compared to his later works, Lee's first film, *The Big Boss* (1971), does not manifest a sense of tranquility. Although Lee distinguished himself from other kung fu actors of the same period such as Jimmy Wang Yu and James Tien Chun through authentic martial capabilities, he did not have much authority when compared to veteran filmmakers such as Lo Wei, who directed *The Big Boss*, and Han Yingjie, who served as Wei's action choreographer. Together, Wei and Yingjie to a large extent followed the established conventions of kung fu cinema. Most notably, the choreography in *The Big Boss* bears a close resemblance to *The Chinese Boxer* (1970), another kung fu film from that era which highlights the emotional content of action through exaggerated movements, excessive acting, extravagant effects, and explicit violence but without revealing the martial ideational potentials of Lee's choreography (Figure 2).⁸

Nevertheless, there are three instances in Lee's oeuvre where circularity is foregrounded. The first one is in *Fist of Fury*, when Chen performs the mysterious hand cycle toward the end of his fight with Petrov (Robert Baker). The second is in *The Way of the Dragon*, when Tang Lung (Bruce Lee) decides to be more flexible and encircles Colt (Chuck Norris) while evading his attacks. The third is in the original footage from *The Game of Death* included in *Bruce Lee: A Warrior's Journey* (2000), in which, similar to *The Way of the Dragon*, Hai Tien (Bruce Lee) performs encircling footwork toward the end of his fight with Pasqual (Dan Inosanto). Apart from these three crucial moments in Lee's oeuvre, Lee embodies martial ideation with his signature weapon, the nunchaku.

Chen's hand movement during his fight with Petrov in *Fist of Fury* embodies the idea of circularity, hence signifying the process of expressive amplification. Nevertheless, the movement is not merely a physical manifestation of expressivity. It also sketches a sense of tranquility. As Chen is performing the first hand cycle, a sound effect is playing in the background. When Chen finishes the two cycles, the sound effect sharply ends, returning to silence. The same is true for Chen's



Figure 3. Chen's negotiation of circularity and tranquility through his hand movement enhanced by a motion trail effect in *Fist of Fury*. The movement signifies both the process of expressive amplification and a return to Daoist tranquility.

hands, which return to the original position after the two cycles as if nothing has changed. Chen's calmness is contrasted with Petrov's response. Stunned by Chen's awkward hand movements, Petrov shouts back in his classical karate stance. When Petrov realizes that Chen is not ruffled by his hysterical scream, he looks perplexed. Then the audience sees Chen's unruffled face as he keeps performing the first cycle of hand movement with a motion trail effect in slow motion.

The concept of martial ideation, however, should not be reduced to a return to silence or a representation of calmness. The circularity of Chen's hands, enhanced with the motion trail effect in slow motion, demonstrates the Daoist tranquility as a state of constant change refusing to be fixed into a single pattern (Figure 3). In this light, Lee's incorporation of the Daoist *wu* into martial ideation forms the martial ideational *wu*, which is the Daoist actualization of martial ideation. As Lee (1975/2015) wrote, "to change with change is the changeless state" (p. 214). Rather than drawing a perfect circle, the two cycles drawn by Chen contain circles of different sizes and shapes. Such a patternless and formless state is rooted in the Daoist discourse. It corresponds to the cosmological meaning of *wu* featuring unlimited creative potentials. The phantasmic trail visualizes the Daoist preference for emptiness over concreteness concerning *wu*'s material manifestation. The arbitrariness symbolized by the movement connects to the double movement of the martial *wu* as reversal and return. In this light, the circularity portrayed in the scene manifests martial ideation in the sense that it signifies not the notion of expressivity but that of serenity achieved through constant alteration of action and stasis.

In addition to hand movement, Lee's footwork also evinces a martial ideational quality. As he gains control over his opponent toward the end of a fight, he moves around his opponent in circular steps while launching attacks. Such footwork is also evident in the fight scene between Chen and Petrov. Toward the end of the fight, Chen moves in a quarter-circle with great agility so that Petrov finds it difficult to pin him down. Such a quarter-circle movement is also used when Chen delivers his finishing move. After performing a fake lower kick, which is blocked by Petrov, Chen moves in quarter-circle to his left, kicks again without deception, and hits Petrov's face directly.

