

Rivalry and Discipleship (A Film Essay on Sparring and Showdowns)

(By Toshio U.-P.)

Through the examination of four films from different eras, we will study the relationship between the master and disciple (or teacher and student) in martial art or films about sparring and dueling. We will also study how this relationship, which imparts tactics and knowledge of a particular fighting style such as Wing Chun Kung Fu, American Boxing, and sword-fighting is tied into security, development and survival in a world full of rivalries, competition and instability.

In Sammo Hung's martial art epic Prodigal Son (1), 'street brawler' Leung Chang comes to realize his kung fu skills are limited when he encounters a superior master of Wing Chun named Brother Tai, who plays a leading female role in the local Lok Fung Lin theatre troupe. After being humbled in a sparring match, Leung Chang tries to be Brother Tai's disciple despite the master refusing to train him. When rival Master Ngai and his spies wreak havoc for the theatre company through nightly invasion and arson, Brother Tai and Leung Chang narrowly escape together and come upon the helpful presence of calligrapher Wong Wah-Bo, who once trained in Wing Chun alongside Brother Tai. After struggling with a respiratory ailment and feeling his end coming, Brother Tai finally agrees to teach Leung Chang (or 'The Prodigal Son') Wing Chun as Master Ngai and his assassins close in on their new location for a final showdown.

In Yung Chang's boxing documentary China Heavyweight (2), we are invited into rural China, where professional boxer Qi Moxiang works for a local high school with his gym teaching assistant to find potential podium talent for the upcoming Olympics by recruiting and training through Sichuan Province's boxing team program. After following the lives and training progression of two young male high school hopefuls Miao Yunfei and He Zhongli from Huili County in Sichuan Province, we are then shown the harsh reality and difficulty of trying to qualify for the country's national level or turning pro to become the next "boxing king".

In Chang Cheh's Shaw Brother wuxia martial arts film The One-Armed Swordsman (3), we meet Fang Kang, a disciple of Qi Rufeng who struggles to fit in with his master's daughter and other disciples. After deciding to leave his master, Fang Kang is bullied and narrowly escapes death after his arm is severed in an unfair dueling contest. After being rescued by farm girl Xiaoman and treated for his severe arm injury, Fang Gang begins to train in sword fighting again through a special book that Xiaoman inherited through her family's tragic martial art past. Fang Kang then faces the dilemma of either following his slain father's broken blade to defend his aging master Qi Rufeng from brutal and corrupt enemy rivals or to dodge a swordsman's duty to live a peaceful simple rural life with his love Xiaoman.

In the first volume of Hiroshi Inagaki's Samurai Trilogy Musashi Miyamoto (4), we are transported to the early 17th century amid the wars raging in the Japanese countryside. After two friends survive defeat at the Battle of Sekigahara, life

complicates itself for skilled sword fighter Takezo when he is separated from his friend and two other female allies and quickly earns a reputation as “Musashi”, a brutal and notorious fugitive in Miyamoto Village, a place where he once grew up and called home. After fighting off endless opponents mobilized by local authorities to capture, discipline and even kill him, Takezo is helped out by his friend Matahachi’s lost love Otsu and local spiritual guide Takuan the priest, who both envision a better future for the fiery and disillusioned felon as they help him later transition to become the more honorable samurai Musashi Miyamoto.

While duels and sparring contests occur in a variety of different realms such as in the harsh wilderness, an isolated courtyard or building interior or a staged fighting ring, preparation for a final duel, title heavyweight bout or decisive showdown is a major factor when pride, honour and personal growth are at stake. While masters must perfect their own technique to remain competitive or hold off adversaries, disciples also play a key role in furthering a style and helping to defend their own world amid wars, instability and changes in the ranks.

Sources:

1. The Prodigal Son (1981). Dir. Sammo Hung. Golden Harvest. Hong Kong. 100 min.
2. China Heavyweight (2012). Dir. Yung Chang. Zeitgeist. Canada. 89 min.
3. The One-Armed Swordsman (1967). Dir. Chang Cheh. Shaw Brothers Studio. Hong Kong. 117 min.
4. Samurai I: Musashi Miyamoto (1954). Dir. Hiroshi Inagaki. Toho. Japan. 93 min. Toho Co. Ltd.