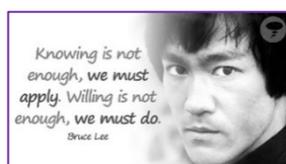


Bruce Lee in the Time of Cyberpunk and the Coronavirus: A Fighter for Our Transnational Brave New World

Dahpon David Ho



Pierre Berton: You've lost me!

Bruce Lee: [laughs] I have, huh? ...I mean here is the natural instinct, and here is control. You are to combine the two in harmony. Not—if you have one to the extreme, you'll be very unscientific. If you have another to the extreme, you become all-of-a-sudden a mechanical man—no longer a human being. [...]

Pierre Berton: Do you still think of yourself Chinese, or do you ever think of yourself as North American?

Bruce Lee: You know what I want to think of myself? As a human being. Because—I mean, I don't wanna sound like, "as Confucius, sayyy..."—but under the sky, under the heaven, man, there is but one family. It just so happens, man, that people are different.

---Interview on *The Pierre Berton Show*, 9 December 1971¹

Bruce Lee did not set out to be a hero; he wanted to be an *actor*, a human being of action. Basically, he wished to be *somebody*: a human being who genuinely expressed himself in the kinetic language of martial arts, and one who helped others, likewise, to express themselves. And yet, despite his untimely death in 1973 at the age of 32, Bruce Lee posthumously became an international hero, a person who exerted a profound influence on global culture, providing a transcultural model of what it means to be truly human. With his lightning-fast kicks, incredible physique, and almost universally-recognizable kung fu battle cry (“*Whooooeeaaaaah!!!*”, variously spelled), Bruce Lee became not just *somebody*, but rather *the* body that transformed Asian and American cinema: martial arts, body expression, fitness, masculinity, race, class, and anticolonialism. Mette Hjort wrote that “The transnational is prompted by economic necessities but the overarching goal is to promote values other than the purely economic: the social value of community, belonging, and heritage...and the social value of solidarity in the case of affinitive and milieu-building transnationalism.”² Bruce Lee embodied those values and inspired millions

¹ Bruce Lee Interview (Pierre Berton Show, 1971), sometimes called “[The Lost Interview](#),” available on YouTube. Throughout this article, I strive to provide full internet links where possible for maximum freedom of access and optimal use of this journal's online format. (Occasionally, online links may change or disappear due to the shifting nature of cyberspace.)

² Mette Hjort, “On the Plurality of Cinematic Transnationalism,” in N. Durovicova & K. Newman, eds., *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2011), 12-33.

around the world of all ages and ethnicities. He was, I would argue, not only the first truly transnational Asian man of his age, but also a fighter for our age.

“We will always be Muslims, Serbs, or Croats. But one thing we all have in common is Bruce Lee,” said Veselin Gatalo of Urban Movement Mostar in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a country that was ravaged by civil war and the horrors of attempted genocide in the 1990s. Mostar was a city divided between Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosniaks. After hostilities ended, the people of Mostar chose to erect a peace memorial. Of the nominees, Bruce Lee was chosen even over the Pope and Gandhi, because polls revealed “he was the only person respected by both sides as a symbol of solidarity, justice, and racial harmony.”³ It was the world’s first Bruce Lee statue. I include a photo of the bronze statue (Figure 1 below; screen-captured from Instagram, 8 April 2020), worth its weight in gold during the current coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic with its noticeable “upgrade,” a thoughtful reminder from the Mostar community that *we are all in this together*.



Figure 1 – The Bruce Lee statue in Mostar, now upgraded to lead the fight against Covid-19. Instagram, 8 Apr. 2020.

Those famous “nunchucks,” plainly visible in Bruce Lee’s right hand, while *not exactly* medical-grade “personal protective equipment” (PPE), might lift spirits enough to help just a little in fighting the pandemic! Joking aside, however, what does Bruce Lee have to do with coronavirus, cyberpunk, and our collective transnational future?

The year 2020 has been one of widespread economic disruption, sickness, and death. I need only briefly remind readers of the extent of the continuing disaster: in the United States alone, repeated lockdowns, businesses gutted, a peak of forty million jobless claims and a

³ Matthew Polly, *Bruce Lee: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 493.

national unemployment rate exceeding fourteen percent, the highest since the Great Depression. At the time of writing (January 2021), American hospitals were overwhelmed, with over twenty-four million cases of infection and over 400,000 deaths having been reported. Globally, the infection toll had exceeded ninety million, while the death toll had passed two-million mark. As numbers continue to rise, the situation is grim. Although currently far less lethal in total mortality than the catastrophic influenza pandemic (commonly referred to as the ‘Spanish Flu’) of 1918-1920, almost exactly a century ago, the coronavirus pandemic has wreaked appalling damage worldwide.⁴

2020, a year that had been “sort of canceled,”⁵ and certainly a year of heartbreak, outrage, suicide, street protests, and general despair in America, Asia, and the world, was one of great confusion, fear, hate-mongering, misinformation, and outright lies. The lights on Broadway are out; so are the lights of over 100,000 restaurants, small businesses, schools, and offices across the U.S. Amid this growing compendium of woe, the United States government, led by President Donald Trump, engaged in a trade war and a cyberwar with China, both sides taking actions and manipulating information in ways that have led to serious talk of a new Cold War. Most germane to this essay is the fact that U.S. President Donald Trump chose this moment of crisis to insult Bruce Lee, kung fu, the Chinese, and, by extension, Asian people generally, using much the same strain of mob-rousing racist, xenophobic rhetoric that historically infected America—you guessed it—exactly a century ago.

Calling COVID-19 the “China virus,” the “Chinese virus,” “Wuhan virus” and “kung flu,” Donald Trump loudly and repeatedly blamed China and the Chinese in thinly-disguised racial vitriol for crossing the Pacific bearing the coronavirus. At a political rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma (20 June 2020), he decided to make a “joke” about the deadly pandemic. The “Chinese virus” or coronavirus, he remarked, “has more names than any disease in history. . . . China sent us the plague . . . [and] I can name [it] ‘kung flu.’” Trump told the audience, “I can name 19 different versions of names,” and the crowd laughed appreciatively.⁶ The Asian-American community immediately objected, but Trump uttered the phrase “kung flu” again in Phoenix, Arizona, while his supporters chanted the term as a sort of rallying cry.

Buzz Patterson, a Republican political candidate, supported Trump’s utterance with a shameless rhetorical question: “If ‘kung flu’ is racist, does that make **Bruce Lee** and ‘kung fu’ movies racist?” This provoked the ire of Bruce Lee’s daughter Shannon Lee, who retorted, “Saying ‘kung flu’ is in some ways similar to someone sticking their fingers in the corners of their eyes and pulling them out to represent an Asian person. It’s a joke at the expense of a culture and of people. It is very much a racist comment...in particular in the context of the times because it is making people unsafe.”⁷ Coronavirus-fueled harassment and verbal/physical abuse of Asian-Americans, which were already rising in 2020, were repeatedly stoked by the racist pronouncements of President Trump and many of his followers.⁸

⁴ South Asia specialist David Arnold has recently and importantly noted, however, that this seemingly compelling historical narrative—of “history repeating itself,” along with the expectation of catastrophic mortality in countries like India (where at least twelve million died during the previous century’s influenza pandemic)—is heavily *colonial* in nature, and must be critically tempered by what he calls an “insurgent” narrative, a careful stress on the specificity of postcolonial states like India in their politics and health systems, rather than easy comparisons with the past. David Arnold, “Pandemic India: Coronavirus and the Uses of History,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 79, No. 3 (August 2020): 569-577.

⁵ Katherine Kam, “‘The Year Has Been Sort of Canceled,’” *WebMD* (Oct. 11, 2020).

⁶ Mary Papenfuss, “Trump Uses Racist Terms ‘Kung Flu’ And ‘Chinese Virus’ To Describe COVID-19,” *Huffington Post* (22 June 2020).

⁷ Kimmy Yam, “Bruce Lee’s daughter on ‘kung flu’: ‘My father fought against racism in his movies. Literally.’” *NBC News* (29 June 2020).

⁸ For resources, news, and hate crime/abuse reports, see [Stop AAPI Hate](#), and also the website of the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council, “[Stop AAPI Hate](#).” Also see E. Tendayi Achiume, Felipe González Morales, Elizabeth Broderick, “[Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance; the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants; and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls](#),” *Report to the U.N. Human Rights Council* (12 August 2020).

As early as February 2020, a man in New York City hit a woman wearing a face mask, “who appeared to be Asian,” calling her a “diseased bitch,” and in a Los Angeles subway during that same month, a man called the Chinese people “filthy,” claiming that “Every disease has . . . come from China because they’re f***** disgusting.”⁹ In March 2020, a near-fatal hate crime took place in Texas, when a man stabbed members of an Asian family (including boys aged two and six, one of whom he wounded in the head) inside a Sam’s Club, believing the family to be Chinese and diseased “carriers” of the coronavirus. Dr. Kevin Nadal, who serves as a national trustee for the Filipino American National Historical Society, said of the incident, “The president’s insistence on referring to COVID-19 as the ‘Chinese Virus’ has emboldened anti-Asian bias. The increase in anti-Asian hate crimes is, without a doubt, a result of the racially charged rhetoric of COVID-19. Words matter.”¹⁰

A much-acclaimed new documentary on Bruce Lee called “Be Water” ([official trailer](#)) was created by Asian-American director Bao Nguyen, airing in June 2020 on the ESPN channel; it could hardly be timelier. Nguyen’s film argues that Bruce Lee is a protest figure whose life and words speak to us directly today in the age of Black Lives Matter—and other movements for racial justice, civil rights, and an end to police brutality—which have exploded onto the streets of America right before our eyes.¹¹ While the dominant narrative is that Bruce Lee was “this martial arts god, in many ways, and a film icon,” Nguyen stated that he “really wanted to see him through the lens of an immigrant American,” whose life stream coincided with the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s-1970s and the opening of China, and whose life was a constant protest against racism on both sides of the Pacific. “Bruce Lee is not seemingly the prototypical American,” Nguyen said, “But when you dive deeper . . . it’s very much the epitome of an American story.”¹² Nguyen holds that Bruce Lee’s legacy transcends borders, just as his life tied Hong Kong and America together across Pacific waters:

Even though Bruce Lee passed away nearly 50 years ago, his words continue to inspire action against oppression and injustice. . . . protesters in Hong Kong are fighting for their way of life and black protesters in America are literally fighting for their lives—many having adapted Bruce’s ethos in their movement. As he said, “water can flow or it can crash,” and at this moment, our country seems to be crashing against a system and way of thinking that has for too long treated African-Americans as less than human—denying them justice, equity, and tragically, many times their own lives, like in the cases of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, among countless others.¹³

Indeed, Bruce Lee’s life and legacy are prismatic lenses that allow us to reexamine our dynamic, transnational, and troubled times, sometimes in surprising ways. Perhaps most readers of this essay will not be martial artists, film buffs, or cyber-navigators; but Lee’s influence extends far beyond the fields of martial arts and so-called chop-socky films. As Paul Bowman wrote, “Bruce Lee has always been construed as a figure who existed at various crossroads—a kind of chiasmatic figure, into which much was condensed, and displaced. His films. . . have also been regarded as spanning the borders and bridging the gaps not only between East and West, but also between ‘trivial’ popular culture and ‘politicized’ cultural movements.”¹⁴

⁹ Holly Yan, Natasha Chen and Dushyant Naresh, “What’s spreading faster than coronavirus in the US? Racist assaults and ignorant attacks against Asians,” *CNN* (21 Feb. 2020).

¹⁰ Dorian Geiger, “[Stabbing Of Asian-American Family At Texas Grocery Store Being Investigated As Coronavirus-Related Hate Crime](#),” *Oxygen* (3 April 2020).

¹¹ Jian Deleon, “[Bruce Lee’s Life Was a Form of Protest](#),” *Highsnobiety*, June 2020; Eric Francisco, “[ESPN 30 For 30 Argues Bruce Lee was a ‘Protest’ Figure—and an ‘Asshole’](#),” *Inverse*, 3 June 2020. The “Be Water” documentary is available via streaming online on ESPN+ and Amazon Prime Video.

¹² Des Bieler, “[Bruce Lee ‘30 for 30’ director says martial arts star is ‘the epitome of an American story’](#),” *The Washington Post (Online)*, 7 June 2020.

¹³ Bao Nguyen, “[The Black Men Who Trained Bruce Lee for the Biggest Fight of His Life](#),” *The Daily Beast (Newsweek)*, New York, 7 June 2020.

¹⁴ Paul Bowman, “The Fantasy Corpus of Martial Arts, or, The ‘Communication’ of Bruce Lee,” Chapter 3 in *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World*, eds. Douglas S. Farrer and John Whalen-Bridge (State University of New York Press, 2011), 64.

It is high time to reconsider the influence of Bruce Lee on our American collective culture (understood as a synthesis of transnational America and transnational Asia), and especially our street culture. Why? Because Black Lives Matter, and, as Lee recognized presciently, Asian lives and Asian culture can help make black and minority lives matter much more. Bruce Lee was literally—biologically and culturally—a transnational figure. His father, Lee Hoi-chuen, was a traditional Cantonese-opera singer, and his mother, Grace Ho, was the mixed-race descendant of a wealthy Eurasian family whose roots dated back to the history of British colonialism and foreign extraterritoriality. Bruce Lee’s lineage was one of migrants, among countless others in Hong Kong, a polyglot entrepôt of immigrant Chinese, British, Indian, and other peoples from across the British Empire.

Lee was born an American citizen in San Francisco, but his parents took him back to Hong Kong, where he was bullied for being a mixed-race “mongrel.” Thanks to his father, Lee had an early movie career as a child actor in Hong Kong cinema, and he was especially good at playing the part of the brash but charming orphan. However, Lee was a troublemaker and prankster who learned Wing Chun Kung Fu so that he could street-fight. When Lee’s Wing Chun classmates discovered that Lee’s mother was half-European and that he was not, therefore, “pure” Chinese, they shunned him.

In 1959, at the age of eighteen, Lee was kicked out of Hong Kong by his own parents after another bad street fight, and he took the slow boat to America with just \$100 in his pocket. He worked as a dishwasher and waiter at Ruby Chow’s restaurant in San Francisco’s Chinatown, had his heart broken by his Chinatown-raised proto-feminist Japanese-American girlfriend Amy Sanbo, and became the first Chinese-American to openly break an unwritten Chinese taboo against teaching “non-Chinese” (in this case an Afro-American) the art of Chinese kung fu. He also dabbled in philosophy classes at the University of Washington, where he fell in love with, courted, and married a Caucasian woman, Linda Emery. (The early life of the young couple was dramatized in the Hollywood film *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* [1993], where, in a famous scene, Linda’s mother Mrs. Emery tells Bruce, “You’re an American citizen. You’re not really an American.”) Linda and Bruce had two children, Brandon and Shannon, before Bruce’s unfortunate death on 20 July 1973 in Hong Kong.

Bruce Lee’s race-breaking, no-nonsense attitude led him to teach Chinese Kung Fu to a Filipino-American (Dan Inosanto), a Japanese-American (Taky Kimura), an African-American (Jesse Glover), and many Caucasian-Americans, including boxer Joe Lewis and Hollywood stars such as Steve McQueen and James Coburn, and others. I mention Jesse Glover because when Bruce Lee died, his widow Linda brought his body back from Hong Kong to be buried in Seattle, the city where he had studied, lived, loved, and fought for respect. I once read to my students, and was also myself deeply moved by, the following line from Matthew Polly’s biography of Bruce Lee, which describes Lee’s private funeral: “As the crowd thinned and the mourners returned to their cars, the last person to remain was Jesse Glover. When the workmen came to fill the grave, Jesse took one of the shovels and shooed them away. It was a uniquely American moment—a black man in a suit with tears running down his face filling a Chinese grave in a white cemetery. Jesse says, ‘It didn’t seem right that Bruce should be covered by strange hands.’”¹⁵

There—I’ve condensed Bruce Lee’s eventful life into a few paragraphs. I offer now a thought piece on Bruce Lee in the time of coronavirus and cyberpunk. We are fighting both battles on- and off-line. We are becoming cybernetic in our work and learning (almost entirely-

¹⁵ Matthew Polly, *Bruce Lee: A Life* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2018), 7.

machine-based and remote due to the “physical distancing” exigencies of the coronavirus pandemic), and in our culture and communication as well, much of which is mediated by ubiquitous mobile devices, social media, and digital information. Donna Haraway famously argued in her 1991 feminist manifesto that the terms cyber and cyborgs empowered her to fashion an “ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism,” which allowed her to reject the bright-line identity markers purporting to separate human from animal, and animal from machine, which are products of a “tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism.” Haraway declared, “We are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs.”¹⁶

Bruce Lee, if he were alive, would likely understand this kind of world, because he was a fighter with a thirst for novelty and knowledge but a deep aversion to mechanical crutches, shackles, and uncritical rules of form. We confront today a reality in which digital technology, automation, machine-learning, and artificial intelligence have intruded into every sector of our lives. In this essay, I suggest that we adapt Bruce Lee’s methodology and examine our own experiences in order to (as Lee once stated) “take what is useful, and develop [it] from there.”¹⁷ Bruce Lee was a transnational, trans-Pacific, and kinetic human being who offers us lessons for studying our own flawed but fertile society—and hopefully mastering it through instinct, control, and compassion. We do not have to go to the extremes indicated in the epigraph above, choosing to be either “unscientific” or “mechanical” men and women who are no longer human beings. Let us, then, engage with Bruce Lee, a transnational fighter for our times.

Cyberpunk Society in the Midst of Covid-19

What the hell, you are what you are, and self-honesty occupies a definite and vital part in the ever-growing process to become a ‘real’ human being and not a plastic one.

- Bruce Lee¹⁸

If you had mentioned the terms “cyber” and “cybernetic man” to Bruce Lee, he probably would have laughed, but his laughter would have had a serious edge. He was a person who personally and painfully experimented with what was then cutting-edge and unproven technology, such as by inducing reflexive muscle twitches in himself via electric shock stimulation. He was also an assiduous fitness fanatic who experimented with supplements, vitamin cocktails, and protein shakes long before they became the fashion among athletes and health devotees. Lee relentlessly pursued the perfection and expression of the human body. But Lee did not live long enough to see the personal computer age or the age of “smart phones.” If you called him a “punk,” Lee would likely have smiled, because he was once nothing more than a rowdy street punk (a delinquent student, prankster, and rooftop street brawler) in Hong Kong, who managed to become an iconic cultural rebel in America. But as the epigraph quoted above shows, Bruce Lee understood that instinct and control were warring forces that had to be joined in harmony to make a complete, scientific human being, one who was fluid and dynamic, but certainly *not* a “mechanical man.”

¹⁶ Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181. Also see Benjamin Wittes and Jane Chong, “[Our Cyborg Future: Law and Policy Implications](#),” *The Brookings Institution*, Sept. 2014.

¹⁷ Bruce Lee, *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* (Santa Clarita, CA: Ohara Publications, 1975), dedication on inset page.

¹⁸ Bruce Lee, “7-E: In Search of Someone Real (In My Own Process: IV),” in *Bruce Lee: Artist of Life*, ed. John Little (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2018), 250.

The term “cyberpunk” was coined by Bruce Bethke in a short science fiction story of the same name in 1980 (published in *Amazing Stories* in 1983). The piece was about a group of teenage crackers (and tech hackers) with ethical shortcomings. Bethke reflected: “Punk kids with cheap, powerful, portable, personal computers the size of notebooks? Ridiculous!”¹⁹ But what he then “set out to do was to name a character type...a young, technologically facile, ethically vacuous, computer-adept vandal or criminal,”²⁰ operating in the few remaining free spaces of societies dominated by amoral corporations and surveillance states.

What Bethke and other authors—especially William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, who wrote brilliant works of science fiction in the 1980s and collaborated in the classic alternative-history novel *The Difference Engine* (1990)—did was to open our culture to the promises and perils of cultural change in the wake of technological changes to our minds and bodies. These works represented, in the words of Sandy Stone, “the supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself.” They “crystallized a new community...[and] established the grounding for the possibility of a new kind of social interaction.”²¹ *Time* magazine in 1993 used the word “cyberpunk” to define a hedonistic countercultural segment of the computer age. But be not deceived: cyberpunk is not marginal or deviant. Rather, it focuses on the most pressing issue of the present generation: *command and control of information that defines human potential*.