The significance of Lee's irregular, quarter-circle movement needs to be read in juxtaposition with his regular, full-circle movement at the beginning of the fight. As Chen and Petrov are evaluating each other after the first few exchanges of strikes, they slowly move in opposite directions to form a



Figure 4. At the end of Chen’s fight with Petrov, the arbitrariness of Chen’s quarter-circle footwork (bottom) breaks the artificiality of full-circle movement in the beginning of the fight (top), revealing the nuanced connection between circularity, expressivity, and tranquility.

circle. It bears some resemblance to theatrical routines common in Chinese opera, in which the two parties move in stylized steps from one end of the stage to the other. The transition from the theatrical circle to the erratic circle signifies Lee’s fulfillment of martial ideation due to his representation of the Daoist tranquility, which is arbitrary and boundless (Figure 4, top and bottom). No longer performing rhythmic and highly stylized steps as at the beginning of the fight, Chen breaks his rhythm and forces Petrov to guess where he will move and what he will throw next. At the same time, Lee fulfills the Daoist idea of *ziran* in his movement, which is not forceful and highly fluid (Laozi, 2008, chap. 25). The predominance of irregular circles is stated in Lee’s writing. He defines JKD as “an undifferentiated center of a circle that has no circumference” (Lee, 1975/2015, p. 212). In other words, Lee does not efface the notion of circularity despite his preference for arbitrariness. The circular pattern, on one hand, is intimately connected to the Daoist *wu*, hence endowing the martial performance with a philosophical basis; on the other hand, Lee realizes the significance of expressivity in martial arts performance. The motif of circles is theatrically and cinematically expressive. His ingenuity lies in the fact that he strikes a balance between performativity and practicality.

The arbitrariness of Chen’s footwork corresponds to his change in the attack pattern. It is the concept of reversal that characterizes his new strategy—from *yang* (the positive) to *yin* (the negative), concreteness to emptiness, and directness to deception. In other words, the broken rhythm is

found not only in Lee's erratic footwork but also in his attack strategy. In *Fist of Fury*, Chen uses three sets of deception. First, he performs two jabs, and then the third one is fake, followed by two real hits. Second, Chen performs a jab to the body once. When he does it again, he suddenly changes to a right hook to Petrov's head. Third, Chen throws a right backfist to the Petrov's face as bait, and when Petrov blocks it, thereby opening up the right side of his body, Chen changes levels and digs in a strong left hook to the body.

However, Lee's choreography embodies the martial ideational *wu* not only because of his preference for the reversal—namely, shifting to emptiness and deception—but his unpredictable return to concreteness and directness so that his rhythm becomes arbitrary. In *Fist of Fury*, as Chen develops a pattern of using deception, he decides to break the pattern and strike a direct sidekick. The directness catches Petrov by surprise, as he had been adapting to Lee's deceptive patterns. The reversal to directness is then followed by Lee's return to deception. When Petrov gets up in pain, his nervous stance is contrasted with Lee's calm stance. Lee glances downward to Petrov's legs and gives him a false signal, hinting that he is going to attack there. When Chen launches a lightning kick to Petrov's leg, Petrov blocks it using his shin. Lee uses a low kick as bait and tricks Petrov into believing that he would repeat the same move. But when Lee falls back and strikes it again, he suddenly changes it to a roundhouse kick. Petrov is deceived because he could not adapt to Chen's unpredictable offensive output.

The concept of martial ideational *wu* is further developed in the choreography of *The Way of the Dragon*. This time Lee manifests the concept of reversal not only through deception but also interception. He changes his approach from passive to active, from defensive to offensive. In the famous Colosseum fight scene, Tang Lung attacks Colt in a rhythmic pattern at the beginning of the fight, which makes his strategy predictable and easy for Colt to thwart. After three rounds of defeat, Tang pulls himself up from the ground, sits upright, and regroups. This is the martial ideational moment where he learns to control his emotions and enter tranquility. Bouncing Ali-like in sharp contrast to the Colt's rigid stillness, Tang changes his strategy and incorporates deception and interception. Regarding the former, Tang pretends to charge forward by flicking out a quick jab. Colt takes the bait and reacts to defend himself. However, Tang bounces back to let Colt realize that it is only a deception. Regarding the latter, as Colt takes his turn and throws two straight punches at Tang, Tang intercepts him by lifting his leg, indicating the potential of him using a front-leg kick if Colt comes in too close.

Similar to *Fist of Fury*, Lee's martial ideational movement is signified by circularity. For the first time in Lee's oeuvre, the audience sees Lee's arbitrary encircling motion from a cross-section view, and the shot lasts for 33 seconds (Figure 5). Tang moves swiftly around Colt, in slow motion, from the left side of the screen to the right, all the while evading Colt's attacks. On one hand, Tang's movement embodies the concept of reversal in the sense that he turns himself into a puff of smoke which defies concreteness. On the other hand, the circular footwork signifies the concept of return as it represents Daoist tranquility.

Compared to the stylized, theatrical steps at the beginning of the fight between Chen and Petrov in *Fist of Fury*, Lee's circular movement in the Colosseum scene of *The Way of the Dragon* is characteristic of arbitrariness. Similar to Chen's footwork at the end of his fight with Petrov, Tang aims not to draw a precise and complete circle, nor does he evade Colt's attacks in a rhythmic manner. He lets Colt attack him however he wants, and then he evades his attacks naturally. More importantly, the erratic quarter-circle first demonstrated by Lee in *Fist of Fury* is expanded to semi-circles in *The Way of the Dragon*. In this view, Lee's increased autonomy in the latter allowed him to better manifest martial ideation through the motif of circularity.



Figure 5. In *The Way of the Dragon*, Tang Lung moves swiftly around Colt while evading his attacks. Tang's movement is characteristic of Lee's semi-circular pattern, manifesting the intimate connection between circularity and Daoist tranquility.

Continuing from *Fist of Fury*, made with Lo Wei, to *The Way of the Dragon*, Lee's first directorial effort, Lee's Daoist rendition of martial ideation is best exemplified in what was to be his follow-up to *The Way of the Dragon*, the unfinished film *The Game of Death*, in which he sought to make a more detailed connection between cinematic kung fu and his martial arts philosophy through extended dialogue, intricate choreography, and sophisticated cinematography.

Similar to *The Way of the Dragon*, there is a 25-second long take in which Hai Tien encircles Pasqual 1.5 revolutions in a full-body medium-long shot (Figure 6). Unlike the previous instance, where the focus was on Tang's agility as he passively evaded Colt's attacks in *The Way of the Dragon*, Hai takes a more active role in demonstrating the martial ideational encircling motion. For the concept of reversal, Hai rejects concreteness by ceaselessly breaking the rhythm of the fight via interception and deception. As Pasqual attempts to dash forward and make an attack, Hai immediately swings the nunchaku to stop his motion. One second later, Hai pretends to charge at Pasqual and then gives a disarming smile to signify that it is just a deception. Hai also utilizes broken rhythm via his circular movement as a way to designate its perpetuity and tranquility. It is the first (and last) time in Lee's oeuvre that he incorporates both interception and deception during his encircling movement.

More importantly, not only does Hai complete the martial ideational circle of arbitrariness for the first time, he also performs his circling at normal speed rather than in slow motion. In *Fist of Fury*, Lee had not yet developed his martial ideational vision and therefore demonstrated Daoist tranquility through quarter-circle movement. In *The Way of the Dragon*, with greater autonomy and creative freedom, the randomness and illusiveness were expanded to that of a semi-circle. In *The Game of Death*, the full martial ideational circle in which Lee exhibits tranquility through the double movement of reversal and return emerges.

The relationship between martial ideation and circularity is also present at the final moment of the fight in terms of cinematography. Hai approaches Pasqual while folding his nunchaku, which is a sign of forsaking his weapon. He pretends to attack Pasqual's head with it. As Pasqual is lured to defend his head and open up his body, Hai throws a quick kick to his mid-section and then, while Pasqual is in pain from the body kick, swiftly circles to his back and chokes him with the rope of the nunchaku. The camera matches Hai's clockwise footwork by moving counterclockwise, hence forming a full circle between choreography and cinematography (Figure 7).



Figure 6. In *The Game of Death*, Lee demonstrates, for the first time, the martial ideational *wu* in full circle. Different from the previous instances that show only quarter- or semi-circles, Lee's character Hai Tien incorporates the concepts of reversal and return during his full-circle movement. Rather than passively evading attacks, he actively uses deception and interception to signify the arbitrariness of the Daoist tranquility.



Figure 7. In *The Game of Death*, Hai Tien steps clockwise to Pasqual's back to choke him and the camera also moves clockwise to parallel the movement. In so doing, the background moves counterclockwise, forming a full circle between choreography and cinematography.