Problems of public space, privacy, urban surveillance, online tracking, malware, and various feedback loops of the endless streams of data that are mined from us—these form our personalized and varied cyber-realities. As Gareth Branwyn wrote, “The future has imploded onto the present. There was no nuclear Armageddon. There’s too much real estate to lose. The new battlefield is people’s minds. ...The world is splintering into a trillion subcultures and designer cults with their own language, codes and lifestyles. ...Computer-generated info-domains are the next frontiers.”²² In 2011, Columbia Law Professor Timothy Wu remarked that machines now mediate so much of our lives that we must create new understandings of “cyborg law, that is to say the law of augmented humans.” Wu elaborated:

[I]n all these science fiction stories, there’s always this thing that bolts into somebody’s head or you become half robot or you have a really strong arm that can throw boulders or something. But what is the difference between that and having a phone with you—sorry, a computer with you—all the time that is tracking where you are, which you’re using for storing all of your personal information, your memories, your friends, your communications, that knows where you are and does all kinds of powerful things and speaks different languages? I mean, with our phones we are actually technologically enhanced creatures, and those technological enhancements, which we have basically attached to our bodies, also make us vulnerable to more government supervision, privacy invasions, and so on... What we’re confused about is that this cyborg thing, you know, the part of us that’s not human, nonorganic, has no rights. But we as humans have rights, but the divide is becoming very small. I mean, it’s on your body at all times.²³

Here is where the story gets really interesting. Computer-mediated social and work interaction has become the new norm in our coronavirus age of quarantines, face masks, and “physical distancing.” The new ritual of the “fake commute” has been coined to address the

¹⁹ Bruce Bethke: “[The Etymology of ‘Cyberpunk.’](#)” 1997, 2000.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows, eds., “Cultures of Technological Embodiment: An Introduction,” in *Cyberspace, Cyberbodies, Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1995), 7.

²² *Ibid.*, 10.

²³ Timothy Wu, “Brookings Inst. Judicial Issues Forum: Constitution 3.0: Freedom, Technological Change and the Law,” (13 Dec. 2011), cited in Benjamin Wittes and Jane Chong, “Our Cyborg Future: Law and Policy Implications,” *The Brookings Institution*, Sept. 2014.

physical and mental health stresses of individuals whose work and lifestyle routines have been upended by COVID-19.²⁴ We all rely on linked digital technologies of one sort or another, from electronic mail, texting, GPS, and online shopping to Web-based “chat-rooms,” Zoom and Skype and FaceTime or other video conferencing platforms, online classes, online reading clubs, and an extraordinary range of audio and visual entertainment. And the latest findings in neuroscience show that continual computer use is literally re-wiring our brains. Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (2010), has stated that screen time is not by any measure equivalent to learning time:

The Internet is an interruption system. It seizes our attention only to scramble it. There’s the problem of hypertext and the many different kinds of media coming at us simultaneously. There’s also the fact that numerous studies—including one that tracked eye movement, one that surveyed people, and even one that examined the habits displayed by users of two academic databases—show that we start to read faster and less thoroughly as soon as we go online. Plus, the Internet has a hundred ways of distracting us from our onscreen reading.²⁵

In this year of digital and remote learning, millions of young schoolchildren (including my own son and daughter) are getting only limited (sometimes only one or two) days of formal school a week, with the rest of their educations outsourced to Zoom video calls and/or learning “apps” like Seesaw and other online providers. During the most restrictive periods, primary and secondary schools have been shuttered and replaced with 100% online learning schedules; some schools have even supplied kindergarteners with iPad digital tablets. The halls of higher education also echo from empty classrooms, traditional face-to-face learning replaced by video calls, video lectures, and online blackboards. At all levels, Zoom teaching is a temporarily useful but qualitatively less satisfactory substitute for personal instruction, as many students, parents, teachers, and administrators acknowledge. Burnout from online meetings and online work coupled with protracted physical isolation from other human beings is a real and burdensome phenomenon in schools and offices. “These days, when video chatting has to stand in for a whole social life’s worth of in-person contact, it feels like a massive downgrade,” wrote Christina Cauterucci. “Every Zoom call brings a painful reminder of what quarantined life is missing.”²⁶ However, as coronavirus cases surge and physical distancing orders persist in order to stem new infections, K-12 school boards have had to cut costs and retool; many institutions of higher learning have had to refund room and board fees to students and cover additional costs associated with transitioning to remote learning.

In a recent Pew national survey, 68% of adults said that an online course did not measure up to an in-person course; and among college graduates, online classes were simply not as popular as in-person courses. About 75% of respondents with bachelor’s degrees or higher said online classes did not provide “an equal educational value.”²⁷ Respondents included, naturally, recently-graduated seniors who had just completed their college careers with a remote final semester capped off by a “virtual graduation” in 2020.

²⁴ “Spending too much time in front of a screen and with no likely return to the office, I knew I had to do something,” said Louise Sharp, whose fake commute now consists of an eight-kilometer (nearly five-mile) walk. Kristen Rogers, “[The Rise of the Fake Commute, and Why It’s Good for Your Mental Health.](#)” *CNN* (18 Jan. 2021). Also Michelle Russell, “[Why You Need a ‘Fake Commute.’](#)” *PCMA* (Professional Convention Management Association, 12 Nov. 2020), which recommends the “role-clarifying prospecting” offered by fake commuting as a self-imposed boundary between professional and personal life.

²⁵ Nicholas Carr, “[Author Nicholas Carr: The Web Shatters Focus, Rewires Brains.](#)” in *Wired* (24 May 2010); also see Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), esp. Ch. 7, “The Juggler’s Brain,” (pp. 115-143, and Ch. 9, “Search, Memory,” (pp. 177-197), on fundamental neurological change and memory loss associated with heavy Internet use.

²⁶ Christina Cauterucci, “[I Will Not Be Attending Your Exhausting Zoom Gathering.](#)” *Slate* (12 May 2020).

²⁷ Simret Akililu, “[Half of All US Adults Say Colleges That Brought Students Back To Campus Made The Right Decision, Study Finds.](#)” *CNN* (26 Oct. 2020).

In the coronavirus age, teachers and staff have been or are being fired and furloughed at an alarming rate following the financial meltdown of many colleges and universities in America and the world. Educators are right to be more than a little concerned about the problem of moral hazard here—to lay off faculty and staff is to eviscerate the substance of education, at least as the better angels of our nature envisioned it.²⁸ Like Davide D’Urbino, a chemistry teacher at Clover Hill High School in Chesterfield County, Virginia, educators nationwide have had to scramble to meet unprecedented pedagogical challenges. “The expectation was that you could teach new stuff [online], but then you have to go back in class and reteach it,” D’Urbino said.”²⁹ D’Urbino’s frustrations are echoed by students at over sixty colleges and universities who are demanding tuition refunds, given the perceived decline in the quality of their education.³⁰

The online world is rich and vast, full of information and potential remote contacts that span the globe, all available at the touch of a fingertip. Smartphones, tablets and laptops eat with us and sleep with us and can also deprive us of sleep. Such powerful tools offer many potential rewards and conveniences. But as Nicholas Carr cogently wrote in *The Shallows*, along with the indubitable benefits of digi-tech come certain costs to our integrity as human beings:

Our willingness, even eagerness, to enter into what [Norman] Doidge calls ‘a single, larger system’ with our data-processing devices is an outgrowth not only of the characteristics of the digital computer as an informational medium but of the characteristics of our socially adapted brains. While this cybernetic blurring of mind and machine may allow us to carry out certain cognitive tasks far more efficiently...as the many studies of hypertext and multimedia show, our ability to learn can be severely compromised when our brains become overloaded with diverse stimuli online. More information can mean less knowledge.”³¹

Worse yet than more information generating less knowledge, it could mean less *understanding*. These observations are important for the cyberpunk age, especially in 2020—the “Year of the Coronavirus.” Nicholas Carr is not against information technology, but rather the uncritical creeping substitution of digital information for real, self-generated, critical knowledge in the brain. Carr is neither a knee-jerk alarmist nor an anti-technological Luddite, and neither am I. Remote learning is a valuable tool, and the potential practical benefits of *technology-assisted* learning, especially in this dangerous coronavirus age, are evident. My argument in studying Bruce Lee, cyberpunk, and the deleterious effects of coronavirus is that we must be cognizant of the weighty and often fateful physical and moral choices we must make. Let us examine what we stand to gain and what we are prepared to lose in our *new* “brave new world.”

Information is all about us, and there can be no doubt that the ease with which we access it facilitates our research. But the *manner* in which it is filtered by search engines and cyber tools conditions our very *thought processes* and *senses of priority*. Nicholas Carr cites James Evans, a sociologist at the University of Chicago, who compiled a gigantic database of 34 million scholarly articles published from 1945 to 2005. Evans analyzed academic citations to study whether patterns of citation and research have changed as journals shifted from print to online formats. What he discovered was that “as more journals moved online, scholars actually cited fewer articles than they had before. And as old issues of printed journals were digitized and uploaded to the Web, scholars cited more recent articles with increasing frequency.” Moreover, “automated information-filtering tools, such as search engines, tend[ed] to serve as

²⁸ Jimmy O’Keefe, “Distance Learning Poses Challenges for Students, Teachers,” *U.S. News*, originally by Associated Press, Wire Service Content (27 Mar. 2020).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Melba Newsome, “More Than 60 Colleges Hit With Lawsuits As Students Demand Tuition Refunds,” *Newsweek* (23 June 2020).

³¹ Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 214.

amplifiers of popularity, quickly establishing and then continually reinforcing a consensus about what information is important and what isn't."³²

In other words, scholars (and others) can inadvertently shackle their own minds with cybernetic tools that they have neither created nor carefully scrutinized. As Bruce Lee said, articulating the problem ahead of his time, "When the mind is tethered to a center, naturally it is not free; it can move only within the limits of that center."³³ Like it or not, we in the industrialized and networked world are living a cyberpunk reality, connected to digital devices that have become a part of us. In June 2014, in *Riley v. California*, U.S. Supreme Court justices unanimously stated that police officers may not, without a warrant, search the data on a cell phone seized during an arrest. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts declared that "modern cell phones . . . are now such a pervasive and insistent part of daily life that the proverbial visitor from Mars might conclude they were an important feature of human anatomy."³⁴

Cutting-edge discoveries in biological and neurological science are illuminating the *plasticity* of our brains—how our brains and neural pathways and synapses change through experience, and particularly through *repeated activity*. The human brain is "very plastic," said neuroscientist James Olds, for "The brain has the ability to reprogram itself on the fly, altering the way it functions."³⁵ The scientific literature is far too vast to cite in full, but for a representative sample of essential books, I would suggest Eric Kandel's *In Search of Memory* (2006); Norman Doidge's *The Brain that Changes Itself* (2007); James Flynn's *What is Intelligence?* (2007); and Torkel Klingberg's *The Overflowing Brain* (2008).³⁶ These works show how one's neurological pathways are being biologically, cybernetically and unconsciously rerouted by Internet use, necessitating no desire or conscious intention to manipulate one's own mind or brain. Repeated physical motion and repeated clicking and reading and scanning create deeper brain manipulations than a layperson might suppose—and our cyber brains are changing much faster than what cyberpunks would call the "meat" brains of the human past. As neurobiologist Michael Merzenich put it in 2005, "Contemporary humans can experience "millions of 'practice' events . . . that the average human a thousand years ago had absolutely no exposure to." Our brains," he argued, "are massively remodeled by this exposure."³⁷

Technology mediates our social relationships and our identities, at the same time constituting an inescapable form of self-augmentation. This has been especially true during the coronavirus pandemic, which has forced so many people to work remotely. We are now reluctant cyberpunks, whose worlds are kingdoms of the screen. We lecture remotely to students who would rather see us in person but must make do with their own little windows on smartphones and computing devices; and as with education and business, sociality has also gone remote. "The Cyberpunk view of the world," as Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows noted, "is also one which recognizes the shrinking of public space and the increasing privatization of many aspects of social life. Close face-to-face social relationships, save those with kin and significant others within highly bounded *locales*, are becoming increasingly difficult to form."³⁸

³² Ibid., 217.

³³ Bruce Lee, "5-K: More Notes on Jeet Kune Do," in *Bruce Lee: Artist of Life*, ed. John Little (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2018), 204.

³⁴ Benjamin Wittes and Jane Chong, "Our Cyborg Future: Law and Policy Implications," *The Brookings Institution*, Sept. 2014.

³⁵ James Olds, interview cited in Carr, *The Shallows*, 26-27.

³⁶ Eric Kandel, *In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a New Science of Mind* (W.W. Norton, 2006); Norman Doidge, *The Brain that Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science* (Penguin, 2007); James Flynn, *What is Intelligence? Beyond the Flynn Effect* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Torkel Klingberg, *The Overflowing Brain: Information Overload and the Limits of Working Memory* (Oxford University Press, 2008). Also see Jean-Pierre Dupuy's *On the Origins of Cognitive Science: The Mechanization of the Mind* (MIT Press, 2009); and David Buller's *Adapting Minds: Evolutionary Psychology and the Persistent Quest for Human Nature* (MIT Press, 2005).

³⁷ Cited in Carr, *The Shallows*, 119-120. Also see Michael Merzenich, "Going googly," in *On the Brain with Dr. Michael Merzenich* (Dr. Merzenich's personal blog, accessed 12 Nov. 2020).

³⁸ Featherstone and Burrows, eds., *Cyberspace, Cyberbodies, Cyberpunk*, 12.

At the very least, we must beware of the ease with which digital convenience bleeds into a collective obviation of human contact and accountability. With so much of modern life tied to the global data “cloud,” scarcely any transaction can be wholly private, and data is collected from individuals without their knowledge or consent, using much the same data-analytics technology for advertising as for surveillance. Anna Wiener writes of the hubris of the cloud-addicted tech industry, “The idea of the cloud, its implied transparency and ephemerality, concealed the physical reality: the cloud was just a network of hardware, storing data indefinitely.” To what end? “Growth at any cost. Scale above all. Disrupt, then dominate. At the end of the idea: A world improved by companies improved by data. A world of actionable metrics, in which developers would never stop optimizing and users would never stop looking at their screens. A world freed of decision-making, the unnecessary friction of human behavior, where everything...could be optimized, prioritized, monetized, and controlled.”³⁹

Cyberpunk is about the control, command, and confining of information by institutions of all sorts. In “We’re on the Brink of Cyberpunk,” Kelsey D. Atherton declared:

As the COVID-19 pandemic sweeps through the world, it collides with governments in the West that have spent decades deliberately shedding power, capability, and responsibility, reducing themselves to little more than vestigial organs that coordinate public-private partnerships of civic responsibility. This hollowing of the state began in earnest in the 1980s, and the science fiction of that time—the earliest texts of Cyberpunk—imagines what happens when that process is complete. Cyberpunk is a genre of vast corporate power and acute personal deprivation.”⁴⁰

Cyberpunk, formerly just a science-fictional concept, is taking the ivory tower by storm and is in danger of vitiating its moral compass of academic responsibility. As Atherton notes, the pandemic did not cause, but rather exposed, the historical results of an increasing lack of accountability of corporate powers and states to consumers and constituents. What it has also done, as I will argue, is reveal ominous excesses of the information economy: entire economies of xenophobia and misinformation.

Chinaman in Cyberland

Perhaps the main difference is the fact that Chinese hygiene is Yin (softness), while Western is Yang (positiveness). We can compare the Western mind with an oak tree that stands firm and rigid against the strong wind. When the wind becomes stronger, the oak tree cracks. The Chinese mind, on the other hand, is like the bamboo that bends with the strong wind.

- Bruce Lee⁴¹

Let us now return to Bruce Lee for clarification of these points. Bruce Lee was a martial artist, thinker, and educator who had an eclectic hand in every branch of learning, and who fought against the overt as well as the incipient racism of his time. Lee abhorred nativism and exclusivity, for his stated purpose was the realization of human potential and the encouragement of its full expression in every individual.

³⁹ Anna Wiener, *Uncanny Valley: A Memoir* (New York: MCD/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 83, 136.

⁴⁰ Kelsey Atherton, “We’re on the Brink of Cyberpunk,” *Slate*, 8 April 2020.

⁴¹ Bruce Lee, “I-A: The Tao of Gung Fu: A Study in the Way of the Chinese Martial Art,” in *Bruce Lee: Artist of Life*, ed. John Little (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2018), 30.

The film *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* (1993) is fictional and perhaps overly hagiographic, but in one telling scene, the open outlook of the protagonist is credibly portrayed. The elders of Chinatown say to Bruce that he cannot teach Chinese martial arts to the *gwailo* (literally, “foreign devils,” or Westerners); he counters that he will teach whoever wants to learn. A Chinese elder admonishes him, “One of the things we do not do is teach our secrets to whites, blacks. They are the enemy.”⁴² To this, Bruce Lee responds, “They are *not* the enemy. They just don’t know us. We’ve been so closed for so long, they’ve never seen the real beauty of our culture—let’s show it to them.” The elders disagree and decide on a trial by combat.

This sets up the historical (and much-mythologized) Bruce Lee Chinatown duel with Wong Jack Man—“the most famous challenge match in kung fu history, retold and reinvented countless times in books, plays, and movies. . . . Wong Jack Man’s northern high-kicking style versus Bruce Lee’s southern fists of fury.”⁴³ According to credible accounts (Wong Jack Man’s supporters in Chinatown published a slew of disinformation claiming Lee’s defeat), the match ended ingloriously in about three minutes, with Wong running away and Bruce Lee raining down punches on his head, yelling, “Admit you lost! Say it! Admit you lost!”⁴⁴ Lee went on to teach his craft to anyone who was willing to learn; but this fight “was the turning point that led him to abandon his traditional style of kung fu.” The duel had disgusted Lee with its Chinatown-centered intolerance and had left him winded from the three-minute flurry. From then on, Lee would devote himself to painstaking physical conditioning and the creation of a new way of martial arts, one that emphasized the adaptability of the individual, which was far more important than any “style.”⁴⁵

In Bruce Lee’s opinion, human beings could not advance in any form of martial arts by endlessly repeating set forms in karate, judo, traditional kung fu, or any other “national” style. He consciously and scientifically researched the useful techniques from many martial arts traditions and applied them to what he called Jeet Kune Do 截拳道 (“Way of the Intercepting Fist”): a transnational non-“style” *par excellence*. It was a philosophy and a fighting approach that was dead-set against fixed, mechanical, prejudicial knowledge. Bruce Lee explained:

So no matter what propaganda has been spread throughout the centuries, a classical style comes about as a result of a human being. . . . The founder might be exposed to a partial truth, but as time goes by this partial truth becomes a sect, a law, or—worse still—a prejudicial faith. . . . So what might have started off as some sort of personal fluidity on the part of its founder is now *solidified knowledge*, preserved and packaged for many younger generations as well as worldwide mass distribution, as well as *mass indoctrination*. . . . By the way, plastic plants might look pretty—that is, if you like dead things.⁴⁶

Bruce Lee was an advocate for genuine teaching—substance, not form; punches and kicks, not words or fancy movements; and free action, not “routine efficiency.” He stated to Pierre Berton in 1971:

To me, ultimately, martial art means honestly expressing yourself, . . . [which] is very difficult to do. I mean, it is easy for me to put on a show and be cocky. . . . or I can make all kinds of phony things, you

⁴² “There was an unwritten rule that you just didn’t teach Caucasians,” said Dave Carter of *Inside Kung Fu*, cited in Jeff Yang, Dina Gan, Terry Hong, and A. Magazine staff, eds., *Eastern Standard Time: A Guide to Asian Influence from Astro Boy to Zen Buddhism* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1997), 188.

⁴³ Polly, *Bruce Lee*, 157.

⁴⁴ Polly, *Bruce Lee*, 157.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁴⁶ Bruce Lee, “(5-F): Toward Personal Liberation (Jeet Kune Do: V)” in *Bruce Lee: Artist of Life*, ed. John Little, 174. My italics.

see what I mean? And be blinded by it. Or I can show you some really fancy movement. But to express oneself honestly—*not lying to oneself*...that, my friend is very hard to do.”⁴⁷

Bruce Lee fervently believed that real, hard, physical combat was the best teacher—a martial arts philosophy that was well-suited to the tumultuous times in which he lived. Recall that the 1960s and 1970s was a period when the fight for civil rights was engulfing America.