Last but not least, Lee's nunchaku instantiates martial ideation in its unique movement insofar as its circular motion represents the process of expressive amplification. However, its circularity also points to its martial ideational stabilization. First, the weapon demonstrates the synthesis of action and stasis in tranquility. The nunchaku's movement is unique in the sense that it is moving and not moving, action and stasis, at the same time. Admittedly, this could be said about all weapons choreography to some degree. However, the salience of the nunchaku is that, unlike other weapons, it is not that it can be used in an ideational way; rather, it is ideational in nature. For a nunchaku to be functional, one end has to be static so that the other end can be in action. More importantly, the weapon involves a process of amplification and stabilization. Despite Lee's showcasing of sophisticated nunchaku techniques, he simultaneously emphasizes control and stability.⁹ In this light, the nunchaku is the weapon that embodies both expressivity and stability, hence revealing its martial ideational essence. Second, the nunchaku specifically manifests a sense of tranquility based on constant change, hence connecting it to the martial ideational *wu*. As Lee demonstrates in many of his fight scenes, the circularity of the nunchaku embodies not only the notion of reversal, from front to back and vice versa, but also the notion of return to the original position after the amplifying movements. In other words, its combination of arbitrariness and steadiness exhibits the martial ideational movement of reversal and return.

In short, martial ideation is the aesthetic and philosophical core of Lee's choreography. The motif of circularity is significant not only for its connection to expressivity but to tranquility as well. Specifically, through different representations of circles, Lee manifests the double movement of *wu*, namely, reversal and return. The shift from concreteness to emptiness becomes reversible due to the circular, returning movement of *wu*.

Conclusion

Watching a Bruce Lee film can have different levels of appreciation. While some viewers look for authentic martial capabilities, others anticipate visual and visceral excitements. However, what this article proposes is that Lee's sophisticated representation of martial arts on screen urges spectators to contemplate the beauty of endless change and learn to cultivate Daoist tranquility in times of conflicts and crises. As the quintessence of the Daoist *dao*, which is nameless and formless, ideation cannot be signified but can only be referred to. The circularity and arbitrariness highlighted by Lee are not ideation per se but only pointers to a higher aesthetic realm. This level of apprehension and appreciation is not instinctual, at least initially. As Lee (1975/2015) writes,

拳道以意會，力拙而意巧，力易而意難。

The *dao* of martial arts is based on ideation. Strength is maladroit and easy to achieve, whereas ideation is graceful and difficult to master. (p. 3, own translation)

The mechanism of eliciting ideation is expounded in the opening scene of *Enter the Dragon* (1973), where Lee meets Lao (Stephen Wei Tung), his student, and offers him a lesson on kung fu enlightenment. Rather than following traditional pedagogical protocols, Lee bluntly commands Lau to kick him. Despite his puzzlement, Lau performs a standard sidekick. The execution of the kick dissatisfies Lee. He sternly says, "What was that? An exhibition? We need emotional content. Try again." This time, Lau strikes a furious kick, thinking that his master

would praise him for his excellent work. Instead, Lee calmly walks up and says, more emphatically, “I said emotional content. Not anger! Now try again! With me.” Then, Lau kicks Lee two times. For the first time, Lee evades it by moving backward. Although missing his attack, Lau remains calm and recalculates the distance. As Lau tries again, Lee has to respond by blocking it, that is, Lee has to respect Lau’s attack. Pleased with Lau’s improvement, Lee joyfully exclaims, “That’s it! How did it feel to you?” Lau pauses and says, “Let me think.” Lee slaps Lau’s head and then delivers his famous line, “Don’t think! Feel! It is like a finger pointing away to the moon.” Noticing that Lau is looking at his finger, Lee slaps his head again and tells him, “Don’t concentrate on the finger or you will miss all that heavenly glory. Do you understand?” To express his gratitude to Lee, Lau smiles and bows with his eyes looking to the ground. Once again, Lee slaps Lau on the head for taking his eyes off of his opponent. Lau bows again with his eyes never leaving Lee. Satisfied, Lee ends the lesson.

The conventional reading of the scene is to prioritize what Lee calls the “emotional content,” which may have led to the predominance of expressivity in the theorization of cinematic kung fu. However, Lee does not explain in the film clearly what it is and how it can be applied to martial arts practice, let alone its implications for cinematic performance. From the ideational standpoint, the central message is not about the expressive amplification of emotions but of controlling emotions in tranquility.