That battle is ever present in the age of the coronavirus, at a time when racism directed against people of color, immigrants, Asian-Americans, and Asians in general is on the rise in the Western world.⁴⁸ In 2020, U.S. anti-immigration policies and travel restrictions (not all of them related to the coronavirus) posed a serious threat to America’s diversity and competitive edge in research and innovation. International student visas were categorically denied to applicants from Middle Eastern, Asian, and African countries, a restriction that “reinforces the notion that the US is hostile to foreigners and that international students would be better off pursuing opportunities in the United Kingdom, Canada, or even China.”⁴⁹ But without international students, American universities will lose millions of dollars in revenue, the American economy will lose billions, and “the United States will be deprived of the significant contributions that foreign students make in many fields.” In the words of Charles Dunst, “[President] Trump is so blinded by xenophobia that he cannot see the benefits international students offer. Instead, his ‘America First’ administration at best considers them leeches on the American system, and, at worst, deems them nefarious spies to be kept out of fortress America.”⁵⁰

But the racist rhetoric directed against China for allegedly “causing” and carrying the coronavirus in 2020 was not just a call to “Go Back to China”; it was an invitation from large numbers of people to repeat America’s unjust *past* and its past mistakes. The “Chinese virus” mantra and the cyber-directed attacks against Chinese-owned communications platforms like WeChat and TikTok—even the forced closure of the Chinese consulate in Houston (“a microcosm, we believe, of a broader network of [cyber-spying] individuals in more than 25 cities,” according to a US Justice Department official⁵¹)—were racially-tainted provocations spurred by the American fear of a rising China and the terror of “Chinese spies” among us.

In the first months of 2020, as the United States began to feel the effects of the coronavirus, across the Pacific, Chinese netizens expressed concern that American media outlets were filled with speculation, information, and especially misinformation about China. They rightly identified this as cyber “China bashing.” Especially egregious were the claims that Chinese people in America were spies.⁵² This called to mind not only the Cold War with the Soviet Union, but also the fresh memory of Wen Ho Lee, a Chinese-American scientist who was jailed in solitary confinement without bail for 278 days until September 13, 2000 for “mishandling” documents. As historian Erika Lee observed, “Chinese Americans have found that their loyalty to the United States has been questioned. They have been treated as dangerous foreigners rather than full-fledged U.S. citizens. This has happened in countless everyday interactions, as well as in high-profile investigations, acts of violence, and discriminatory racial

⁴⁷ Bruce Lee Interview (*Pierre Berton Show*, 1971).

⁴⁸ E. Tendayi Achiume, Felipe González Morales, Elizabeth Broderick, “[Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance; the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants; and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls.](#)” *Report to the U.N. Human Rights Council* (12 August 2020).

⁴⁹ Charles Dunst, “[By Limiting Student Visas, The US is Losing More Than Students.](#)” *CNN* (19 Oct. 2020).

⁵⁰ Charles Dunst, *ibid.*

⁵¹ Nicole Gauvette and Jennifer Hansler, “[Chinese consulate in Houston closed following US order.](#)” *CNN*, 25 July 2020.

⁵² For example, see Rupert Cornwell, “[US Declares Cyber War On China: Chinese Military Hackers Charged With Trying To Steal Secrets From Companies Including Nuclear Energy Firm.](#)” *The Independent* (20 May 2014).

profiling by government agencies.”⁵³ The coronavirus pandemic exacerbated a problem faced by Chinese Americans, who now found themselves blamed for spreading disease in America.

For example, on 2 March 2020, *Fox News* carried the following exchange:

JESSE WATTERS: I ask the Chinese for a formal apology. This coronavirus originated in China, and I have not heard one word from the Chinese, a simple ‘I’m sorry’ would do. So [I’m] demanding a formal apology from the Chinese people.

DANA PERINO: What if the outbreak had started here?

WATTERS: It didn’t start here, Dana, and I’ll tell you why it started in China. ‘Cause they have these markets where they’re eating raw bats and snakes... They are very hungry people. The Chinese Communist government cannot feed the people. And they are desperate, this food is uncooked, it is unsafe. And that is why scientists believe that’s where it originated from.



Figure 2 - Jesse Watters on Fox News claiming the Chinese are dirty bat-eaters. Wikimedia Commons.

Video of this dialogue (Figure 2, pictured above) almost immediately went viral on China’s social media. Chinese netizens were highly attuned to American invective, and they reacted with fury on Internet domains (despite their own criticisms of the Chinese government for its handling of the coronavirus and its suppression of free speech).⁵⁴

But the insults kept rolling in: on February 3, the *Wall Street Journal* published an editorial on China’s handling of the coronavirus with the offensive title, “China is the Real Sick Man of Asia.”⁵⁵ The sobriquet “Sick Man of Asia” (*Dongya bingfu*) is, of course, a derogatory coinage from the turn of the 20th century used to denigrate China’s perceived weakness in the face of Western and Japanese imperialism. In Bruce Lee’s *Fist of Fury*, he showed up in a Karate dojo carrying a framed Japanese sign inscribed with the words “東亞病夫” (Sick Man of Asia), which the Japanese had used to insult his Kung Fu academy. Lee proceeded to punch, kick, and smash in the faces of the entire Japanese martial arts student body before declaring that “We Chinese are *not* Sick Men!” and destroying the sign. (See Figure 3, below—**be sure to turn on the video subtitles!**) In the film, Bruce Lee compelled two arrogant Japanese karate students to chew up the paper sign, literally making them “eat their words.”⁵⁶ Shortly afterwards in the film, Lee also obliterated a racist signboard above the entrance to Shanghai Public Garden—one that read: “No Dogs and Chinese Allowed” (狗與華人不得入內)—with a flying jump-kick.

⁵³ Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 384.

⁵⁴ David Moser, “A Fearful Asymmetry: Covid-19 and America’s Information Deficit with China,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, v. 18 (Issue 14, Number 5, July 15, 2020).

⁵⁵ Walter Russell Mead, “China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia,” *The Wall Street Journal*, (Feb. 3, 2020).

⁵⁶ Bruce Lee, *Fist of Fury* 精武門 (1972); the classic nine-minute scene is at <https://youtu.be/17kKlvtEo>.



Figure 3 – In *Fist of Fury* (1972), Bruce Lee declared that the Chinese were “not sick men.” YouTube. Click on the lower-right “CC” tab for closed-captioning English subtitles.

If Bruce Lee were still alive in the time of coronavirus, his probable response would be to force Jesse Watters to “eat his words,” figuratively rather than literally. In his short life, Lee created a new image of a Chinese-American man, one who redefined Chinese masculinity even as he also redefined American-ness. Film critic Davis Miller, who stepped into a theater in 1973 to see *Enter the Dragon*,⁵⁷ wrote that “My hands shook...Bruce Lee launched into the first real kick I had ever seen. My jaw fell open like the business end of a refuse lorry. This man could fly. ...Bruce Lee was unlike anyone I (or any of us) had seen.” Paul Bowman writes, “all of these accounts [from moviegoers encountering Lee] describe this same moment: once, I was one way; then I saw Bruce Lee, and that was the day everything changed.”⁵⁸

Heady stuff. But in addition to revolutionizing martial arts in America (which he did by tearing down the ethnic and national hierarchies that separated them), Bruce Lee became a transnational sensation. In Bowman’s well-chosen words,

He became the first truly international film luminary (popular not only in the United States, Great Britain and Europe, but also in Asia, the Soviet Union, the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent—in those pre-Spielberg days [when, it must be remembered] people in most nations were not particularly worshipful of the Hollywood hegemony)... Lee has been credited with transforming intra- and inter-ethnic identification, cultural capital, and cultural fantasies in global popular culture, and in particular as having been central to revising the discursive constitutions and hierarchies of Eastern and Western models of masculinity.⁵⁹

In short, Bruce Lee’s history and philosophy give every indication that today he would fight against the savage, spiteful, racist, and largely anonymous online portrayals of the Chinese and Asian peoples as spies and subversives in today’s world.

Lee would also combat the persistent stereotypes of Asian men as “Charlie Chans” or “Fu Manchus” and Asian women as “prostitutes” and “dragon ladies.” The prolific Chinese-American author Frank Chin has stated, “The most insidious part of the stereotype is... [that] when looking for masculine characteristics, you find none. ... [In Western eyes, the Chinese] are waiters, laundrymen—okay, that’s old. And the new ones, you know, the good engineers, the

⁵⁷ Lee’s last complete film, which shot him into international superstardom, although he never lived to see it. *Enter the Dragon* was a co-production of the Golden Harvest (Hong Kong) and Warner Bros. (International) studios.

⁵⁸ Paul Bowman, “The Fantasy Corpus of Martial Arts, or, The ‘Communication’ of Bruce Lee,” 62.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

nice doctors, all very nice, all very conservative...all passive. This makes them the ideal subject race, the ideal employees, the ideal servants.”⁶⁰

Bruce Lee would most certainly have had an ally in Anna May Wong (1905-1961), the first Asian female movie star, who also chafed at the racist restrictions imposed on her as she acted in silent and sound film, stage, radio, and television. The period from the late 1920s to the late 1930s was a time when “Chinese” and “Asian” protagonists in Hollywood movies were played by white actors in yellowface. MGM Studios’ film “The Good Earth” [1937] provides an excellent example, featuring German-American actress Louise Rainer, who won the Best Actress Oscar award for playing the character of the demure Chinese wife O-Lan. It was also an era when songs like Bret Harte’s “Heathen Chinee” and “Chink Chink Chinaman” by Bert A. Williams and Alex Rogers were popular jingles.⁶¹ In 1933, Anna May Wong told the *L.A. Times*: “I was so tired of the parts I had to play. Why is it that the screen Chinese is nearly always the villain of the piece, and so cruel a villain—murderous, treacherous, a snake in the grass. We are not like that.” And Wong said, exasperated: “There seems little for me in Hollywood, because, rather than real Chinese, producers prefer Hungarians for Chinese roles.... Pathetic dying seemed to be the best thing I did.”⁶²

Like Anna May Wong, Bruce Lee was unwilling to appear in anything that he felt demeaned his Chinese culture or his race. When Hollywood producer William Dozier called him in 1965, Bruce Lee was thrilled. As a veteran of twenty Hong Kong movies, Lee at first had not thought it viable to act in Hollywood, where there were so few roles for Asians. “If Bruce landed the part, he would achieve something historic. He would be the Jackie Robinson of Asian actors,” writes biographer Matthew Polly.⁶³ But Lee was offered only the role of Kato, the driver and sidekick of a white hero in *The Green Hornet*. “Lee reacted incredulously to being cast in a stereotypical role, recalling, ‘...I could immediately see the part—pigtailed, chopsticks and ‘ah-so’s,’ shuffling obediently behind the master who has saved my life.’”⁶⁴ Daryl Joji Maeda, who calls Lee a “nomad of the Transpacific,” wrote that “Lee was uninterested in ‘typical houseboy stuff’ and told Dozier, ‘Look, if you [want to] sign me up with all that pigtail and hopping around jazz, forget it.’”⁶⁵ Lee ultimately took the limited role and made it his own, becoming, through his overwhelming kinetic energy, the undeclared star of the show.

Bruce Lee brought genuine martial arts to his role; his kung fu was real in a world of fakes. Stuntmen hated working with him, because “they were tired of getting hurt.” His movements were simply too fast. “Judo” Gene LeBell, a pro wrestler and *judoka* and the stunt coordinator on the set of *The Green Hornet*, said that “We did our best to slow Bruce Lee down because the Western way was the old John Wayne way where you reach from left field, tell a story, and then you hit the man. Bruce liked to throw thirty-seven kicks and twelve punches.”⁶⁶

According to Matthew Polly, Bruce Lee insisted that his character of Kato was not a submissive manservant, but rather an equal with superior abilities: “They are making me the weapon. I’ll be doing all the fighting. ...I’ll do all the chopping and kicking.” All this cost him dearly. “In nine years of marriage this nomadic family moved eleven times. Bruce may have felt rich, but he was actually getting screwed.... Despite being the second lead of the show, the

⁶⁰ Jeffrey Paul Chan, “I’m a Chinaman: An Interview with Frank Chin (1970),” in Gordon H. Chang, Him Mark Lai, and Judy Yung, eds., *Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 306.

⁶¹ See Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s-1920s* (Rutgers University Press, 2004), 40-42; 136-140.

⁶² Jean-Philippe McKenzie, “The True Story and Struggles of Hollywood’s Anna May Wong,” *O: The Oprah Magazine* (4 May 2020).

⁶³ Polly, *Bruce Lee: A Life*, 165.

⁶⁴ Daryl Joji Maeda, “Nomad of the Transpacific: Bruce Lee as Method,” *American Quarterly*, V. 69, Issue 3, (2017), 750-751.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Polly, *Bruce Lee: A Life*, 187.

Chinese guy was paid far less than the white actors.” Bruce Lee was the lowest-paid and hardest-working actor on the set of *The Green Hornet*. How much less for equal work? Bruce Lee (Kato): \$400; Walter Brooke (District Attorney Scanlon): \$750; Wende Wagner (Miss Case): \$850; Lloyd Gough (Mike Axford): \$1,000; Van Williams (Britt Reid/The Green Hornet): \$2,000.⁶⁷

Disappointed with his low pay and seriously worried about being able to provide for his family, Lee saw Hollywood’s racism against Asians, Native Americans, and African Americans as part of a systematic and closely interconnected denial of humanity. “I have to be a real human being,” he said, noting: “You never see a human-being Indian on television. ... It’s about time we had an Oriental hero.”⁶⁸ Thus it was that Bruce Lee, trans-Pacific nomad, left Hollywood in 1970 to return to Hong Kong, sailing toward a transnational superstardom that he would not live to fully see. He would make his breakout films *The Big Boss* (1971) and *Fists of Fury* (1972) in Hong Kong for Chinese and Southeast Asian audiences, not the American audience that he had hoped to teach about martial arts.

In 2020, the idea of Asians as chopstick-holding, harmless hopping houseboys was replaced by notions of Asians as dangerous, bounding vectors of disease and economic destruction. The rampant misinformation about Asians as the “cause” and “super-spreaders” of Covid-19,⁶⁹ as well as the use of the offensive phrase “China Virus” in Europe and America, triggered a burst of outrage from mainland Chinese and the Chinese diaspora. The Chinese government demanded an apology for the editorial about “Sick Man of Asia,” and when the *Wall Street Journal* repeatedly refused to retract the term, China’s Foreign Ministry expelled three of the top U.S. journalists from the newspaper’s Beijing bureau on 18 February 2020.

The Year of the Coronavirus intensified political nativism in the United States, even seeming to normalize xenophobia in the context of fears around foreign diseases. For example, in a now-deleted Instagram post, U.C. Berkeley Health Services included on a list of “common reactions” to the coronavirus outbreak “anger” and “xenophobia” (the latter defined as “fears about interacting with those who might be from Asia and guilt about those feelings”). The post then cautioned students to “please recognize that experiencing any of these can be normal reactions,” for which the university later apologized after online criticism.⁷⁰ “There is heightened public panic when diseases are associated with the ‘Racial other,’” sociologist Charles Adeyanju wrote in February 2020. “The Chinese have become North America’s ‘model immigrants’ due to their economic success.... However, their ‘rising’ has constituted a psychological and economic threat to the populations that once derided them as less than human.”⁷¹ To understand how such “public panic” can operate, let us view contemporary events in historical perspective, examining times when the Chinese were far from “model immigrants” in the eyes of most Americans.

The “Diseased” Chinese on the Shores of America

No matter what the reason is, followers are being enclosed and controlled within a style’s limitation, which is certainly less than their own human potential. Like anything else, prolonged imitative

⁶⁷ Polly, *ibid.*, 181, 183, 191.

⁶⁸ Maeda, “Nomad of the Transpacific,” 751.

⁶⁹ Su-Lin Tan, “‘You Chinese Virus Spreader’: After Coronavirus, Australia Has An Anti-Asian Racism Outbreak To Deal With,” *South China Morning Post* (30 May 2020).

⁷⁰ Kimmy Yam, “UC Berkeley health account calls xenophobia a ‘common reaction’ to coronavirus,” *NBC News* (31 Jan. 2020).

⁷¹ Brian Kahn, “How Coronavirus Fears Tap Into the Deep History of Xenophobia in Public Health,” *Gizmodo* (4 Feb. 2020).

drilling will certainly promote mechanical precision and habitual routine security. ... Thus any special technique, however cleverly designed, is actually a disease, should one become obsessed with it. ... [Students of martial arts] are constantly on the search for that teacher who "satisfies" their particular diseases.

- Bruce Lee⁷²

A knife-wielding white woman spewing racial abuse attacked Vietnamese-Australian sisters Rosa and Sophie Do in their hometown of New South Wales. Rosa and Sophie were called "Asian whores," "Asian dogs," and "Asian sluts," and they were blamed for a terrible disease.⁷³ Sadly, this is not some hoary old racist propaganda from well over a century ago; the event occurred in March 2020, and the disease was the coronavirus. Such wild imaginings seem to keep popping up when it comes to the Chinese and disease, especially in the English-speaking world. This has been true for decades; the Chinese have long been named as the cause of the flu. A letter to *Time* magazine on 14 February 1969 complained that the term "Hong Kong Flu" was inaccurate, and that, because the influenza virus "was probably manufactured in secret laboratories on mainland China—it should be called Flu Manchu,"⁷⁴ the same term that would be revived in 2020. The multiple ideas—that the Chinese are: 1) less than human; 2) deliberately exporting disease to America and Europe; and 3) such machine-like non-humans that they can resist the same disease that they are exporting so virulently—were patently false back in 1969, but they have been once again trotted out in 2020 as "evidence" of a Chinese plot against America that bears a resemblance to that of the vile Dr. Fu Manchu, who once planned to take over the world from his secret lab. I shall address this theme below.

American president Donald Trump stridently claimed that Covid-19, the coronavirus, originated as a bioweapon in a Chinese lab.⁷⁵ "We're going to find out," Trump said, "You'll be learning [about this] in the not-too-distant future," he maintained.⁷⁶ What we now know (thanks to Bob Woodward's revealing new book, *Rage*⁷⁷) is that as early as January 2020, long before the virus became a pandemic, Trump was called and fully informed about the threat of coronavirus by the Chinese government, but he deliberately chose to "play it down" and mislead the American public about its dangers, likening it to a mere case of the seasonal flu.⁷⁸

White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany defended President Trump's naming of the coronavirus as the "kung flu." "The origin of the virus is China," McEnany said in a press briefing, "It's a fair thing to point out.... Well, President Trump is saying, 'No, China, I will label this virus for its place of origin.'" Asked whether Trump regretted using the phrase "kung flu," McEnany said that he did not. "The president never regrets putting the onus back on China," she said, also saying, "The president does not believe it's offensive."⁷⁹

Further fanning the flames, former Trump advisor Steven Bannon (an ardent critic of the Chinese government) funded and promoted a "scientific paper" allegedly authored by a respected Chinese virologist, Li-Meng Yan. The paper stated that the novel coronavirus that causes Covid-19 was likely engineered in a Chinese lab and intentionally released into the world.⁸⁰ Angela

⁷² Bruce Lee, "5-D: Jeet Kune Do: What It Is Not (Jeet Kune Do: III)," in *Bruce Lee: Artist of Life*, ed. John Little (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2018), 155.

⁷³ Su-Lin Tan, "'You Chinese Virus Spreader,'" 1.

⁷⁴ Frayling, *The Yellow Peril*, 23.

⁷⁵ Maanvi Singh, Helen Davidson, and Julian Borger, "[Trump claims to have evidence coronavirus started in Chinese lab but offers no details.](#)" *The Guardian* (30 Apr. 2020).

⁷⁶ "[Trump 'confident' coronavirus may have originated in Chinese lab.](#)" *Aljazeera* (1 May 2020).

⁷⁷ Bob Woodward, *Rage* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

⁷⁸ Alana Wise, "[Trump Admits Playing Down Coronavirus's Severity, According To New Woodward Book.](#)" *NPR news* (9 Sept., 2020).

⁷⁹ Dylan Stableford, "[White House says Trump has no apology for calling coronavirus 'kung flu' at Tulsa rally.](#)" *Yahoo News* (22 June 2020).

⁸⁰ Rob Kuznia, Scott Bronstein, Drew Griffin and Curt Devine, "[Weird Science: How A 'Shoddy' Bannon-Backed Paper On Coronavirus Origins Made Its Way To An Audience Of Millions.](#)" *CNN* (21 Oct. 2020).

Rasmussen, a virologist at Columbia University, harshly criticized the paper for its false and shoddy science, which she believes was “political propaganda” aimed at smearing China. “This paper is very deceptive to somebody without a scientific background, because it’s written in very technical language, using a lot of jargon that makes it sound as though it is a legitimate scientific paper,” Rasmussen wrote. “But anybody with an actual background in virology or molecular biology who reads this paper will realize that much of it is actually nonsense.”⁸¹

How has the political use of derogatory terms such as “kung flu” and “the Chinese virus” affected the transnational Asian diaspora? Former Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang commented in April 2020 that he had gotten heartbreaking messages about Asian Americans “being spat on or attacked or assaulted around the country.” As the coronavirus spread across the U.S., Asians were not recognized as equal victims of the virus, but rather as its perpetrators. The “Chinese virus is definitely part of the lexicon at this point, and you know, I’ve heard of schoolchildren getting called the Chinese virus and being bullied mercilessly,” Yang said.⁸²

As the coronavirus spread, there was a concomitant rise in anti-Asian hate speech and abuse in the English-speaking world, both in person and online. Links to a small sample of videos in the latter category are listed below:



In the United States of America:

Asians facing discrimination, violence amid coronavirus outbreak – *ABC News* (12 Mar. 2020)

Racism and xenophobia are on the rise as the coronavirus spreads – *CNN* (18 Feb. 2020)

In Australia:

Coronavirus: Anti-Chinese sentiment on the rise in Australia – *News.com.au* (30 Jan. 2020)

In the United Kingdom:

Coronavirus: Racism towards Chinese people in the UK on the rise – *The Telegraph* (12 Feb. 2020)

Coronavirus: Hate crimes against Chinese people in the UK on the rise – *Sky News* (5 May 2020)

On 17 September 2020, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution condemning the rising tide of anti-Asian racism due to the spread of the coronavirus. House Resolution 908 was sponsored by Rep. Grace Meng (D-NY) and passed by a vote of 243 to 164, with 164 Republicans *refusing* to support a resolution condemning anti-Asian racism and discrimination. Meng stated: “Enough of the demeaning usages of ‘Chinese virus,’ ‘Wuhan virus,’ and ‘Kung-flu,’ especially from our nation’s leaders... enough of the scapegoating. Enough of using the Asian American community to stoke people’s fears about COVID-19.” For this, Rep. Grace Meng got hate speech voicemails from online racists.⁸³ “Hey, you look like a

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Kate Sullivan, “Yang says Asian Americans being attacked over coronavirus is ‘a heartbreaking phenomenon,’” *CNN* (2 Apr. 2020).

⁸³ Carl Samson, “NY Congresswoman Gets Racist Voicemails for Passing Bill Against Anti-Asian Racism,” *Nextshark*.

Chinese virus, you fat slob. Or maybe ‘Kung Flu,’ you fat slob,” one caller said. Another opened with, “I’m calling about the ‘Karate Kid’ virus or the ‘Kung Flu’ virus.” Another: “I’ll call the FBI and put you in jail, you dumb*** motherf***er....F*** you....” Meanwhile, another claimed, “It’s not racist, it’s the truth. Filthy people.”⁸⁴

The notion of the Chinese and Asian people as “filthy” carriers of disease has a lengthy, ignominious pedigree in America. Anti-Chinese sentiment, whipped up by the likes of Denis Kearney and the “California Workingman’s Party,” found expression in legal rulings that deemed the Chinese “inferior and incapable of progress” (1854: *The People vs. Hall*) and in periodic outbursts of deadly violence: The Chinese Massacre in Los Angeles in 1871; the Rock Springs Massacre in Wyoming in 1885; Anti-Chinese riots in California, Oregon, Nevada, Alaska, Colorado, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Washington in 1885–1886, including the Seattle Riot, in which almost every Chinese resident was evicted from the city. In 1887, white robbers murdered and mutilated the corpses of 34 Chinese gold miners, tossing them into the Snake River, where their mangled bodies showed up 65 miles downstream in Lewiston, Idaho. As a result, Hells Canyon, Oregon, where the atrocities occurred, was renamed “Chinese Massacre Cove.” No one was held accountable, although, in the words of Judge Joseph K. Vincent of Idaho, “it was the most cold-blooded, cowardly treachery I have ever heard tell of on this coast...every one was shot and cut up and stripped and thrown in the river.”⁸⁵ After the devastating 1906 San Francisco earthquake, thousands of “white looters had a field day” pillaging the charred remains of Chinatown, and afterwards those same white men howled in protest that the Chinese refugees might settle in their neighborhoods.⁸⁶

Most vital from the standpoint of our cultural history, Chinese immigrants have been identified not only as bearers of filth and disease, but also as subhuman animals or inhuman machines. In the words of Senator A. Sargent, “Should we be a mere slop-pail into which all the dregs of humanity should be poured? ... The Chinaman can live on a dead rat and a few handfuls of rice...work for ten cents a day....”; to which California Senator John Miller echoed: “The Chinese are machine-like... they are automatic engines of flesh and blood; they herd together like beasts. We ask you to secure the American Anglo Saxon civilization without contamination or adulteration....”⁸⁷ Contamination and adulteration: such words carried the whole narrative of Chinese inferiority. It is a shameful fact that the 1875 Page Act and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 were the first and only American immigration laws ever to ban entry to one group of people based on race or nationality. In 1881, no less than eleven different bills were submitted calling for Chinese exclusion.

The American popular press reinforced negative attitudes toward the Chinese with demeaning images. Let us take a moment to examine two such images. Although the *San Francisco Call*’s newsheet (Figure 4 below) was printed in 1901, it employs the same hateful rhetoric of the 1870s and 80s, accusing the Chinese of sinisterly coming across the Pacific to steal American jobs and pollute the country’s integrity. The upper-left-hand box quotes Mayor James D. Phelan’s address at the Chinese Exclusion Convention: “We are the warders of the Golden Gate...and if there is any danger or trial it is for us to sound the alarm. I regard the Chinese question as a race question. I regard it as an international question; and above and over all, a question involving the preservation of our civilization.”

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ These events and more are vividly recounted in Iris Chang’s last book, *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004). On the Hells Canyon massacre, see Richard Cockle, “[Massacred Chinese gold miners to receive memorial along Snake River.](#)” *The Oregonian* (27 Nov. 2011); also see the book by R. Gregory Nokes, *Massacred for Gold: The Chinese in Hells Canyon* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2009).

⁸⁶ Iris Chang, *The Chinese in America*, 145-146.

⁸⁷ Bill Moyers, “[Becoming American: The Chinese American Experience.](#)” *Moyers on Democracy* (Schumann Media Center, Inc., 25 Mar. 2003).

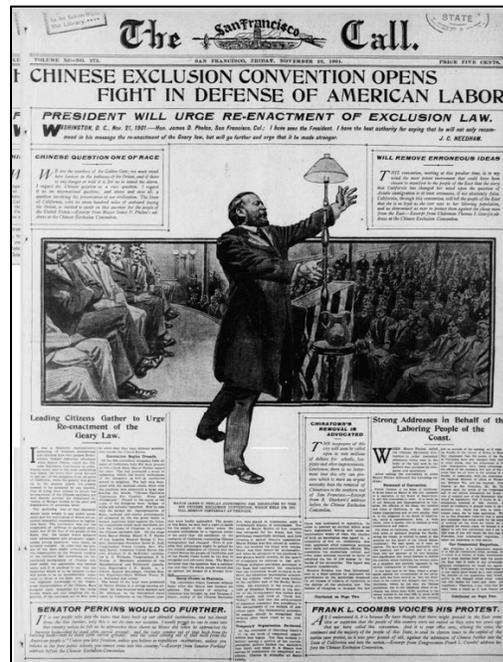


Figure 4 – The Chinese Exclusion Conference, *The San Francisco Call*, 22 Nov. 1901. Wikimedia Commons.

This rhetoric echoes earlier sentiment from the 19th century, which claimed that the Chinese were dirty and diseased by nature. See the image of an advertisement for the “Magic Washer” from 1886 (Figure 5 below)—this product apparently serving much the same function that hand sanitizer does today in the coronavirus pandemic: to ward off “Chinese” germs.



Figure 5 - "Magic Washer" advertisement, 1886. Wikimedia Commons.

“The Chinese Must Go,” the advertisement proudly declares, and we must all use Magic Washer in order to avoid being “dirty.” No family should go without it (except, of course, the Chinese. I would call your attention to the ominous slant-eyed face on the setting sun overlooking the Pacific Ocean). The images are clear: Asians bring defilement; Chinatowns, historically, were seen as dens of opium, prostitution, and sickness. “Why not discriminate?”

asked California Senator John F. Miller. “America is a land resonant with the sweet voices of flaxen-haired children. We must preserve American Anglo-Saxon civilization without contamination or adulteration from the gangrene of Oriental civilization.”⁸⁸

Not surprisingly, an outbreak of bubonic plague—the dreaded “Black Death”—at the turn of the century cemented the impressions of white Americans that the Chinese were filthy “rat-eaters” (just as Jesse Watters would publicly call the Chinese “bat-eaters” in 2020). The plague, which claimed an estimated six million victims in India from 1896 to 1906, found its way to Hawai’i in 1899, where “about 10,000 people—mainly Chinese and Japanese immigrants—were quarantined within the cordon or at the [containment] camps” and fumigated and disinfected with chemicals. On a Saturday morning, 20 Jan. 1900, the Honolulu fire department set fire to Chinatown, trying to burn the plague out. It did not work.⁸⁹

On March 6, 1900, Chinese-American worker Wong Chut King (*aka* Chick Gin, Cheek Gun, and other variants) died of the bubonic plague in San Francisco’s Chinatown, his being the first plague case identified on mainland American soil. The bacteria was spread by fleas from infected rats, but it was blamed on the Chinese. In the face of this outbreak, Navy Surgeon General W.K. Van Reypen at first discounted the evidence, claiming: “It is a disease peculiar to the Orient and seldom, if ever, attacks Europeans.... There is absolutely no danger of the plague ever getting here.”⁹⁰

Yet for the ten to fifteen thousand residents of San Francisco’s Chinatown, barbed wire and ropes were the new reality. “The police turned them back. Food deliveries were halted. Garbage collection stopped, leaving piles of rubbish on the street. Street cars were forbidden to pass through the area,” for Chinatown was condemned as diseased, its people deemed “an inferior race that had poor hygiene and, as a result, spread disease.”⁹¹ Dr. Joseph Kinyoun, an idealistic and skilled bacteriologist of the Hygienic Laboratory (which later became the National Institutes of Health), tried mightily to stem the tide of anti-Asian racism in favor of a rational, scientific procedure to test for the plague bacteria, but he was mocked and derided by the San Francisco press, which reduced his laboratory experiments to a simple jingle that demeaned Asian-Americans as rat-eaters, with Kinyoun himself as their sponsor:

*Health Board, Health Board,
Where are we at?
Guinea pig, guinea pig,
Rat, rat, rat!*⁹²

Dr. Kinyoun, disgusted by the news coverage about the plague, stated flatly that “people here [are] absolutely in the dark as to [the] correct situation.”⁹³ In much the same way, in the 21st century, President Donald Trump publicly mocked Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation’s leading expert on infectious diseases, for warning Americans to wear masks and practice physical distancing to prevent coronavirus infection. “People are tired of hearing Fauci and all these idiots,” Trump said, declaring Dr. Fauci “a disaster.”⁹⁴ In 1900, when the bubonic plague hit San Francisco, California’s governor, Henry T. Gage, likewise stated that he would neither look

⁸⁸ Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 84.

⁸⁹ Gail Jarrow, *Bubonic Panic: When Plague Invaded America* (Honesdale, PA: Calkins Creek, 2016), 55-57. Also see Philip A. Kalisch, “The Black Death in Chinatown: Plague and Politics in San Francisco, 1900-1904,” *Arizona and the West* 14.2 (Summer, 1972), 113-136.

⁹⁰ Katie Dowd, “San Francisco’s Bubonic Plague Epidemic Has Eerie Parallels to Modern Day,” *SFGate* (10 Apr. 2020).

⁹¹ Jarrow, *Bubonic Panic*, 66, 73-75.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 83.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁹⁴ *The Associated Press*, “Trump Calls Fauci A ‘Disaster,’ Mocks Biden For Listening To Scientists,” 19 Oct. 2020.

at the evidence nor take action. Governor Gage was allied with business interests and knew a public health crisis would cost business. “Bubonic plague does not exist and has not existed within the State of California,” Gage claimed in a telegram to the U.S. Secretary of State.⁹⁵ Gage simply promoted hatred, sowed distrust, and wanted “Dr. Kinyoun’s head.” As Gail Jarrow explained: “The people of San Francisco didn’t care...they hated Joseph Kinyoun. There was no plague.... Kinyoun realized that he had become the scapegoat in the fight over plague’s existence in San Francisco. ...His opponents criticized and blocked everything he did to control the threat of plague. He wrote his uncle, ‘I am at war with everybody out here.’”⁹⁶

All evidence of the plague outbreak was squelched and denied by local businessmen, politicians, and the city’s big three newspapers—the *Bulletin*, the *Call*, and the *Chronicle*—which called the plague “fake.” This plague outbreak was invented, the papers claimed, simply to increase the health board’s funding. “The most dangerous plague which threatens San Francisco is not of the bubonic type,” wrote the *Call*, “It was the “plague of politics.” And white people took notice only because of the inconvenience; as the *Chronicle* complained, “The white employers of the Chinese awoke to find that there was nobody on hand to prepare breakfast.” Then, after noisily denying the plague’s existence for a year, Governor Gage addressed the California legislature with the outrageous accusation that Kinyoun was *causing* the plague outbreak by injecting imported plague samples into dead bodies to create positive tests!⁹⁷

California was torn apart by the plague over a century ago, even though the number of fatalities was relatively small.⁹⁸ In what the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has called “one of the most infamous chapters in U.S. public health history,” the events of the San Francisco plague took the low road of scapegoating and cast public health as a problem of race, not of science. If anyone was to blame, the American public felt, it was the Asiatic peoples, who had to be roped off behind barbed wire because they lived in overcrowded homes, had poor sanitation, foul drinking water, and bad nutrition, Asiatic qualities of life that allegedly acted as plague vectors, “the same way they spread cholera, typhus, and typhoid fever.”⁹⁹ Gage lost the California governorship to George Pardee in 1902, and only then did medical intervention finally stop the plague in 1904. “Apprehension that an epidemic might generate widespread furor and cause severe economic consequences encouraged the business interests to deny the truth,” wrote Philip Kalisch.¹⁰⁰ Fake news a century ago was still just that—fake news. And fake news sold back then, as it does now. Let us again view the present through the prism of the past.

The “Virus Lab” of Fu Manchu

During the current coronavirus crisis, the Trump White House took a page out of Henry Gage’s playbook from early 1900s California, demonizing Dr. Anthony Fauci,¹⁰¹ in the same way that Gage once vilified and tried to discredit Dr. Joseph Kinyoun. And, like Navy Surgeon General Reypen, Governor Gage, and his business allies at the turn of the century, the U.S. government swung into denial once again, calling the coronavirus a “Fake News Media

⁹⁵ Jarrow, *Bubonic Panic*, 93.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁹⁷ Dowd, “San Francisco’s Bubonic Plague Epidemic Has Eerie Parallels to Modern Day.”

⁹⁸ The official death toll of the 1900-1904 plague was 119, although it is possible that more cases were covered up or never discovered. Compare that to the more than 400,000 deaths in the first year of the coronavirus, 2020-2021.

⁹⁹ Jarrow, *Bubonic Panic*, 28.

¹⁰⁰ Andrew Lawler, “When Bubonic Plague First Struck America, Officials Tried To Cover It Up,” *National Geographic* (24 April 2020).

¹⁰¹ Stephen Collinson, “Trump Offers Denial And Delusion As Pandemic Crisis Overtakes His Presidency,” *CNN* (15 July 2020). See also Maeve Reston, “A Once Restrained Fauci Unleashes On White House Coronavirus Approach Days Before Election,” *CNN* (1 Nov. 2020).

Conspiracy,” even as the number of infections and hospitalizations surged in the United States. “COVID, COVID, COVID,” President Trump tweeted: “We have made tremendous progress with the China Virus, but the Fake News refuses to talk about it this close to the Election.”¹⁰² As Trump watched his poll ratings plummet in advance of the November 2020 presidential election, he vociferously blamed secret Chinese labs for manufacturing a bioweapon in a secret lab to doom the American way of life.¹⁰³ Meanwhile, some conspiracy-oriented writers have gone so far as to allege that the coronavirus was a preemptive strike and China’s equivalent to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, employing a string of fanciful racist names for the deadly virus, including “Chop Fluey,” “Lung Pow Sicken,” “the Communist Chinese Virus,” and, of course, “Kung Flu” and “Flu Manchu.”¹⁰⁴

Such references to “Flu Manchu” naturally raise the specter of the fictional Fu Manchu, who planned to conquer and/or destroy the world from his secret lab. But why does Fu Manchu still prey upon our minds in 2020, when he was a creation of the 1910s and 1920s, a full century ago? Is the bad doctor not dead and desiccated? Contemporary politicians and popular writers have resurrected Fu Manchu as a bogeyman. As Shan Wu recently wrote, “the othering of Asians enjoys a long, dark history in American and Western culture. The concept of the ‘Yellow Peril’—hordes of Asians invading the West—surfaced in the 19th century, continuing into the 20th century with film characters like Fu Manchu and Flash Gordon’s Ming the Merciless.”¹⁰⁵ Fu Manchu was, quite simply, the quintessential Asian villain for all ages (and yes, he had a lab).

Scholar Crystal Anderson quoted Robert Lee’s description of Fu Manchu as “the archetype of the sado-masochistic Asian male character in American popular culture narratives of the twentieth century” and “the very definition of the alien, an agent of a distant threat who resides among us.”¹⁰⁶ Edward Said, famous for his cogent critique of “Orientalism” (1978), once said that his most indelible visual images of China were those of “Chinamen,” those people whom he remembered having

their effect on me...[with] the Fu Manchu films and Charlie Chan.(...) We didn’t interact with Chinese people. So in a certain way these films also created divisions within the non-European world. But the most powerful thing about them was that they established the norm, which became unquestioning. And everything else was deviant, frightening and eccentric. They were and are very strong.¹⁰⁷

British scholar Christopher Frayling wrote, “In America, the *literary* image of the Chinese as alien ‘other’—as sinister villain or dragon lady or comic laundryman or threatening heathen or broken blossom or doomed prostitute or member of a brutalized horde—grew out of Bret Harte, mining stories from gold-rush California, railroad and urban myths about bachelor societies, the Exclusion Act of 1882, and the anxieties the images embodied were mainly about immigration.”¹⁰⁸ What Frayling referred to are, in part, the apprehensions of the decline of the early-1900s British empire, on which the sun was finally setting. Frayling also pointed to the

¹⁰² Kadia Goba and Amber Jamieson, “Trump Gets Very Angry When People Talk About The Virus That’s Killed 225,000 In The US,” *BuzzfeedNews* (26 Oct. 2020).

¹⁰³ David Smith, “Trump Fans Flames Of Chinese Lab Coronavirus Theory During Daily Briefing,” *The Guardian* (15 Apr. 2020). Trump also used his executive powers to hallow out the legislature: “We have a tremendous number of people that have to come into government and now more so than ever before because of the virus ... If the House will not agree to that adjournment, I will exercise my constitutional authority to adjourn both chambers of Congress.” Michael Beschloss, an author and historian, tweeted: “No President in history has ever used the Constitutional power to adjourn Congress ... Wilson, Taft and FDR were all urged to adjourn Congress and all refused.”

¹⁰⁴ Dr. Richard Moss, “Red China’s Pearl Harbor,” (6 Apr. 2020; accessed 23 Nov. 2020).

¹⁰⁵ Shan Wu, “Trump’s ‘Chinese Flu’ Takeback Is Worthless,” *The Daily Beast* (Newsweek), 26 Mar. 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 116, quoted in Crystal S. Anderson, *Beyond the Chinese Connection: Contemporary Afro-Asian Cultural Production* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 28.

¹⁰⁷ Christopher Frayling, *The Yellow Peril: Dr. Fu Manchu & The Rise of Chinaphobia* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 10.