The highlight of the scene is Lee’s enlightening comment about a finger pointing away to the moon. One of the interpretations is that the finger represents martial arts techniques and the moon represents real combat (Bowman, 2010, pp. 101-102; Luo, 2010, pp. 164-65). To Lee’s mind, a martial artist should forget about “rehearsed routines” in combat and seek to transcend the repetition of set patterns. In light of martial ideation, the key message of the scene is that a martial artist needs to focus not on the reproduction or amplification of action and stasis but on stabilizing the interplay between action and stasis, thereby reaching a state of tranquility.


Specifically, Lee asks Lau to move from the realm of object (reproducing a perfect sidekick) to the realm of affect (expressing anger through the kick) and finally to the realm of ideation (controlling the emotions and striking with a serene mind). Notice that Lau kicks twice in his third attempt. Although he misses with his first kick, he is not frustrated and remains calm. This corresponds with the concept of return in that it reveals a tranquil repetition of action. The major point of contention concerning Lee’s lesson to Lau is what he means by “emotional content.” Intuitively, it would be the inclusion of various emotions while striking, namely, rage. However, as Lee disapproves of Lau’s furious kick, he implies that it is more about the handling of the content rather than the content itself.

Understanding the scene from the perspective of the martial ideational *wu*, the key to the highest level of martial arts practice and performance is less about emotional *content* per se and more about one’s ability to *control* emotional content. It is a state in which a martial artist would not be interrupted by emotions and could focus on the perennial reversal of concreteness and emptiness in combat. Such a martial ideational experience of *wu*, however, does not lead to further feelings. When Lee asks Lau not to “think” but to “feel,” he is not bringing his student back to the realm of affect with the goal of expressivity. To Lee, the ultimate feeling is to feel nothing—not joy, not sadness, not rage—and to instead immerse oneself in tranquility.

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Notes

1. The idea of pausing in the middle of an action is related to the operatic technique of *liangxiang* (亮相), or striking a pose at an actor's entrance (Bordwell, 2001, p. 80). It is a "frozen, sculptural pose that visually conveys 'archetypal images and emotions' onstage" (Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 63).
2. The term *wuyi* (武意), or martial ideation, is intimately connected to the term *wuyi* (武藝), or martial artistry. The difference is that the former focuses more on its aesthetic and philosophical meanings.
3. On the Buddhist configuration of martial ideation in Wong Kar-wai's *The Grandmaster* (2013) via the concept of *guan* (觀), or perspicacity, see Wong (2018).
4. In Chinese literary-aesthetic criticism, there is a nuanced distinction between *yi*, or ideation, and *yijing*, or the realm of ideation. The former is taken as an umbrella term delineating the highest aesthetic experience in Chinese art, while the latter is specifically used in the theoretical discussion of the concept. In this article, I consider them as equivalent terms to facilitate the discussion that follows. For the translation of Wang's passage on his theorization of ideation, see Wong (2018, pp. 203-207).
5. In this article, the term *wu* has more than one meaning, referring to Daoist nothingness (*wu* 無) and the general concept of martial arts (*wu* 武). Unless specified, *wu* refers to the former, which is the focus of the discussion.
6. Suzuki, for example, played an essential role in merging American counterculture and Zen Buddhism. His effort was seen "as comparable to Bodhidharma's epic (if mythical) journey to China" (Goffman & Joy, 2004, p. 98).
7. Lee's actual major at the University of Washington was drama (Polly, 2018, p. 107). His childhood acting experience in Hong Kong helped him gain admission despite his unsatisfactory grade point average (2.6) at Edison Tech High School (Bleecker, 1999, pp. 33-34).
8. In the final fight scene where Cheng fights Hsiao Mi, Cheng plays a passive role in controlling the rhythm of the fight, which ends abruptly when Cheng kicks Hsiao's knife back to him and kills him by thrusting both hands into his lungs. Similar to *The Chinese Boxer*, *The Big Boss* focuses on the notion of expressivity as opposed to tranquility.
9. The difficulty of using nunchaku is shown in the second back alley fight scene of *The Way of the Dragon*. The last and most comically inept gangster left standing is so terrified that he picks up Tang's nunchaku on the ground in the hopes of being as effective with it as Tang. Tang simply fakes an attack and the terrified gangster hits himself in the head with his own nunchaku.

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