¹⁰⁸ Frayling, *The Yellow Peril: Dr. Fu Manchu & The Rise of Chinaphobia*, 10.

fact that scare-stories about the threatening transnational “Other” are actually twisted reflections of self-doubt. “The stories were about ‘us’—they were not really about China at all.”¹⁰⁹

Why was China on the mind? Frayling recalled his own childhood experiences in early- to mid-1950s Britain, back when Bruce Lee was still just a troublesome boy picking fights in Hong Kong, just a boy trying to toughen up and be *somebody*.

We played a game called Chinese Chequers—with a Fu Manchu lookalike on the box, complete with long moustache and mandarin robe—and had Chinese conjuring sets, which were supplied with an ornate faux-ivory wand; we gave each other Chinese burns in the playground, bowled sneaky ‘Chinamen’ on the cricket field and joked in pidgin Chinese (‘Confucius, he say . . .’) ...[during one river cruise up through London...] the amplified commentator pointed out that Limehouse was ‘the headquarters of Dr. Fu Manchu, where he planned to take over the world.’ All of this was, indeed, very difficult to remove from my head when I grew up. It stayed with me.”¹¹⁰

Such tropes as those described by Frayling, introduced by British popular culture to impressionable schoolchildren, disclosed the secret staying power of persistent anti-Chinese racial stereotypes. They claimed to be both scientific (labs, drugs, disease) and supernatural (mystical, disembodied).

“Doctor” Fu Manchu was a yellow, undead vampire-like creature; he was also a wicked genius. More importantly, Fu Manchu was a *person* who could be fought and defeated, unlike the plague, which was, in the words of Gail Jarrow, “like a phantom haunting the land, the killer [that] took the lives of the lowliest beasts to the greatest human leaders. . . . The wisest physicians were no match. Potions and remedies failed to cure.”¹¹¹ Prior to British author Sax Rohmer’s creation of Dr. Fu Manchu, the Yellow Peril was diffuse and elusive, embodied in opium dens and fanatic “Boxer” mobs more than in any single person. The evil doctor’s wildest opponent was Scotland Yard detective Nayland Smith, a character who “corresponds to the culmination of the collective desire of the imperialist bloc for a representative figure (‘the man who fought on behalf of the white race’) in opposition to the diabolic Fu Manchu (‘the head of the great Yellow Movement’).”¹¹² Hollywood Orientalism, drawing from British inspirations, was thus responding to popular demand and “firmly embedded in the logic of late capitalism.”¹¹³ Evil had to have a face and a body.

The bodies of Asians were encountered by British and American interlocutors in the early 20th century with “(1) an almost superstitious dread of Orientals and a tendency to portray them as animals and/or vampire-like living dead parasites and (2) a preoccupation with the role of English women in the opium den accompanied by the suggestion that they are being Orientalized and assimilated.”¹¹⁴ Thus, Fu Manchu had a secret headquarters in which he conducted lascivious experiments in drugs and diseases and moral corruption, and he tried to poison the Anglo-Saxon world from his lab. In *The Face of Fu Manchu* (1965), the film plot involved the kidnapping of scientist Prof. Muller, who had discovered how to distill poison from the Tibetan black hill poppy. Fu Manchu wanted to use the poison to infect the world, but in the end, Nayland Smith of Scotland Yard appeared to have blown Fu Manchu and his poisoned poppy seeds to smithereens. Yet Fu’s face, superimposed on the wall of his burning laboratory, sent the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 12.

¹¹¹ Jarrow, *Bubonic Panic*, 9.

¹¹² M.T. Kato, “Enter the Dragon, Power, and Subversion in the World of Transnational Capital,” Ch. 4 in M.T. Kato, *From Kung Fu to Hip Hop: Globalization, Revolution, and Popular Culture* (New York: State University of New York, 2007), 147.

¹¹³ Kato, *ibidem*.

¹¹⁴ Cited in M.T. Kato, “Enter the Dragon, Power, and Subversion in the World of Transnational Capital,” 146.

following message: “The world shall hear from me again!”¹¹⁵ Across a baker’s dozen of original Sax Rohmer novels and a slew of spin-off stories, movies, radio and comic-book dramas, Fu Manchu was virtually unkillable. Fu Manchu was “‘the Yellow Peril incarnate in one man’: a man of mysterious malignance, possessed by an unexplained hatred of Caucasians and a desire for global domination.”¹¹⁶

Director Don Sharp, who created the films *The Face of Fu Manchu* [1965] and *The Brides of Fu Manchu* [1966], said that he simply came to racism as a kid and culturally acclimatized to it: “I grew up with the Yellow Peril...and going past a Chinese shop run by Chinese people and all the schoolchildren singing ‘Chinky, Chinky Chinaman.’ But strangely, I didn’t project any of that onto Fu Manchu. He was like a James Bond villain.”¹¹⁷ Even Sax Rohmer, the creator of Fu Manchu, stated that his Fu Manchu stories, his lascivious maidens, and his willing lackeys were the product of pure pantomime and ignorance. “I made my name on China,” Rohmer said, “because I know nothing about the Chinese!”¹¹⁸ Rohmer also said that the historical environment was ripe for an Asian anti-hero: “Conditions for launching a Chinese villain in the market were ideal. I wondered why it had never before occurred to me. The Boxer Rebellion had started off rumors of a Yellow Peril which had not yet died down. Recent [criminal] events in Limehouse had again drawn public attention eastwards.”¹¹⁹ The bioweapon lab of Fu Manchu was fake and fictional, but his sinister cultural appeal was real and profitable.

Sax Rohmer once claimed that Fu Manchu “speaks the purest English I have ever heard,” and that Fu Manchu was a symbol of China’s rise, of the character’s desire for “China to be *someone* on the world stage again.” But Christopher Frayling disagreed: “As I write this, a play called *The Fu Manchu Complex* has just opened in London...in white half-masks—by Chinese-British actors: Fu Manchu is kidnapping financiers from all over Europe, and turning them into stereotypical Chinese people with the aid of his magic mushrooms. ... ‘I am the god of *assimilation*,’ shrieks Dr. Fu Manchu at the climax, played for the first time by a Chinese *actress*. The Yellow Peril is very much alive in the culture wars of the early twenty-first century, and so is Sax Rohmer’s indestructible creation.”¹²⁰ “Flu Manchu” and “kung flu” are no accidents of history—they derive from evocative examples from the history of disease and discrimination across the oceans. The supposed bioweapon of China in the coronavirus pandemic is likewise a theory concocted out of a century of race-tinged fiction.

Moving beyond Stereotypes: Bruce Lee and Cultural Hybridity in America

How does it happen that two people from the opposite ends of the earth meet, fall in love, establish a true and contented union, and bring up their children as a triumph of human grace?

[...] Bruce Lee and his wife, Linda, are the parents of one of destiny’s children. His name is Brandon; he is Oriental and Occidental; he has eyes like ripe cherries; his hair is blond; his personality is a fascinating blend of the thoughtfulness of the East and vigor of the West.

¹¹⁵ Frayling, *The Yellow Peril: Dr. Fu Manchu & The Rise of Chinaphobia*, 318.

¹¹⁶ Julia Lovell, “[The Yellow Peril: Dr Fu Manchu & the Rise of Chinaphobia by Christopher Frayling – review](#),” *The Guardian* (30 Oct 2014).

¹¹⁷ Frayling, *The Yellow Peril: Dr. Fu Manchu & The Rise of Chinaphobia*, 319.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ M.T. Kato, “Enter the Dragon, Power, and Subversion in the World of Transnational Capital,” Ch. 4 in M.T. Kato, *From Kung Fu to Hip Hop: Globalization, Revolution, and Popular Culture* (New York: State University of New York, 2007), 140.

¹²⁰ Frayling, *The Yellow Peril: Dr. Fu Manchu & The Rise of Chinaphobia*, 15.

-The “Green Hornet and Kato interviews”¹²¹

In 2020 and 2021, we live in an information-rich age, not in a hundred years of solitude. And although the Chinese in early-1900s America may have been “marginalized and ghettoized in their Chinatowns—a distrusted, despised, and discriminated against minority,” a second great wave of Chinese immigrants came to America in the mid-20th century, a so-called “model minority, capable, as *U.S. News & World Report* declared in 1966, of ‘winning wealth and respect by dint of its own hard work.’”¹²² Bruce Lee was part of this second wave, arriving on a passenger liner in 1959. He was “educated, well-to-do, and already an American citizen, [and] his eventual success would fundamentally alter the perception of the Chinese in America.”¹²³ But his struggle to alter perceptions was never easy.

Among the many battles Bruce Lee had to fight in America, his effort to overcome the sinister Fu Manchu stereotype of the 1960s was of a piece with his struggles against earlier stereotypes of the Chinese as weak, submissive, dirty, disease-bearing sub-humans. But over time, he made significant headway, not only in undermining these negative images, but also in creating a compelling and enduring hybrid persona. “When I first arrived in the United States,” Lee wrote, “...I had my ‘Chinese’ system then. However, since then I am no longer interested in systems or organization. Organized institutes tend to produce patternized prisoners of a systematized concept...what is worse is that, by imposing lifeless preformation, their natural growth is blocked.”¹²⁴ In other words, by choice, Bruce Lee ceased to be “Chinese” in any simple sense, and became instead an expositor of personal liberation from all shackles of traditions, race, or politics.

In the 1960s and 1970s, for audiences worldwide, Bruce Lee created not only a new vision of cultural hybridity, but also, and more importantly, a new *practice* based on a spontaneous art of empowerment, kung fu. And despite its origins in China, Bruce Lee’s martial arts transcended time, space and culture. Scholar Paul Bowman wrote, “Is the hybrid an inferior bastardization and dilution of something(s), or is it a superior work of alchemy? ... With Jeet Kune Do, the fantasy on offer is that of a *rational, efficient, interdisciplinary* martial ‘science.’”¹²⁵

Jeet Kune Do is simultaneously scientific and spontaneous, said Bruce Lee, for “it has to grow spontaneously, like a flower, in a mind free from emotions and desires. The core of this principle of gung fu is Tao—the spontaneity of the universe.” Bruce Lee had no secret lab, but he had a voice, strong arms and legs, and a pen, and he was a kung fu scientist because circumstances encouraged him to be. “To hell with circumstances, I create opportunities,” Bruce Lee famously said.¹²⁶ M.T. Kato has remarked that Lee’s “transnational encounter...led to new practices and new transformations of mind and body...[and] the confrontation between the protagonist and the villain in the end [of Bruce Lee’s films] unravels the highest plateau of antagonism where [he]...confronts the ultimate antagonist, the ‘foreign power.’”¹²⁷

Bruce Lee loved America and made it his mission to rebrand “Chineseness.” Using his body and his mind, he constructed a radically new type of Chinese persona, the antithesis of the old Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan stereotypes. This transformation took place at a critical

¹²¹ John Little, ed., *Bruce Lee: Words of the Dragon, Interviews, 1958-1973* (Boston: Tuttle, 1997), 35, 42-43, cited in Polly, *Bruce Lee: A Life*, 192 and 542.

¹²² Polly, *Bruce Lee: A Life*, 85-86.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Bruce Lee, “5-E: Toward Personal Liberation (Jeet Kune Do: IV),” in *Bruce Lee: Artist of Life*, ed. John Little (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2018), 168.

¹²⁵ Bowman, “The Fantasy Corpus of Martial Arts,” 79.

¹²⁶ Bruce Lee, “[To Hell With Circumstances.](#)”

¹²⁷ Kato, “*Enter the Dragon*, Power, and Subversion in the World of Transnational Capital,” 141.

moment in American history, a moment marked by the rise of ethnic pride in communities of color, and the effort to eradicate racial stereotypes. Leon Jay, an African-American martial arts instructor, recalled Lee's success: "We lived in Alameda, near Oakland, where the Black Panthers came from. Before *Enter the Dragon* [1973] . . . It was 'Hey, Chink,' and after Bruce's movies came out it was like, 'Hey, brother.'"¹²⁸

M.T. Kato argues that it was "kung fu, and more precisely the 'kung fu dialectic,' that would offer the idiom of collective resistance" to discrimination and oppression,¹²⁹ but it took many scholars a "rather long time" to make sense of the popularity of martial arts in the West.¹³⁰ Lee's appeal owed much to his unabashed portrayal of a *colored* man on screen. In the words of Paul Bowman, "It all seemed to have something to do with ethnicity: martial arts in the United States exploded first within the black and Hispanic communities."¹³¹

Bruce Lee founded no dogmatic approach or "style," which he deeply felt would be limiting to both the martial arts practitioner and the individual human being. "I do not believe in *styles* anymore," Lee said:

I mean I do not believe that there is such thing as, like, a Chinese way of fighting or a Japanese way of fighting...or whatever way of fighting, because unless a human being has three arms and four legs, there can be no different form of fighting. But, basically, we only have two hands and two feet. So styles tend to not only separate man because they have their own doctrines, and the doctrine became the gospel truth that you cannot change! But, if you do not have styles, if you just say, 'Here I am as a human being, how can I express myself totally and completely?'"¹³²

This non-dogmatic and non-racial philosophy of life had tremendous appeal, particularly to those who sought to fight against forms of oppression born of race, politics, or both. "Images of Bruce Lee were at least as popular in many Black homes as were images of Martin Luther King, possibly even more so," claims one author.¹³³ Another author aptly remarks:

Outside of the blaxploitation genre it largely replaced, kung fu films offered the only nonwhite heroes, men and women, to audiences alienated by mainstream film and often by mainstream culture. . . . The lone, often unarmed combatant fighting a foe with greater economic clout who represented the status quo provides an obvious but nonetheless real connection between kung fu films and black audiences.¹³⁴

Thus it was that Bruce Lee became a hero—not just to Cantonese or Chinese people more generally, but to African-Americans, Latinx, and Native Americans as well. As Paul Bowman has said, "it all seemed to have something to do with ethnicity: martial arts in the United States exploded first within black and Hispanic communities. . . . Bruce Lee films offer the possibility of politicizing consciousness—of producing what Foucault or Deleuze might term a visibility."¹³⁵

Bruce Lee's body and mind influenced not just East Asia and America, but Southeast Asia and Africa as well. For instance, in Indonesia circa 1970-1997, Lee's films inspired people of all ethnicities to dream bigger and be more expressively human as members of a practicing,

¹²⁸ Polly, *Bruce Lee: A Life*, 491.

¹²⁹ M.T. Kato, "Enter the Dragon, Power, and Subversion in the World of Transnational Capital," Ch. 4 in M.T. Kato, *From Kung Fu to Hip Hop: Globalization, Revolution, and Popular Culture* (New York: State University of New York, 2007), 140.

¹³⁰ Paul Bowman, *Deconstructing Martial Arts* (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press 2019), 20–22.

¹³¹ Bowman, "The Fantasy Corpus of Martial Arts," 66.

¹³² Bruce Lee Interview (Pierre Berton Show, 1971).

¹³³ Amy Abugo Ongiri, "He wanted to be just like Bruce Lee': African Americans, Kung Fu Theater and Cultural Exchange at the Margins," *Journal of Asian American Studies* (v. 5, no. 1, Feb. 2002), 33.

¹³⁴ Gina Marchetti, *The Chinese Diaspora on American Screens: Race, Sex, and Cinema* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 21.

¹³⁵ Paul Bowman, "The Fantasy Corpus of Martial Arts, or, The 'Communication' of Bruce Lee," 66.

creative martial arts movement that transcended borders of politics or race. As Mario Rustan wrote, “Indonesians have contributed to Hollywood and international sports. Many of them are Chinese-Indonesians, but unfortunately many Chinese-Indonesians do not know and even refuse to believe that they are Chinese (and Indonesians). ... It is beyond doubt that Lee opened the gate...his charisma, both on and off screen, has since served to inspire a nation and a people.”¹³⁶ Bruce Lee’s training also inspired Indonesia’s Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fighters, like Stefer ‘The Lion’ Rahardian, who followed Lee’s movies since his childhood and admires Lee’s life principle of always flowing and adapting to new knowledge, new technologies, and new tactics. “For me Bruce Lee was an innovator. He founded the modern martial arts,” Rahardian said.¹³⁷

Jim Kelly, the African-American athlete and martial artist who starred as “Williams” in Bruce Lee’s last film, *Enter the Dragon* (1973), went on to become a staple of “blaxploitation films” in America, like *Black Belt Jones* (1974) and *Black Samurai* (1976). In fact, African-American visual and musical culture is replete with Asian references to martial arts, kung fu theater, and Bruce Lee, from rap to hip-hop music to video games. Hip-hop music itself “emerged out of an amalgamation of African diasporic cultures: Cuban, Jamaican, Dominican, Puerto Rican, and African American. As George Lipsitz reminded us, ‘[A]s people in different places around the world face similar and interconnected kinds of austerity, inequality, and social disintegration, a transnational culture speaking to shared social realities starts to merge.’”¹³⁸

In music and dance, artists ranging from Carl “Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting” Douglas to RZA and the Wu-Tang Clan drew inspiration from Bruce Lee. Wu-Tang Clan rapper Lamont “U-GOD” Hawkins remarked in his autobiography, “Everybody wanted to be Bruce Lee back in the day. He was the main dude on TV.”¹³⁹ Six Kung Fu films from Hong Kong surprisingly held the No.1 spot in American theaters in 1973 from late March to October, and there was a total of fifteen successful imports. According to journalist Phil Hoad, it was the urban black crowd that kept the flame alight in budget grindhouse cinemas long after the initial mania subsided. “America is generally regarded as the land that subtitles forgot, the graveyard where foreign-language film goes to be buried, with a tombstone reading: ‘Negligible box office,’” Hoad wrote. “But that’s only if you ignore one special genre, which has had consistent success with a particular audience...black Americans have stood staunchly by eastern martial-arts films like an outraged young acolyte ready to kick off for his *sifu* [師傅 or 師父, “respected teacher”].”¹⁴⁰

Race, rage, and pride stimulated young African-Americans to create transcultural fusions. “Cross-cultural stuff has been going on in the ghettos for a long time,” says producer-writer James Schamus, whose film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000)—directed by Taiwanese-American auteur Ang Lee—played big to black audiences. “Remember Bruce Lee was probably the greatest African-American star of the 70s. And that culture persists.”¹⁴¹ Hip-hop music, inspired in part by Lee’s fluid hybridity and explosive force, was a vibrant musical fusion “born in the late 1970s in New York City, embraced by young African Americans. Through elements like music and street art, the movement gave them a voice. And they found a common chord in Bruce Lee.”¹⁴² In 2017, the Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C.

¹³⁶ Mario Rustan, “Bruce Lee and the need for a Chinese hero.” *The Jakarta Post* (27 July 2013).

¹³⁷ Muhammad Ramdan, “Gaya hingga Filosofi. Petarung ONE Championship Indonesia Terinspirasi Bruce Lee.” *Skor* (14 June 2020).

¹³⁸ Frances Gateward, “Wong Fei-Hung in Da House: Hong Kong Martial-Arts Films and Hip-Hop Culture,” in Tan See-Kam, Peter X. Feng, and Gina Marchetti, eds., *Chinese Connections: Critical Perspectives on Film, Identity, and Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 64.

¹³⁹ Lamont ‘U-GOD’ Hawkins, *Raw: My Journey into the Wu-Tang* (New York: Picador, 2018), 31.

¹⁴⁰ Phil Hoad, “Why Bruce Lee and Kung Fu Films Hit Home with Black Audiences.” *The Guardian* (18 July 2012).

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Tom Vick, “Welcoming NMAAHC with ‘Kung Fu Wildstyle.’” (Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art, 23 Sept. 2016); “Explore an Exhibition Kung Fu Wild Style in Washington, D.C. Which Displays The Legacy of Bruce Lee and His Influence in The Hip Hop World.” *Britannica* (CCTV-America, 2017).

held a “Kung Fu Wild Style” exhibition to celebrate the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Curator Tom Vick remarked that the artworks, a collaboration between hip-hop pioneer and graffiti artist Fred Brathwaite (better known as Fab 5 Freddy) and Hong Kong street artist MC Yan, celebrated the “deep and sometimes surprising connections among African American, Asian American, and Asian pop culture.”

REPORTER: He is one of the icons of the big screen, Bruce Lee. He is most famous for his Kung Fu moves, but Lee also influenced a major sociopolitical movement in the United States. ... His impact wasn't limited to the big screen. Lee also made his mark in the world of hip-hop culture. [...]

TOM VICK: The themes of his movies where he was often fighting oppression and racism, like he was sort of embraced by that community. ... Bruce Lee has never been on our [Smithsonian] walls before, I'm fairly certain. [...]

MC YAN: For me, he is a big philosopher. And in China, it seems a very long time since we have had a new philosopher, more than 1,000 years.

FAB 5 FREDDY: When the Kung Fu movies happened in that time in the '70s, the blaxploitation movies had also just happened. So you have like black heroes and these Asian heroes, which was like—you just never had that [before] in movies.¹⁴³

Blacks and Yellows and Cybernetic Fusions

No other human being had ever trained the way Bruce trained—fanatically. He lived and breathed it from the time he got up at six o'clock in the morning until he went to bed at night. He was either working out or thinking about it. His mind was always active, never resting. He was always thinking about what he could do to improve himself or what new inventions were possible.

- Chuck Norris¹⁴⁴

The cybernetic mind is a networked, driven mind, one conditioned to experience technology as an appendage rather than a burden; such an amalgam of biology and science trains itself to control its organic and artificial synthesis. A cybernetic human retains every connection to the past but turns its attention to the present and future before its eyes, in augmentations that enhance its ability and vision, and it does not discriminate over terms like authenticity.

“Authenticity is not the point!” exclaimed Otaria in Donald Kingsbury’s cyberfuture novel *Psychohistorical Crisis*. “Do you deny the changes? Doesn’t that give you hope that change is possible? ... Nothing changes in a lifetime, but every thousand years of human history has brought a major upheaval.”¹⁴⁵ Daryl Joji Maeda has emphasized the notion of what he calls *translocalities* and quantum indeterminacy with regards to his notion of “Bruce Lee as method” and as a corporeal metaphor for transnational Asia.¹⁴⁶ Like water, Maeda says, “Lee refused to be captured by the East or the West, but instead flowed between and shaped both.”¹⁴⁷

Maeda has reminded us that “Lee’s famously lean, ripped physique was not something he brought with him from Hong Kong; rather, it was honed in the United States.”¹⁴⁸ Bruce Lee was not born muscular: rather, he systematically built himself up in America as a fighter against “colonialism, labor migration, and militarism,”¹⁴⁹ drawing inspiration from a multiracial and

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Quoted in Bruce Lee, *The Art of Expressing the Human Body*, ed. John Little ((North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2018), 172.

¹⁴⁵ Donald Kingsbury, *Psychohistorical Crisis* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2001), 381-382.

¹⁴⁶ Maeda, “Nomad of the Transpacific,” pp. 743-745.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 744.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 747.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

internationally-minded group of mentors: Ed Parker (who grew up in Hawai'i), Dan Inosanto (a Filipino who fought against colonialism all his life), Chuck Norris (who learned his martial arts in the U.S. military), and Joe Lewis (a renowned karate champion who first learned the art as a U.S. Marine in Okinawa). Bruce Lee built his mixed martial arts from a broad range of sources, from Chinese kung fu to Korean taekwondo to Filipino stick fighting, European fencing and French savate; he also carefully studied the boxing matches of his personal hero Cassius Clay, better known to us as “the greatest,” heavyweight boxing champ Muhammad Ali.¹⁵⁰

In essence, Lee wore his transnationalism not on his sleeve as an exterior badge of identity, but physically inscribed in his body's sinews. Striving to be an international actor who could bridge worlds, Lee was sometimes snubbed or even pilloried in the presses of both Hong Kong and America for being multiracial and neither fully “Chinese” nor fully “American.” Bruce Lee's philosophy of seeing someone for his “character rather than the color of his skin” has its origins in his transnational upbringing and understanding of America's civil rights struggles, as Bao Nguyen recently said.¹⁵¹ Hence, Lee indicated to Pierre Berton in this paper's epigraph that he resisted national identity labels and favored identity as a human being.

The theme of poverty, domestic and international, runs through much of what Bruce Lee thought about and reacted against. In the opening scenes of Lee's film *Enter the Dragon* (1973), Jim Kelly, the charismatic black man who played “Williams” in the film, observed: “Ghettos are the same all over the world. They stink.” Like Bruce Lee, Jim Kelly hated poverty, and years later, Kelly recalled of Lee, “He knew my struggle, and I knew his.”¹⁵² As Daryl Maeda aptly wrote, “Lee and Williams' interracial solidarity cinematically enacts the connection between the Asian American and Black Power movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s—a relationship forged within the United States through consciousness of Third World struggles in Asia and Africa.”¹⁵³ And all this was made possible because Bruce Lee used his body—a finely honed instrument that could provide “visual narratives of the body as an instrument of social justice or oppression...[with] obvious resonance for much of the world's oppressed population. For new world Africans,” wrote Amy Abugo Ongiri, the developed body was “the final instrument of the oppressed for creative self-defense and performative resistance.”¹⁵⁴

In Latin America, too, Bruce Lee has left an indelible influence. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, or EZLN), often referred to as the Zapatistas—a far-left and libertarian socialist political and militant group that rose up in Mexico in 1994—wove Bruce Lee into their own mythology of rebellion. M.T. Kato has noted that, for the Zapatista freedom fighters of Chiapas, Mexico, Bruce Lee embodied the “mobile subjectivity that borders on the material and spiritual, society and nature, individual and collective.” “In March of 1996,” Kato reported, “in a meeting with EZLN leadership, an insurgent called **Brusli (or Bruce Lee)** clearly explained what the Zapatistas expected from the people.... He recounted the history of insurgents who had been preparing to fight for many years to ensure never to wound a comrade. In the same way, he said those who are going to fight with the ‘weapons of intelligence’ must be very careful not to hurt a comrade.”¹⁵⁵

The Zapatistas represented a grassroots social rebellion against statist ideologies and corporatized forces of globalization in the 1990s, which were simultaneously unsettling the developing world and generating disillusionment in the developed world. Events like the 1994

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 749.

¹⁵¹ Kimmy Yan, “How Bruce Lee Became A Symbol Of Solidarity With The Black Community,” *NBC News* (11 June 2020).

¹⁵² Maeda, “Nomad of the Transpacific,” 757.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ongiri, “He wanted to be just like Bruce Lee,” 38.

¹⁵⁵ M. T. Kato, “Enter the Dragon: Power and Subversion in the World of Transnational Capital,” Ch. 4 of *From Kung Fu to Hip Hop*, 168-169. Bold added.

Zapatista uprising in Mexico, the June 1999 Carnival Against Capital in London (whose slogan was “Our Resistance is as Transnational as Capital”), and the massive November-December 1999 Battle of Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization were milestones of “mutiny in the global village” that sent “a sobering sense of reality back to the popular consciousness amid the hype of the millennium turnover.”¹⁵⁶ Significantly, the political movements coincided with revolutionary technological advances in automation, human augmentation, and above all the explosion of the Internet—the last of which played an integral part in economic globalization, but also fueled a parallel globalization of resistance and opened possibilities for alternative media and global popular alliances.¹⁵⁷

Cybernetic fusions, the outcomes of rapid social change and technologies that stick fast to our synapses, are all about us and within us twenty years after the Battle of Seattle. We have only to try to toggle off the power buttons of our “smart” devices before we realize that cyberpunk often works as a late capitalist version of what Herbert Marcuse described as the default “affirmative culture” of modern bourgeois society.¹⁵⁸ While Bruce Lee did not live to see the digital revolution that developed in leaps and bounds from the mid-1990s until today, he recognized that vast changes were occurring all around him, and he sought to adapt to them “like water.” Lee wrote to a friend:

Yet, whether I like it or not, circumstances are thrust upon me, and being a fighter at heart I sort of fight it in the beginning but soon realize what I need is not inner resistance and needless conflict... rather, by joining forces to readjust and make the best of it. ... Believe me, this man here is confronting some ‘real’ pressure and needless to say it is easier said than done. After all, fame and fortune are illusive creations and impostors. So [to] hell with it and steering my direction and unperturbedly I try to march on.¹⁵⁹

The American empire faces pivotal decisions about the future of its citizens and the cyberwar that it is waging against immigrants, Asians, Blacks, Latinx, and other “minority” Americans who are fighting for their health and their lives.¹⁶⁰ Niall Ferguson has provocatively claimed: “[America] is an empire that lacks the drive to export its capital, its people and its culture.... It is an empire, in short, that dare not speak its name. It is an empire in denial.”¹⁶¹ But the “America First” Trump administration of 2017-2021 represented a more grotesque kind of denialism, a narrowly isolationist and nativist denial of the strengths of inclusion and transnational partnerships, a denial of science and a reliance on demagogic cyberbullying, conspiracy theories, and misinformation. If America is indeed an empire in denial, then that is where it may stay—in denial—until it nurtures and celebrates the transnational partners and immigrants who have helped to build it and who help to keep it strong.

Cyberwar and a “New Cold War”

¹⁵⁶ M. T. Kato, “Mutiny in the Global Village: Bruce Lee Meets Jimi Hendrix,” Ch. 3 of *From Kung Fu to Hip Hop*, 71.

¹⁵⁷ Katherine Ainger, “[Global Carnival Against Capital](#),” *Z Magazine* (Sept. 1999); “[Don’t Hate the Media, Be the Media’: Reflections on 20 Years of Indymedia, a Radical Media Movement](#),” *DemocracyNow* (27 Nov. 2019).

¹⁵⁸ Graham J. Murphy, and Sherryl Vint, eds., *Beyond Cyberpunk: New Critical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁵⁹ Bruce Lee, *Letters of the Dragon*, ed. John Little (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2016), “To Mito Uyehara,” (12 Aug. 1972), 168-169.

¹⁶⁰ Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (London: Basic Books, 2004), 317.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

To be a martial artist means and demands absence of prejudice, superstition, ignorance, and all that—the primary, essential ingredient of what a quality fighter is, and leave the circus acts to the circus performers. Mentally, it means a burning enthusiasm with neutrality to choose to be.

- Bruce Lee¹⁶²

At the same time that President Donald Trump was promoting anti-Asian hatred over the coronavirus, he was following up his “Make America Great Again” trade war with China by starting an anti-Chinese cyberwar.¹⁶³ That war began with a legal battle over Huawei (opening with a summary judgment that Huawei, a Chinese cyber firm, was a Chinese spy agency) and culminated in threatened bans on TikTok (a popular online video platform) and WeChat (a versatile messaging program), which the Justice Department under the Trump administration claimed to be threats to America’s cybersecurity. The threatened cyber-ban on WeChat shook the transnational Chinese community, and millions of WeChat users along the Pacific Rim worried about being cut off from communication with their friends and families in China, the United States, and the many nations of the far-flung Chinese diaspora.

The WeChat app, owned by the Chinese company Tencent, was considered a cybersecurity threat because, in the words of Donald Trump’s Executive Order 13943, it captures “personal and proprietary information of Chinese nationals visiting the United States, thereby allowing the Chinese Communist Party a mechanism for keeping tabs on Chinese citizens who may be enjoying the benefits of a free society for the first time in their lives.”¹⁶⁴ WeChat—used by some 1.2 billion users worldwide, over 100 million users internationally, and nineteen million people in the U.S.—was set to stop operating in the U.S. following Trump’s executive order, issued on 6 August 2020. The U.S. WeChat Users Alliance sued the federal government, their lawyer Thomas Burke arguing: “Never before has a President sought to ban an entire social media platform—used by a minority community to communicate—with such discriminatory animus and haste,” Burke said.¹⁶⁵

U.S. Magistrate Judge Laurel Beeler of the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Northern California issued an injunction on 19 September 2020 in favor of users of WeChat, citing violations of First Amendment rights to free speech and Fifth Amendment rights against self-incrimination. “Certainly the government’s overarching national-security interest is significant,” Judge Beeler wrote, but the Trump administration “has put in scant evidence that its effective ban of WeChat for all U.S. users addresses those concerns.” Beeler went on to rule that “in the U.S., those in the Chinese-American, Chinese-speaking, and other communities rely on WeChat...as their ‘primary source of communication and commerce,’ in part because western social-media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter are blocked in China, and WeChat often is the only way for its users to reach their networks in China.” In addition, said Beeler, “WeChat provides content (such as the news) in Chinese, which is critical for the many U.S. WeChat users with limited proficiency in English.”¹⁶⁶

The reprieve for WeChat came a day after TikTok, an online video-sharing app owned by China-based company ByteDance, was rescued in a last-minute deal in which American software company Oracle contracted itself to serve as custodian of U.S. user data. The difference was that while TikTok was primarily used for creating and sharing short, goofy videos among mostly

¹⁶² Bruce Lee, “7-C: In My Own Process: II,” in *Bruce Lee: Artist of Life*, ed. John Little (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2018), 247.

¹⁶³ Christian Datoc, “REPORT: Trump Secretly Authorized CIA To Carry Out Cyber Attacks On Iran, China, Russia And Others,” *Daily Caller* (July 15, 2020).

¹⁶⁴ Jefferson Graham, “What Is Wechat And Why Does President Trump Want To Ban It?” *USA Today* (7 Aug. 2020).

¹⁶⁵ Steven Overly, “Judge hits pause on Trump administration’s WeChat ban,” *Politico*, 20 Sept. 2020.

¹⁶⁶ Judge Laurel Beeler, United States District Court, Northern District of California: San Francisco Division, *U.S. WeChat Users Alliance, et al., v. Donald J. Trump, et al.*, “[Order Granting Motion For Preliminary Injunction](#),” Case No. 20-cv-05910-LB (19 Sept. 2020).

teens and 20-somethings, WeChat was, by its flexibility and near ubiquity, “a virtual public square.” Banning WeChat, Executive Order 13943 was, in Beeler’s judgment, an attempt to legislate a racially targeted muzzling of Chinese-American speech and an endangerment of public health by denying Chinese-speaking residents and citizens access to health information.¹⁶⁷

While the WeChat ban was struck down as unconstitutional, the cyberwar continued unabated. “For all intents and purposes,” declared Matt Sandgren, “The United States and China are locked in a technological arms race, seeking to build influence and soft power through social media, 5G networks, and other innovations.”¹⁶⁸ A cyberwar within our lifetimes is real, and China seems to be grinding to victory. “The reason is simple,” Kevin Townsend has averred. “China is already engaged in its own form of cyberwarfare, but one that does not readily fit into the West’s perception of war and peace. China, the world’s oldest surviving civilization, is taking the long view. It has no interest in winning short-term battles; its focus is on winning the long-term war.”¹⁶⁹ Townsend concluded, “While the West worries about the potential for cyberwar with its traditional foe, Russia, it fails to realize that cyberwar with China is already happening. But this is cyberwar conducted on China’s terms—it is not the traditional view of warfare. China Inc is conducting a low and slow cyberwar, attempting to stay under the radar of recognition in the same way that individual hackers use low and slow techniques to remain hidden.”¹⁷⁰

Trump had used his power to “declare a national emergency...prohibit[ing] transactions with foreign countries or foreign nationals that pose ‘an undue risk of sabotage to or subversion’ of the ‘maintenance of information and communications technology or services in the United States’ or ‘‘otherwise pose an unacceptable risk’ to the national security.”¹⁷¹ American accusations against China quickly escalated into financial retaliation—billions of dollars in tariffs, counter tariffs and freezes—with grave implications in a time of global economic havoc. Don Lee wrote for the *Los Angeles Times* that “The COVID-19 pandemic, in an unexpected but potentially fateful twist, has moved the United States and China a big step closer to a new cold war. ... The punitive duties also have affected badly needed protective medical gear such as masks, gloves and goggles, many of which are made in China.”¹⁷²

At a time when lives were at stake, scholars, diplomats, and experts from across the spectrum issued a public statement urging the U.S. and Chinese governments to work together to find a common solution. The statement referenced transnational history:

*This coronavirus transcends borders and nationalities.... The kind of cooperation we are promoting has precedent: during the height of the Cold War, the United States and Soviet Union worked together to vaccinate the entire world against smallpox. It is true that the United States and China are increasingly in competition and have serious differences in interests and values. But America need not concede its interests or values, or condone China’s handling of the crisis, to cooperate on coronavirus.*¹⁷³

But misinformation at the highest levels of the American government poisoned relations between America and Asia, as Trump relentlessly blamed China for the coronavirus pandemic,

¹⁶⁷ Judge Laurel Beeler, *U.S. WeChat Users Alliance, et al., v. Donald J. Trump, et al.*, pp. 7-8.

¹⁶⁸ Matt Sandgren, “[We’re in a cyber cold war with China. Here’s how we gain the upper hand.](#)” *The Washington Times* (29 Sept. 2020).

¹⁶⁹ Kevin Townsend, “[The United States and China - A Different Kind of Cyberwar.](#)” *Securityweek* (7 Jan. 2019).

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*; Overly, “Judge hits pause on Trump administration’s WeChat ban.”

¹⁷² Don Lee, “[Coronavirus Pandemic Pushes U.S. and China Closer to Cold War.](#)” *Los Angeles Times* (7 April 2020).

¹⁷³ “Statement: Saving Lives in America, China, and Around the World,” The 21st Century China Center, UC San Diego. <https://china.ucsd.edu/opinion/statement/index.html>

promising further retaliation. “[China will] pay a big price for what they’ve done to the world. . . . It wasn’t your fault that this happened, it was China’s fault,” Trump said in an October video address from the White House. “China’s going to pay a big price [for] what they’ve done to this country.”¹⁷⁴ The Trump regime slapped further restrictions on a slew of Chinese tech corporations, including Xiaomi (the world’s third-largest smartphone maker) and Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation (SMIC), barring them from access to American investment and technology.

Facts about the pandemic and other national security problems served only as grist for Trump’s grinding cyberwar with China and his top priority: a domestic campaign to sow distrust in the electoral process and overturn the results of the November 2020 election, which Trump refused to concede, despite losing both the popular and electoral votes for the presidency. This became clear at the close of 2020, when it was revealed that the United States had been hit by a *real* cyberattack: Russia-linked hacks against the Departments of Homeland Security, Treasury and State, the National Institutes of Health, and potentially hundreds of companies and departments in the private and public sectors. The staggering 2020 SolarWinds Orion data hack by Russia, whose full scale and impact may not be fully known for months or years, may be “one of the most important hacking campaigns in history,” according to Alex Stamos of the Stanford Internet Observatory.¹⁷⁵ But as with the coronavirus back in January 2020, Trump deliberately downplayed the Russian cyberattack revelations, claiming he was “fully briefed and everything is well under control.” Trump played his familiar online game of using Twitter as a mouthpiece to “tweet” pontifications that contradicted his own top officials’ press statements. “The Cyber Hack is far greater in the Fake News Media than in actuality,” he tweeted, suggesting without evidence that the cyber-hack’s true culprit “may be China (it may!)” and baselessly claiming that the only real danger of the attack may have been “a hit on our ridiculous voting machines during the [3 November 2020] election, which is now obvious that I won big.”¹⁷⁶

Misinformation and disinformation are potent weapons in the new cyberwars, both transnational and domestic. When racists in the United States feel that they have free license to hate Asian-Americans for being “diseased,” it impoverishes us as a democratic society. In particular, we see conspiracy-fueled China-bashing and coronavirus misinformation spread wildly on mainstream social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Reddit, and conservative “alt-universe” platforms like Parler, 8kun, Gab, and Telegram, to name a few. The ubiquity of Internet sharing apps and online media niches for fringe conspiracy groups has made targeted disinformation a dangerous tool. Of 2,583 reported acts of hate speech and anti-Asian violence between 19 March and 5 August 2020, 789 of them (30.5%) included mentions of anti-Chinese rhetoric.¹⁷⁷ Attacks included physical assaults, vandalism, verbal harassment, and denial of access to services and public spaces—victims were spat on, blocked from public transportation, discriminated against in workplaces, shunned, beaten, stabbed, and insulted as alleged transmitters of the coronavirus.

According to a report submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Council, in 2020 there was “serious concern over the rising wave of racist and xenophobic attacks and other incidents against Asian-American communities and individuals—in particular Asian-American women who are reported to be the majority of victims,” suggesting misogyny as well as racism.

¹⁷⁴ James Griffiths, “Trump Threatens China With Big Price 'For What They've Done To The World' As Campaign Looks To Shift Blame,” *CNN* (8 Oct. 2020).

¹⁷⁵ Alex Stamos, “Enough is enough. Here’s what we should do to defend against the next Russian cyberattacks,” *The Washington Post* (15 Dec. 2020).

¹⁷⁶ Ellen Nakashima and Josh Dawsey, “Trump contradicts Pompeo in bid to downplay massive hack of U.S. government, Russia’s role,” *The Washington Post* (19 Dec. 2020).

¹⁷⁷ Russell Jeung, Tara Popovic, Richard Lim, and Nelson Lin, “Anti-Chinese Rhetoric Employed By Perpetrators Of Anti-Asian Hate,” *Stop AAPI Hate* (Aug. 2020).

“Victims reported being subject to racist slurs and profanities based on perceived descent or ethnicity such as ‘fucking Chinese,’ ‘die Chink die,’ ‘yellow nigger,’ and ‘go back to China, bitch!’” “There is a special place in hell reserved for the fucking Chinese and their archaic culture,” one graduate student’s post read, “[President Trump’s] description of COVID-19 as the Chinese virus is the most accurate thing he has ever said.”¹⁷⁸

The U.N. report concluded that the opprobrium should be directed at the top, for “U.S. authorities have utterly failed to take the steps required to detect, monitor, and prevent racist and xenophobic incidents.” The report goes on to say:

One result of this state of impunity is that many victims of such attacks are reportedly reluctant to seek justice. We are further concerned by the documented increase in hate and misogynist speech, including incitement to hatred and racial discrimination in public places and online, and the contribution of the President of the United States in seemingly legitimizing these violations.”¹⁷⁹

Such hatred owed much to false representations in various cyber-media outlets, where coronavirus had been misrepresented and wild conspiracy theories were concocted in infinite variety. These included theories that coronavirus vaccines are actually weapons to sterilize and control people; the “Plandemic” theory that COVID-19 was engineered for profit in labs funded by rich conspirators like Microsoft founder and billionaire Bill Gates; that American media and politics are infiltrated, if not dominated, by secret members of a global child-trafficking ring run by satanic pedophiles and cannibals; that the virus is not real and that the coronavirus pandemic is a hoax unleashed by “Deep State” plotters to destroy Trump and the American Way.¹⁸⁰

The events of 2020 may have occasioned some positive changes in scientific and political discourse in America, but the historical languages of otherness, civil injustice, and exclusion have regrettably persisted, if not been augmented. That was plain in the repeated charges of police brutality against African-Americans before and during the Black Lives Matter movement, such as during the hundred days of consecutive protest that rocked Portland, Oregon in the summer of 2020, and in counterprotests by white-supremacist groups like the Proud Boys and QAnon. Sadly, smaller-scale recycling of historical ideas about otherness continued unabated. On October 31, 2020, Asian-American reporter Amara Walker experienced three separate racist incidents within an hour at New Orleans International Airport. The first occurred when an older man pulled down his facial mask and said, “*Ni hao*,” [“hello”], followed by the racial slur “Ching-chong.” Then, at the gate, a younger man who was not wearing a facial mask came right up to her face, calling out, “Hey, do you speak English?” and mocking Asian languages by mumbling in fake pidgin. A policeman, when asked for help, retorted, “That is not racist. ...Okay? Do you understand me?” Walker wrote on Twitter after the incident: “I hate that I have to say this. But I belong. We Asian Americans belong. I was born & raised in the U.S. I am as American as apple pie & I am as American as Korean barbecue. I am American.”¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ Tendayi Achiume, Felipe González Morales, Elizabeth Broderick, “[Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance; the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants; and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls.](#)” *Report to the U.N. Human Rights Council* (12 August 2020).

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ Tara John, “[2020’s alternative universe is not going away.](#)” *CNN* (2 Jan. 2021). The last claim – that the pandemic is a hoax – had tragic consequences for the patients of Jodi Doering, a South Dakota nurse who was worn down by the frustration of trying to convince COVID-19 patients they actually had the virus. “People want it to be influenza, they want it to be pneumonia, we’ve even had people say, ‘I think it could be lung cancer,’” Doering said. “Their last dying words are, ‘This can’t be happening. It’s not real.’” Elyse Wanshel, “[South Dakota Nurse: Dying COVID-19 Patients ‘Still Don’t Believe the Virus Is Real.’](#)” *Huffington Post* (16 Nov. 2020).

¹⁸¹ “[I’m Shaking Right Now’: CNN Reporter Describes 3 Racist Attacks Within An Hour.](#)” *CNN* (31 Oct. 2020).

Pidgin English or bastardized Chinglish is a throwback to the 1800s and the invented tradition of “yellowface,” which imitated “blackface” minstrelsy by producing catchy, racist songs for the stage (with African-Americans and Asian minorities played and sung by Caucasian actors dolled in dark makeup). As Krystyn Moon has noted, “Nonsensical gibberish, which was common in blackface minstrelsy and in nursery songs for children, was another device used to demonstrate the inferiority of Chinese immigrants and their inability to speak English coherently.”¹⁸² A good historical example is John “Chinee” Leach’s “Chun Wow Low” (1882), a popular jingle at the start of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which added nonsensical words and animal references to simulate what many Americans believed Chinese sounded like:

*Chun wow low, eatum chow, chow,
Chinaman a walla good likum bow wow;
Litta Dog, litta cat, litta mouse, litta lat.
Alla wella good for to makum me fat.*¹⁸³

Moon assesses, “The prevalence of ‘bow,’ ‘wow,’ and ‘chow,’ although making little or no sense, associated the Chinese with dogs and eating, both of which were called ‘chow’ in the 1870s. ‘Chow’ also alluded to the common belief that Chinese immigrants ate dogs (as well as cats, mice, and rats).”¹⁸⁴ Language about the “Other” made sense insofar as it enabled control of mainstream narratives about foreignness in America. Stir in big business, manipulation of information, and public health fears, and one has a recipe for the xenophobic, botched handling of the 1900 plague (Gage) and the 2020 pandemic (Trump).

Some of the foulest battles to close out the Year of the Coronavirus (January 2020-January 2021), however, were not centered on the pandemic, or China, economic depression, or Russian hacking. They were fought online and offline by largely anonymous groups of propagandists who manipulated information, cherry-picked “facts,” and pitted Americans against Americans, using the very technologies that enabled free speech to assault democracy itself and attempt to overturn a legitimate national election.

From the November 3 election onward, as U.S. hospitals were swamped by surges in coronavirus cases and Americans died in record numbers, the last two months of Trump’s presidency were consumed with the whipping up of lawsuits (over sixty in total) and the blaring of conspiracy claims about voter fraud and a stolen election.¹⁸⁵ One by one, the election lawsuits

¹⁸² Consider the chorus of Frank Curtis’s “The Artful Chinee” and “Ching A Ring Chaw” (1870s):

THE ARTFUL CHINEE
*Chingaring chi, and chingaring chee,
Chingaring chi for the young Chinee.*
CHING A RING CHAW
*Chinger ringer, ring ching, ching
Ho ah, Dinah ding kom darkee,
Chinger ringer, ring ching chaw,
Ho ah ding cum darkey.*

See Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s-1920s* (Rutgers University Press, 2004), 42. Consider the words of George McKinley Murrell, a gold prospector in El Dorado, California, who asserted in an 1851 letter to his sister Eliza that “there are several letters of the English Alphabet that they [the Chinese] cannot pronounce at all.” Almost two decades later, Ackland Von Boyle in “What! Never?” (1879) told fellow performers that “The Chinese in attempting to speak English ‘hardly ever’ fail to use ‘L’ for ‘R.’” *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ Moon, *Yellowface*, 43.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ Jim Rutenberg, Nick Corasaniti and Alan Feuer, “[Trump’s Fraud Claims Died in Court, but the Myth of Stolen Elections Lives On.](#)” *New York Times* (26 Dec. 2020); William Cummings, Joey Garrison and Jim Sergent, “[By the numbers: President Donald Trump’s failed efforts to overturn the election.](#)” *USA Today* (6 Jan. 2021). See also the statement of first and former Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) Director Christopher Krebs, “[We prepared for more Russian interference. But this year the assault on democracy was from within the US.](#)” *CNN* (15 Dec. 2020). Krebs was fired by President Trump for declaring the 2020 election secure, having prioritized election security against fraud and foreign and domestic hacking. “I will continue to clarify and correct this onslaught of false information alleging systems interference where none has occurred,” Krebs stated, “...Disinformation targeting elections is one of the hardest problems that remains before the US government.” *Ibid.*

were thrown out of the courts as baseless, but that did not end the frenzy of the “Stop the Steal” movement, which fed off the Trump machine’s Twitter and Facebook feeds and “alt-reality news” sources like Newsmax and the One America News Network, where repeating the same things noisily across many platforms seemed to constitute truth.

Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews had identified this new wave of propaganda as the “Firehose of Falsehood” propaganda model, and credited the Russians for its creation, but its features were distinctly visible in Trump’s coronavirus-stricken America throughout 2020. The Firehose of Falsehood’s core features included “high numbers of channels and messages and a shameless willingness to disseminate partial truths or outright fictions”; the Firehose is “rapid, continuous, and repetitive, and it lacks commitment to consistency.”¹⁸⁶ Unlike conventional modes of propaganda that avoided ideological contradictions, the Firehose model lacked a commitment to objective reality and could thus fully exploit the pervasive virtual technologies of the cyberpunk age to create drama and fear, and thus “entertain, confuse, and overwhelm the audience.” As Paul and Matthews recognized as early as 2016 (coincidentally the year Donald Trump was elected president), one needed only to “repeat and recycle disinformation... [for] ‘the illusory truth effect’ is well documented. ... Even with preposterous stories and urban legends, those who have heard them multiple times are more likely to believe that they are true.” “Repetition,” they wrote, “leads to familiarity, and familiarity leads to acceptance.”¹⁸⁷ As Trump and his allies already knew, “angry messages are more persuasive to angry audiences.”¹⁸⁸

The upshot is a visceral story that has been heard “round the world.” The unprecedented and heinous storming of the U.S. Capitol on 6 January 2021—by a mob of thousands of angry Trump followers (roused by online Firehose-style propaganda and lame-duck president Trump’s exhortation to “fight like hell”)—was a direct attack on democratic processes and institutions. The mob, most of its members white and male, intoned “Make America Great Again,” all the while bearing Gadsden flags and Confederate flags and even Nazi and KKK symbols and “Camp Auschwitz” shirts and chanting “Stop the Steal.” They threatened to kill and maim government officials, attacked Capitol police, besieged, vandalized, looted, defecated in, and otherwise defiled the Capitol building, all in a partially planned and coordinated effort to stop Congress from affirming president-elect Joe Biden’s 306-232 victory in the Electoral College. Their actions, which resulted in multiple deaths, have been roundly condemned by leaders worldwide, by American politicians and military officers, business leaders, reporters, and educators, and by a substantial majority of U.S. citizens.¹⁸⁹ The wounds of the Capitol attack on democracy are bare and raw; the 6 January 2021 Capitol insurrection will live in infamy.

The animus and aggression that spilled from cyberspace into physical violence as disinformation and hate-mongering online fueled physical acts of violence such as the attack on the Capitol, invite study and introspection, not just disgust. In the aftermath of the January 6th attack, Congressman Jim Himes (D-Connecticut) explicitly addressed the information deficits of the cyberpunk era, writing forcefully:

On January 6, America almost lost its democracy. ... As broken glass is swept from the floors of the Capitol, we must decide now whether we will be worthy citizens or passive consumers, repeatedly doping ourselves with posts and memes that scratch our itches and fire up our tribes. Do we grapple

¹⁸⁶ Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, “The Russian ‘Firehose of Falsehood’ Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It,” *Perspective* (RAND Corporation, 2016), 1.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁸⁹ Soo Kim, “World Leaders Condemn ‘Disgraceful, Distressing’ Violence at U.S. Capitol,” *Newsweek* (7 Jan. 2021); Idrees Ali, “In rare joint message, top U.S. military leaders condemn Capitol riot,” *Reuters* (12 Jan. 2021); Emma Whitford, “The Worst Day for American Democracy in My Lifetime,” *Inside Higher Ed.* (Washington, D.C.: 7 Jan. 2021); Brian Naylor, “Graphic Video Of Capitol Insurrection Opens Trump’s Impeachment Trial,” *National Public Radio (NPR)*, 9 Feb. 2021.

with the messiness of complicated reality, or do we close our minds to all but those facts that validate our beliefs? Today we live in radically different media—and social media—universes. We can't debate policy because we don't agree on basic facts. One difference between a citizen and a political dope addict is that a citizen is open to learning and seeing reality from different points of view, whereas an addict only feeds his political point of view with reinforcing sources of information. ... No party or individual has a monopoly on sin or virtue... [and the argument] that "they do it, too" is not a defense in kindergarten, in court or in the politics of a supposedly great democracy.¹⁹⁰

Rep. Himes asserted that as members of a democracy in crisis, Americans must look inward, and "change the way we talk about who we are and what we do."¹⁹¹ If a war existed, it was a culture war at home rather than a cyberwar against an external enemy. "Government of, by and for the people," Himes wrote, "is not some happy gift of history. It is a challenge to each of us. It imposes obligations and duties, many of which are neither comfortable nor intuitive."¹⁹²

The critical questions, ultimately, turn upon the right to choose in a networked American democracy that must coexist with states that share neither its political forms nor its transnational history and connections. The United States of America, which spawned the Internet, has waged a quiet cyberpunk culture war that outweighs more well-publicized external attempts to hack American democracy. **Who controls information, and who can contain the damage of disinformation?** Mitchell Kapor, developer of *Lotus 1-2-3* (a pioneering spreadsheet program that dominated the 1980s and early 1990s), wrote that the new battleground was people's minds:

...the crucial political question is 'Who controls the switches?' There are two extreme choices. Users may have indirect, or limited control over when, what, why, and from whom they get information and to whom they send it. That's the broadcast model today, and it seems to breed consumerism, passivity, crassness, and mediocrity. Or, users may have decentralized, distributed, direct control over when, what, why, and with whom they exchange information. That's the Internet model today, and it seems to breed critical thinking, activism, democracy, and quality. We have an opportunity to choose now.¹⁹³

Yet despite Kapor's optimism, as we have seen from the ghastly events of 2020, and as attested by recent studies on Internet self-deception,¹⁹⁴ the Internet could itself be a 21st-century quagmire, in which states and human individuals find themselves bogged down in paralysis, shouting but not listening.

Bruce Lee was, in a sense, a Mitchell Kapor of transnational Asian culture—naively optimistic, demystifying martial arts to breed compassionate pluralism and opening our minds to new ways of thinking. In Lee's view, kung fu was a means by which to overcome the "acceptance, denial and conviction [that] prevent understanding."¹⁹⁵ The transformation of human beings required *awareness*, "an alert and totally free mind." Thus, he admonished his fellow humans to "Let your mind move together with another's in understanding with

¹⁹⁰ Jim Himes, "[America almost lost its democracy. Here's how its citizens can protect it.](#)" *CNN* (19 Jan. 2021).

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ Mark Poster, "Postmodern Virtualities," in Featherstone and Burrows, eds., *Cyberspace, Cyberbodies, Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*, 83.

¹⁹⁴ See, for instance, a pair of British studies: Aleksis Knuutila, Aliaksandr Herasimenka, Hubert Au, Jonathan Bright, Rasmus Nielsen, and Philip N. Howard, "[Covid-Related Misinformation on Youtube: The Spread of Misinformation Videos on Social Media and the Effectiveness of Platform Policies.](#)" *COMPROP (Computational Propaganda Project)*, V. 2020.6 (University of Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute, 21 Sept. 2020); and Daniel Allington, Bobby Duffy, Simon Wessely, Nayana Dhavan, and James Rubin, *Psychological Medicine* (Cambridge University: 9 June 2020). About the latter study, Professor Bobby Duffy, Director of the Policy Institute at King's College London, said: "There are clear links between belief in conspiracies and both lower trust in government and less compliance with the guidelines set to control the disease. Where people get their information about the virus is also strongly related.... These sort of associations cannot prove that misinformation on social media platforms causes belief in conspiracies, lower trust and a greater likelihood of breaking the rules, but they point to a toxic mix between underlying beliefs and misleading information that can have real effects on how people behave, even during a pandemic." Daniel Allington, "[Social media use linked to belief in Covid-19 conspiracies and breaking lockdown rules.](#)" *News Centre* (King's College London, 18 June 2020).

¹⁹⁵ Bruce Lee, *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* (Santa Clarita, CA: Ohara Publications, 1975), 19.

sensitivity.” “Then,” Lee wrote, “there is a possibility of real communication. ...*Above all, don't start from a conclusion.*”¹⁹⁶

By contrast, Donald Trump as the U.S. president acted from simplistic nativism, and throughout his four years of “American Carnage” (a catch-phrase for his presidency), and in the most pronounced manner during the coronavirus pandemic, Trump fanned racist flames, imposed visa bans, closed borders, revived the vampire Fu Manchu, placed an immigration ban on Muslim countries, claimed that Mexican immigrants were criminals and rapists, and described African nations as “shithole countries,” to name but a few examples of his actions. Small wonder then that Trump was identified by a recent Cornell University research survey of 38 million English-language articles and by the *New York Times* as “the largest driver of the ‘infodemic’—falsehoods involving the pandemic.”¹⁹⁷

Athwart the coronavirus pandemic and a cyberwar over control of public discourse, if indeed a larger “New Cold War” looms between the U.S., Russia and/or China, then a rigorous examination of the historical lessons of the old Cold War is imperative. The United States must choose a future, not the recycled dregs of the past.

Cyberpunk, Cyber-future, and Bruce Lee's Battle Cry

A fateful process is set in motion when the individual is released “to the freedom of his own impotence” and left to justify his existence by his own efforts. The individual on his own, striving to realize himself and prove his worth, has created all that is great in literature, art, music, science and technology. This autonomous individual, also, when he can neither realize himself nor justify his existence by his own efforts, is a breeding ground of frustration and the seed of the convulsion that shakes our world to its foundations.

...
The times of drastic change are times of passions. We can never be fit and ready for that which is wholly new. We have to adjust ourselves and every radical adjustment is a crisis in self-esteem: we undergo a test; we have to prove ourselves. A population subjected to drastic change is, thus, a population of misfits, and misfits live and breathe in an atmosphere of passion.

...
The control of our being is not unlike the combination of a safe. One turn of the knob rarely unlocks the safe; each advance and retreat is a step toward one's final achievement.

- Bruce Lee¹⁹⁸

We are living in a cyberpunk world, like it or not. It is a “postfordist, posthumanist, postmodernist milieu,” in which the forces of global capital have shifted us “from an industrial-based system of production and consumption (Fordism) to an information-based system that operates through more flexible methods of exploitation, accumulation, and control....” Multinational corporations, which are based in and supported by powerful nation-states, have become “transnational corporations able to reduce the role of the nation-state to the limited function of providing national and, in the case of the U.S., global security...planetary capital now manages workers and consumers through a ‘casino economy’ with a world-wide division of

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Sarah Evanega, Mark Lynas, Jordan Adams, Karinne Smolenyak, “[Coronavirus Misinformation: Quantifying Sources and Themes in the COVID-19 ‘infodemic’](#)” *The Cornell Alliance for Science* (Cornell University, Oct. 2020); cited in Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Noah Weiland, “[Study Finds ‘Single Largest Driver’ of Coronavirus Misinformation: Trump.](#)” *New York Times* (30 Sept. 2020).

¹⁹⁸ Bruce Lee, *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* (Santa Clarita, CA: Ohara Publications, 1975), 206-207.

labor in a world-market of goods and services.”¹⁹⁹ The seemingly all-powerful corporations, however, have been deeply affected by the coronavirus pandemic, and they do not benefit from Sino-American cyberwar. As Kevin Townsend has maintained, “China does not wish to provoke open conflict with the U.S.; either cyber or kinetic.”²⁰⁰ And neither does the United States, despite the recklessness of so many of President Trump’s public statements in 2020.

Two weeks after the calamitous Capitol siege, President Joe Biden’s inauguration speech of 20 January 2021 acknowledged that, after the damage wrought by Trump, America needed to “repair our alliances and engage with the world once again,” but the focus of Biden’s speech was unity and common purpose in the face of immense obstacles. Biden spoke of the millions of jobs lost, the hundreds of thousands of businesses closed, environmental challenges, and the unrequited “cry for racial justice some 400 years in the making” that had to be addressed while also defeating the coronavirus pandemic. Biden stated: “Politics need not be a raging fire destroying everything in its path. Every disagreement doesn’t have to be a cause for total war. And, we must reject a culture in which facts themselves are manipulated and even manufactured. ... We have to be different than this. America has to be better than this.”²⁰¹

A cyberwar and physical wars are not inevitable, nor are the uncivil wars fought on news and social media networks that are embroiling the United States of America. But we need personal and political strategies for coping with change that focus on flexibility rather than rigidity. One such strategy is the concept of free-running. The documentary film *How Bruce Lee Changed the World* (2009, dir. Steve Webb) begins with a section on the sport and discipline of free-running (formerly called Parkour). Viewed narrowly, it is the art of expressing yourself physically as you move fluidly across urban spaces: jumping, sliding, rolling, traversing, vaulting and the like, with scarcely a stop. But it is much more than that—it is a way of a thinking about how to maximize one’s humanity. Kerbie, a freerunner, explained in the documentary, “Bruce Lee isn’t just a fighter, he’s a thinker, and the rules that he created in his book and the guidelines that [he formulated] are transferrable to anything in life, and especially anything that involves using your body.” In 2004, Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) founder and president Dana White called Lee the “father of mixed martial arts” and stated: “If you look at the way Bruce Lee trained, the way he fought, and many of the things he wrote, he said the perfect style was no style. You take a little something from everything. You take the good things from every different discipline, use what works, and you throw the rest away.”²⁰²

Historian Madeline Y. Hsu, author of *The Good Immigrants*, discussed in a speech at Rice University one way to think about coping with rapid change: “In contrast to beleaguered immigrants who arrive and are expected to disappear into America’s famous melting pot, such transnational migrants—a useful scholarly concept that I encountered in the 1990s and applied to my life in hindsight—do not blend in or remain in one place.”²⁰³ I believe that Hsu is right. Bruce Lee, transnational migrant of the mid-20th century, did not blend in, because he was a restless self-actualized individual who *refused* to disappear or be melted away.

Coronavirus and cyberpunk are inescapable facts of our present. At a time when national and transnational solidarity and cooperation are desperately needed, diverse peoples around the world look to Bruce Lee for inspiration. As Sonia Ryang and Richard J. Smith argued in the editorial statement of *Transnational Asia*, we live in “an age in which, to a degree and at a speed

¹⁹⁹ Tom Moylan, “Global Economy, Local Texts: Utopian/Dystopian Tension in William Gibson’s Cyberpunk Trilogy,” in *Beyond Cyberpunk: New Critical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2010), eds. in Graham J. Murphy, and Sherryl Vint, pp. 81-82.

²⁰⁰ Townsend, “The United States and China - A Different Kind of Cyberwar,” *Securityweek* (7 Jan. 2019).

²⁰¹ Alex Sundby, “Read the full text of Biden’s inaugural address,” *CBS News* (20 Jan. 2021).

²⁰² Marc Wickert, “Dana White and the future of UFC,” *Fight Times*, 2004. <https://magazine.fighttimes.com/dana-white-and-the-future-of-ufc/>

²⁰³ Suraya, “Madeline Y. Hsu’s transnational experiences,” Rice University, *The Pleiades* (24 Mar. 2013).

never previously imagined, people are traveling, moving, and relocating across national borders; goods are being circulated, sold, and bought in markets that know no national boundaries; and technologies, knowledge, and belief systems are transmitted from coast to coast and from continent to continent, regardless of national borders.” Ryang and Smith added that “the unprecedented scale of the transnational movement of millions reflects human tenacity, creativity, and the will to live.”²⁰⁴

Wars fought over cyberspace and information carry social implications beyond the merely economic. They are about history and interpersonal identity, for as Nicholas Carr reminded us, “personal memory shapes and sustains the ‘collective memory’ that underpins culture. What’s stored in the individual mind—events, facts, concepts, skills—...[is] also the ‘crux of cultural transmission.’ Each of us carries and projects the history of the future. Culture is sustained in our synapses.”²⁰⁵ In other words, history becomes memory, and memory prefigures behavior. But what lies between body and mind and betwixt history and memory is art: controlled motion, mindfulness, kung fu.

To Bruce Lee, living meant changing, flowing freely, like water. “He lived every day as a day of discovery,” said his spouse Linda Lee. “His thirty-two years were full of living. Bruce believed that the individual represents the whole of mankind, whether he lives in the Orient or elsewhere. He believed that man struggles to find a life outside himself, not realizing that the life he seeks is within him.”²⁰⁶ Bruce Lee’s search for a meaningful inner life found outward expression in the transnational role model he became. According to Jeff Yang, “Lee may be the only Asian American with household-name status nearly everywhere in the world—he’s certainly the only Asian American on the *Time 100 list* of the century’s most influential individuals.”²⁰⁷ “From my point of view, the 20th century gave us just two icons who rose above time, space and race: there was Muhammad Ali, and there was Bruce Lee,” says filmmaker Pete McCormack, who directed documentaries on both Ali (2010) and Lee (2012).²⁰⁸

Shanlon Wu, who grew up in New York in the 1950s, had no Asian heroes for role models until he saw a Bruce Lee film. In 1990, years after Lee’s tragic death, Wu visited Bruce Lee’s grave. “I realize I am crying,” he wrote:

Bruce’s grave seems so small compared to his place in my boyhood. So small in my comparison to my need for heroes. Seeing his grave, I understand how large the hole in my life had been, and how desperately I’d sought to fill it. I had sought an Asian hero to emulate. But none of my choices quite fit me. Their lives were defined through heroic tasks—they had villains to defeat and battles to fight—while my life seemed merely a struggle to define myself. But now I see that the very struggle has defined me. I must be my own hero even as I learn to treasure those who have gone before. Their lives beckon like fireflies on a moonless night...their lives were real.²⁰⁹

Bruce Lee’s efforts at moral, mental and physical self-cultivation were extraordinary. As biographer Bruce Thomas has asserted, “Anyone who looks for Bruce Lee in the details and events of his life, while ignoring his pleas to actively *work* on self-awareness...will miss the essence and purpose of Bruce Lee’s thirty-two years on earth.”²¹⁰ Faced with coronavirus-fueled

²⁰⁴ Sonia Ryang and Richard J. Smith, “[Editorial Statement: Transnational Asia and the Challenge of Globalization.](#)” *Transnational Asia: An Online Interdisciplinary Journal*.

²⁰⁵ Carr, *The Shallows*, 196.

²⁰⁶ Bruce Thomas, *Bruce Lee: Fighting Spirit* (Berkeley, CA: Frog Ltd., 1994), 207.

²⁰⁷ Jeff Yang, “[Why Bruce Lee Has More Kick Now Than Ever.](#)” *The Wall Street Journal* (30 Jan. 2012).

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ Bruce Thomas, *Bruce Lee: Fighting Spirit*, 262-263.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

injustice and iniquity, plus economic woes, quarantines, and lockdowns, people around the world feel angry, and justifiably so. Bruce Lee warned, however, that “Angry people want to fight to injure and kill. The martial arts do not deny this teaching, but the true inner art turns this anger and alienation back on itself so that the challenge inherent in simply being alive is recognized in the artist himself.”²¹¹ The real martial art, in other words, is self-mastery, the “art of fighting without fighting,” to cite a well-known scene from Bruce Lee’s film *Enter the Dragon*.²¹²

In Hong Kong, beginning in June 2019 and lasting throughout the year, pro-democracy protesters fighting the Chinese government’s “security law” used Bruce Lee’s philosophy of “Be Water” to take the fight to the streets. At their peak, the demonstrations involved some two million people in Hong Kong (out of a population of approximately 7.5 million). Bruce Lee’s Jeet Kune Do was all about adapting flexibly and lithely to any situation. “Running water never grows stale, so you just got to keep on flowing,” Lee famously said in an interview with Pierre Berton in 1971, “... Empty your mind. Be formless, *shapeless*, like water. Now you put water into a cup, it *becomes* the cup; you put water into a bottle, it *becomes* the bottle; you put it in a teapot, it *becomes* the teapot. Now water can flow—or it can *crash!* Be water, my friend.”²¹³ Traditional modes of mass protest would not have worked, given the heavily militarized police crackdown in Hong Kong, where peaceful mass marches soon descended into clashes with police and accusations of police brutality. In practice, “be water” resistance meant “pop-up, guerrilla protest.” Protesters were constantly on the move. By AirDropping, instant-messaging, or Telegramming maps and updates, protesters were able to disperse from sites of police crackdowns and then reassembled in other parts of the city. Activists also shared entrance codes for safe houses for their comrades to hide in at short notice.



Figure 6 – “Be Water,” like Bruce Lee - Hong Kong protester, 2019. Wikimedia.

The Hong Kong protesters offered some advice to American protesters who were (and are) also battling against injustice and police brutality in 2020, urging them to “be water.”²¹⁴ They developed a set of four principles around their own protests and around Bruce Lee’s concept of water as “formless, shapeless,” but which could “flow” or “crash”:

1. *Be strong like ice*—when confronted by police or violent vigilante groups.
2. *Be fluid like water*—when escaping through the city’s narrow streets.

²¹¹ Ibid., 289.

²¹² In that scene early in the film, when Bruce Lee and other martial artists are being transported to Han’s island, Bruce Lee defeated a pugnacious bully (who wanted to pick a fight) by convincing him to step off the big ship and onto a small boat, ostensibly so Lee could row him to an islet and demonstrate some of this style, “the art of fighting without fighting.” Lee stayed on the ship and let the boat rope go slack to carry the bully out to sea, where he could be controlled by means of the boat rope, which Lee handed to the Chinese sailors whom the bully had abused.

²¹³ Bruce Lee Interview (*Pierre Berton Show*, 1971).

²¹⁴ Colin Groundwater, “Pack an Umbrella’: Hong Kong Protesters Share Their Best Strategies and Tactics,” *GQ*, 4 June 2020).

3. *Gather like dew*—for “flash-mob” protests that are hard to prepare for.
4. *And, scatter like mist*—to avoid arrest, and be able to fight for another day.²¹⁵

In this way, the Hong Kong protesters sought to connect with their perceived American compatriots and fellow travelers across the Pacific Ocean—seeking, in other words, to let their protest culture become transnational in imitation of one of their inspirations, Bruce Lee.

Adaptions of Bruce Lee abound in popular culture worldwide, not least in creative online videos, of which Bruce Lee would most likely approve if he were alive today (he was an inexhaustible and perfectionistic film creator and editor in his own right.) One recent expression of Lee’s blazing body (apparently alive and well in the 21st century) is Patrick Nan’s “Bruce Lee Lightsabers Scene Recreation,” which depicts Lee as a Jedi knight using *Star Wars*-style lightsaber nunchucks in footage taken from the climax of Lee’s film *Fist of Fury* (1972). A link to the YouTube video is included below (Figure 7):



Figure 7 - "Bruce Lee Lightsabers Scene Recreation" by Patrick Nan. 12 Jan 2018. YouTube.

This video became an instant Internet sensation, garnering over 2.1 million hits in just a month.²¹⁶ In the comments section, a user wrote, “He would be the scariest Jedi to fight, ever.” Another user asserted, “What about the Force you say? BRUCE LEE IS THE FORCE!”²¹⁷

Faced with impossible quandaries of race, nationality, and culture, Bruce Lee once asked: “When real feeling occurs, such as anger or fear, can the stylist express himself with the classical method, or is he merely listening to his own screams and yells? Is he a living, expressive human being or merely a patternized mechanical robot? Is he an entity, capable of flowing with external circumstances, or is he resisting with his set of chosen patterns? Is his chosen pattern forming a screen between him and the opponent and preventing a “total” and ‘fresh’ relationship?”²¹⁸ How, in other words, can a human avoid becoming frozen and robotic in times of crisis?

In asking these questions, Bruce Lee pointed to a cognitive phenomenon only recently identified by scientists and psychologists: “Change blindness.” In the words of *BBC* journalist Matthew Tompkins, “Change blindness . . . [occurs when] viewers fail to detect (sometimes

²¹⁵ “Bruce Lee’s ‘Be water’ philosophy inspires Hong Kong protesters,” *NTD News* (9 Jan. 2020).

²¹⁶ Leah Kelly, “Pitzer Student’s Bruce Lee Lightsabers Video Gains Over Two Million Hits,” *University Wire* (Carlsbad; original article from *The Student Life*, Pomona College, Claremont CA), 8 Feb. 2018).

²¹⁷ Patrick Nan, “Bruce Lee Lightsabers Scene Recreation,” YouTube (12 Jan 2018).

²¹⁸ Bruce Lee, *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, 15.

surprisingly dramatic) changes to a visual scene.”²¹⁹ Such “metacognitive illusions” occur “when people hold mistaken beliefs about their own cognitive systems. We all tend to feel like we are experts about the nature of our own perceptions and memories.”²²⁰ But we are not always in command of our senses. We live and breathe in an alternative air of urban alienation and enclaves, a cyber reality that scholar Mike Davis has identified in his books *City of Quartz* and *Ecology of Fear*,²²¹ a dystopian atmosphere in which we feel we are constantly being watched.

Bao Nguyen, director of the new Bruce Lee documentary “Be Water” (2020), has clearly stated the problem: “In the time of COVID, . . . when you’re not necessarily interacting with the outside world so much, . . . your access to society is what you see on screen, and what you read, and what you see in film—that’s why it’s so important not just that we see ourselves on screen, but how we are shown on screen.”²²² As the current crises facing us compels us more and more to live, write, think, and work on computer and tablet screens, it is imperative that we continue to strive for integrity and beware of fossilizing or outsourcing our minds to the machines that seem to run our lives.

In April 2000, technologist Bill Joy at Sun Microsystems (a large computer and data-processing innovation company) published an article titled, “Why the Future Doesn’t Need Us,” with the provocative subtitle “Our most powerful 21st-century technologies—robotics, genetic engineering, and nanotech—are threatening to make humans an endangered species.”²²³ In Joy’s dark vision, “we have the possibility not just of weapons of mass destruction but of knowledge-enabled mass destruction (KMD), this destructiveness hugely amplified by the power of self-replication.”²²⁴ I do not doubt the clear and present dangers of technological abuse and data manipulation. However, I do not believe that humanity is endangered—not if we fight in Bruce Lee fashion: to flow and crash like water, and to be cyberpunk: rebellious, attentive, and persistent in our demands for facts.

We must avoid becoming what Richard Foreman described as “pancake people”—“spread wide and thin as we connect with that vast network of information accessed by the mere touch of a button.”²²⁵ We are due for a fresh and mindful relationship with our shared humanity, even as we become cyborgs who are compelled by circumstances to work, socialize, and participate in recreation at a distance. The dynamic human foundation remains beneath the flow of machine information; and the history of Bruce Lee and transnational Asians attests to the human flow that has boldly crossed barriers like exclusion, racism, and disinformation. African-American rapper/actor LL Cool J concluded the documentary film *How Bruce Lee Changed the World* (2009) by summarizing the influence of Bruce Lee on Americans of all ages and races: “His impact was so incredibly powerful. . . . He just really hit popular culture in the solar plexus, with the *biggest right hand* a man can throw. . . . and I think we’re still reeling from the blow.”

“Today, at the turn of the millennium,” wrote Jeff Yang in 1997, “America is more Asian than ever: a place where ramen is slurped on the run, curry is consumed in a hurry, and General Tso’s Chicken rules the roost at every corner take-out; where Sonic and Super Mario duke it out on home video screens, and John Woo and Jackie Chan reign supreme in Hollywood. . . . in 20th century America, the twain of East and West have not only met—they’ve mingled, mated, and produced myriad offspring, inhabitants of one world, without borders or boundaries, but with

²¹⁹ Matthew Tompkins, “The Two Illusions That Tricked Arthur Conan Doyle,” *BBC* (29 Aug. 2019).

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990), and *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

²²² Bao Nguyen, [Interview on the “The May Lee Show #26,”](#) (11 June 2020).

²²³ Freeman Dyson, *The Scientist as Rebel* (New York: New York Review Books, 2006), 44.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ Carr, *The Shallows*, 196.

plenty of style, hype, and attitude.”²²⁶ If the borders and barriers and boundaries have been cracked or shattered, one historical and unmistakable blow was struck by a unique transnational fighter, Bruce Lee (1940-1973), who unleashed a “*Whooooeeaaaaah!!!*” and a Bruce Lee kick.

To remain vital, to be fully human, in the age of the coronavirus and cyberpunk, we must be scientific, fluid, and non-dogmatic (like Bruce Lee), and fight for culture and collective memory. As Nicholas Carr reminded us, “culture is more than the aggregate of what Google describes as ‘the world’s information.’” It is also more than “what can be reduced to binary code and uploaded to the Net. To remain vital, culture must be renewed in the minds of the members of every generation. Outsource memory, and culture withers.”²²⁷ Our human selves are more than our offloading of memory to external data banks, more than the mechanical and digital devices that increasingly circumscribe our lives and identities, and more than the corporations and governments that fight to control the information flows.

What I am arguing for is a Bruce Lee-style scientific humanism, one that is critical and martial, one that is fortified and mindful and informed by history. To quote the philosopher Will Durant, “Science tells us how to heal and how to kill; it reduces the death rate in retail and then kills us wholesale in war; but only wisdom—desire coordinated in the light of all experience—can tell us *when* to heal and *when* to kill. ... Science without philosophy, facts without perspective and valuation, cannot save us from havoc and despair. Science gives us knowledge, but only philosophy can give us wisdom.”²²⁸ It is imperative, therefore, that we see the coronavirus and cyberpunk as triggers that force us to think about national communities in more open ways—ways that were not always available to Bruce Lee and other transnational migrants in the last century, but which we may fight to create in this one.

Scholar Kevin Robins has argued against the naïve idea of cyberspace and virtual reality as utopias that will easily erase all borders and create a whole new world. Cyberspace cannot right our wrongs unless communities of users learn to “relocate virtual culture in the real world,” the physical, kinetic world of the here and now. “We might consider what a transitional (as opposed to autistic) logic might mean in the context of imagining virtual communities,” Robins wrote, the point being “to broaden and to politicize the debate on community and collectivity in cyberspace.”²²⁹ In this time of cyberpunk and the coronavirus, the impulse to withdraw into enclaves and cocoons networked by the Internet must be critically assessed. Who controls, who or what sets the agenda of these powerful technologies that are literally rewiring our brains, and those of our children too? “‘Learning how to think’ really means learning how to exercise some control over *how* and *what* you think,” said the late novelist David Foster Wallace. You must be “conscious and aware enough to *choose* what you pay attention to and to *choose* how you construct meaning from experience.” He added that to surrender control leaves one with “the constant gnawing sense of having had and lost some infinite thing.”²³⁰ Much can be said about this point of view, but in this article I have maintained that one of the priceless things that we should not lose is the fighting legacy of Bruce Lee.

I remain an optimist, a video gamer, a tech-geek, a martial artist, a humanist, a musician, a filmmaker, and above all a historian. Using science and history, I hear and honor Bruce Lee’s battle cry to fight injustice and inequality. In today’s transnational brave new world, this means courageously facing our coronavirus and cyberpunk-infused future, and embracing our fellow

²²⁶ Jeff Yang, Dina Gan, Terry Hong, and A. Magazine staff, eds., *Eastern Standard Time: A Guide to Asian Influence from Astro Boy to Zen Buddhism* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1997), Introduction.

²²⁷ Carr, *The Shallows*, 196-197.

²²⁸ Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005 [1926]), 2-3. My italics.

²²⁹ Kevin Robins, “Cyberspace and the World We Live In,” in Featherstone and Burrows, eds., *Cyberspace, Cyberbodies, Cyberpunk*, 152-153.

²³⁰ David Foster Wallace, commencement address at Kenyon College in 2005, cited and analyzed in Carr, *The Shallows*, 1944-195.

men and women of all colors and creeds. We must be fearless, Bruce Lee-style scientific humanists, not haters or Luddites, and like Bruce Lee, we must take up the fight with *both* our biological and our cyber-augmented brains. “Here is the natural instinct, and here is control,” Bruce Lee once said, raising left and right fists separately, and then bringing them together.²³¹

Like the activists in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina, taking their lead from Bruce Lee, may we combine our hands in harmony and continue the fight against injustice and information control in the time of coronavirus and cyberpunk. Or, to borrow the vocabulary of the Zapatistas of Chiapas, to arm ourselves with sufficient knowledge to fight with “weapons of intelligence” in a scientific, compassionate way, and not to give in to those who would poison society with ignorance, divisive hatred, or appeals to base instincts, as we continue our quest for a more perfect union in the time of cyberpunk and the coronavirus. To practice the art of “fighting without fighting,” together. It is both the most and the least we can do. What we share is the legacy of Bruce Lee.

²³¹ Bruce Lee Interview (Pierre Berton Show, 1971).